



WINNER
OF A
BETTY TRASK
AWARD

*The
Wild
Hunt*

ELIZABETH
CHADWICK

Elizabeth Chadwick lives in Nottingham with her husband and two sons. Much of her research is carried out as a member of Regia Anglorum, an early medieval re-enactment society with the emphasis on accurately recreating the past. She also tutors in the skill of writing historical and romantic fiction. *The*

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***Scarlet Lion*, was nominated by Richard Lee, founder of the Historical Novel Society, as one of the top ten historical novels of the last decade.**

For more details on Elizabeth Chadwick and her books, please visit

www.elizabethchadwick.com.

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THE FALCONS OF MONTABARD

THE GREATEST KNIGHT

DAUGHTERS OF THE GRAIL

THE SCARLET LION

(sequel to The Greatest Knight)

A PLACE BEYOND COURAGE

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Contents

[Also by Elizabeth Chadwick](#)

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[ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS](#)

[AUTHOR'S NOTE](#)

[CHAPTER 1: ASHDYKE THE WELSH
MARCHES NOVEMBER 1098](#)

[CHAPTER 2](#)

[CHAPTER 3](#)

[CHAPTER 4](#)

[CHAPTER 5](#)

[CHAPTER 6](#)

[CHAPTER 7](#)

[CHAPTER 8](#)

[CHAPTER 9](#)

[CHAPTER 10](#)

[CHAPTER 11](#)

[CHAPTER 12](#)

[CHAPTER 13](#)

[CHAPTER 14](#)

[CHAPTER 15](#)

[CHAPTER 16: LONDON WHITSUNTIDE 1100](#)

[CHAPTER 17](#)

[CHAPTER 18](#)

[CHAPTER 19: AUGUST 1100](#)

[CHAPTER 20](#)

[CHAPTER 21: LONDON NOVEMBER 1100](#)

[CHAPTER 22: AUGUST 1101](#)

[CHAPTER 23](#)

[CHAPTER 24: SUMMER 1102](#)

[CHAPTER 25](#)

[CHAPTER 26](#)

[CHAPTER 27](#)

[CHAPTER 28](#)

[CHAPTER 29](#)

[CHAPTER 30](#)

[CHAPTER 31: ASHDYKE AUTUMN 1102](#)

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

My first conscious memory of telling stories goes back to very early childhood. I was three years old, sitting up in bed on a light summer evening, making up a tale about the fairies decorating my cotton handkerchief.

Throughout my childhood I entertained myself by inventing stories, generally based on visual prompts from illustrations in books, or from memories of TV programmes I had enjoyed. *Champion the Wonder Horse* was responsible for many an afternoon of involved imagining. At this stage in my life, the tale-telling was always verbal and it wasn't until I was fourteen that I began writing things down - inspired to do so by summer holiday boredom and the BBC's *Six Wives of Henry VIII* starring Keith Michelle as Henry. However, although I enjoyed the writing, my Tudor tale didn't go the distance and was really just a sampler piece.

The following year the BBC aired the children's TV programme *Desert Crusader*, dubbed from the French series *Thibaud ou les Croisades* and set in the Holy Land in the twelfth century. I fell hook, line and sinker for the leading actor, Andre Laurence, and immediately began to write my own crusading novel. This time I persevered and completed it, realising along the way that I had found my period and my niche. I wanted to write historical adventures for a living - preferably medieval!

It took me another seventeen years and eight full-length novels to achieve that ambition, but I never gave up or saw rejections as a waste. It was all a learning curve and still fun to do. *The Wild Hunt* was the novel that finally gained me both a literary agent and a publisher. It also won me a Betty Trask award, which is an award given to authors under the age of thirty-five for a first novel of a romantic or traditional nature. The year I won, the award was presented by H.R. H. The Prince of Wales at Whitehall. This was a somewhat surreal moment for me as six months

previously I had been stacking shelves at the local supermarket to make ends meet while raising my family!

The Wild Hunt has gone on to sell around the world and has been translated into a dozen languages. However, due to the vagaries of the publishing industry, it went out of print in English for many years. When Sphere wanted to reissue it, I was thrilled, but I said that in the light of increased writerly experience and with a bit more historical knowledge under my belt, I would like to go through the novel and give it a spring clean, so to speak.

The Wild Hunt was the first step on the rung of my career as a professional full-time author, and since then I have moved from writing tales of imaginary historical characters set against authentic backdrops, into telling, as fiction, the stories of people who actually lived. However, I remain very fond of this, my first published novel. I hope that my established readers will enjoy revisiting this reworked version and that those

who have not come across *The Wild Hunt* before will be delighted too.

C H A P T E R 1

ASHDYKE
THE WELSH MARCHES
NOVEMBER 1098

Snow, driven by a biting November wind, flurried against Guyon's dark cloak then swirled past him towards the castle glowering down from the high stone ridge overlooking the spated River Wye. His weary mount pecked and lumbered to a sluggish recovery. Guyon tugged the stallion's ears and slapped its muscular neck in encouragement. Dusk was fast approaching, the weather was vicious, but at least shelter was within sight.

The horse almost baulked at the hock-deep water of the ford, but Guyon touched him lightly with his spur and with a snort, the grey splashed through the swift, dark flow and gained the muddy, half-frozen village road. The crofts were lit from within by cooking fires and the sputtering glint of rushlight. As they passed the church, a cur ran out to snap at Arian's heels. Shod steel

flashed. There was a loud yelp, then silence. A cottage door opened a crack and was quickly thrust shut in response to a sharp command from within.

Guyon rode on past the mill and began the steep climb to the castle, grimacing as if a mouthful of wine had suddenly become vinegar. On their arrival, Arian would receive a rub down, a warm blanket and a tub of hot mash to content him through the night. Guyon wished fervently that his own concerns could be dealt with as easily, but he bore tidings that made such a thing impossible.

The drawbridge thumped down to his hail and the grey paced the thick oak planks, hooves ringing a hollow tocsin, for beneath lay a gully of jagged rocks and debris, foraged only by the most nimble of sheep and the occasional cursing shepherd in less than nimble pursuit. Emerging through the dark arch of the gatehouse into the open bailey, he drew rein and swung from the stallion's back. His legs were so stiff that for a

moment he could barely move and he clung to the saddle.

'Evil night, sire,' remarked the groom who splashed out from the stables to take the horse. Although there was deference in his manner, his eyes were bright with unspoken curiosity.

Guyon released his grip on the saddle and steadied himself. 'Worse to come,' he answered, not entirely referring to the weather. 'Look at the shoe on his off-fore, I think it's loose.'

'Sir.'

Guyon slapped Arian's dappled rump and walked across the bailey, slowly at first until the feeling returned to his limbs, his shoulders hunched against the force of the bitter, snowy wind. Greeting the guards at the forebuilding entrance, he stripped off his mittens, then climbed the steep staircase to the hall on the second level.

The dinner horn had recently sounded and the trestles were crowded with diners. At the sight of their lord's heir, jaws ceased chewing, hands

paused halfway to dishes, necks craned. The men at the trestles marked his long, impatient stride and pondered what new trouble his arrival augured. The women studied his progress with different looks entirely and whispered to each other.

Ignoring the assembly, Guyon strode up the hall to the dais table where sat his father with the senior knights and retainers of the household and also, he noticed with a certain irritation, his sister Emma in the lady's customary place.

Miles le Gallois rose to greet him, an expression of concern on his face. 'Guy! We had not looked for you so soon.'

'A man rides quickly when the devil snaps at his heels,' Guyon answered, bowing to his father. Then he rose, kissed his sister and stepped over the trestle to take the place hastily made for him. His limbs suddenly felt leaden and the room wavered before his eyes.

'The wonder is that you did not fall off. Guy, you look dreadful!' Emma gave a peremptory signal

to the squire serving the high table.

'Do I?' He took the cup of wine presented to him. 'Perhaps I have good reason.' He was aware of them all staring at him, their anxiety tangible.

'Surely the King did not refuse to grant you your uncle's lands?' His father looked incredulous.

Guyon shook his head and stared into the freshly poured wine. 'The King was pleased to acknowledge me the heir and grant me all rights and privileges pertaining,' he said in a flat voice. It was three months since his uncle had died fighting the Welsh on the Island of Mon that some called Anglesey. Gerard had been a childless widower and Guyon his named heir, but King William Rufus had been known to favour money above heredity when it came to confirming grants of land. Guyon had gone to Rufus in Normandy to make his claim and he had what he desired - at a price.

'Then why the dark looks for such good news?' his father demanded. 'What else has happened?'

Disinclined to make a public announcement of the news, Guyon tightened his grip around his cup. The ride had been so difficult and cold that he could barely think straight.

His sister set her hand over his. 'You are frozen! What were you thinking to make a journey in such weather? Could it not have waited? I'll have the servants prepare a tub in the solar and you'll come there now where it's warm!'

Some of the bleakness lifted from Guyon's spirit and his lips twitched. Emma still viewed her three years' seniority over him as a licence to command his obedience, more so since their mother had died of the sweating sickness two winters ago. While Emma's husband travelled with the court as an assistant chamberlain, she dwelt here on the Welsh border, terrorising servants and family alike with her demands for a state of gracious domestic order.

This time Guyon chose not to rebel and after a single look, let her have her way. 'You had better stir the cooks to provision for my men,' was all he

said as he rose to follow her. 'They will be here within the hour and cursing me to the devil.'

Emma started to scold him about the folly of outriding them when the marches were so dangerous and unsettled, but Guyon let the words tumble away from him like spots of melting snow.

Once the steaming tub was ready, Guyon began to disrobe and Emma dismissed the maids with an autocratic snap of her fingers, causing him to lift his brows. Cadi, his white gazehound bitch fussed around him, wagging her tail and panting. He paused in his undressing to pat her flank and tousle her silky ears.

Miles dropped the curtain behind the two girls. 'I doubt that Guyon has any designs on ravishment just now, Emma,' he remarked drily.

She scowled. 'From what my husband tells me of the court, Guy would have designs on ravishment even if he were tied down and bludgeoned half unconscious.'

'Half the tale and a fraction of the truth,' Guyon

defended himself as she snatched his padded tunic out of his hands and nudged Cadi away with the side of her leg. 'It would depend who was doing the tying and what she had in mind.'

As Emma made to cuff him, he ducked with agility, straightened and, seizing her by the shoulders, delivered a smacking kiss to her cheek. Emma glared at him, but her mouth started to curve despite her best efforts to keep it straight. 'You need not attempt your courtier's tricks on me. I know them by rote!'

Falsely crestfallen, Guyon released her with a sigh and began to unlace his shirt. 'I suppose you do.' The teasing look fell from his face. 'But I needs must hope they still have their effect on other women.'

Emma's gaze narrowed. 'Not within this keep,' she said with asperity.

'I was thinking further up the march. Maurice FitzRoger's daughter, to be precise.'

'What?' Miles, who had been lounging against a

coffer was suddenly alert.

'Judith of Ravenstow,' Guyon said and having removed the rest of his garments, stepped into the steaming tub. 'On the King's order.'

His father's eyes widened. 'Rufus offered you Maurice of Ravenstow's girl?'

'He did not offer. He said marry her or else.' He looked bleakly at his stunned father. 'He also sold the earldom of Shrewsbury to Robert de Belleme for three thousand marks.'

'What!' Miles's concern became consternation. 'Surely the King would not permit de Belleme to inherit Shrewsbury. Considering what he owns already and the kind of man he is, it is much too dangerous!'

Guyon took the washcloth that Emma silently handed him. 'Every man has his price and de Belleme has calculated Rufus's to a nicety,' he said with a grimace. 'Belleme wanted Ravenstow as well, since it belonged to his late half-brother. He might have had it, too, if someone had not

remembered that the heiress was of marriageable age and unbetrothed. The King chose to bestow her himself, and not without malicious amusement,' He began vigorously to wash as if purging himself of the thoughts chasing round his mind.

'You cannot do it!' Emma's mouth twisted with revulsion. 'If you marry the girl, it will make you blood kin to de Belleme. Everyone knows what a monster he is. He robs and tortures for sport and impales those who displease him on greased poles and smiles as they die.' She shuddered and hugged her arms. 'God's mercy, he keeps his own wife locked up in the cells below Belleme with only the rats for company!'

Guyon did not accuse her of hysterical over-reaction. Even the hardest men were horrified by the sadistic cruelty of Robert de Belleme, eldest son of the late Roger de Montgomery, Earl of Shrewsbury. It was not his treatment of the peasants that caused distress - their lives were expendable - but his torture of noble prisoners

capable of paying ransom, and he had no respect for any authority but his own.

'If I do not accept this match, I forfeit Uncle Gerard's lands. The King says he will give them to one of his Flemings. I am caught in a cleft stick. Not only does Rufus force a wife into my bed, he makes me pay for the privilege too - five hundred marks. Nowhere near three thousand, I know, but enough to make my tenants squeal when I squeeze them for its payment. It is fortunate for de Belleme that he does not have a conscience as to how he goes about raising his own relief.'

Emma shuddered and crossed herself.

'And of course,' said his father, 'the lands you gain with this match, added to what you own and what you will inherit, make you a suitable counterbalance in the middle marches to whatever schemes of advancement de Belleme may choose to plot.'

'Oh yes,' Guyon said darkly. 'I am to pay for that privilege too, mayhap with my life.'

There was a taut silence. Emma drew a shaken breath and murmuring something about food and wine, fled the room.

Miles sighed and sat down on a stool, his movements easy.

As yet, his fifty-four years sat lightly on his body which remained, through vigorous activity, firm, if more stocky than in his slender youth.

'I know the girl's mother,' he said thoughtfully. 'Alicia FitzOsbern, Breteuil's sister. She was pretty at fifteen, very pretty indeed. If I had not already been married and satisfied with your mother, I might have offered for her myself.'

Guyon grunted. 'I always understood you had no liking for the FitzOsbern clan.'

'The male stock, no. They all were - and are, when you consider Breteuil - snakes, but Alicia was different. She was courageous and gentle and she had eyes like summer twilight. She never forgave her menfolk for selling her in marriage to Maurice de Montgomery.'

Guyon reached for the towel that Emma had left conveniently to hand and stepped from the tub. 'Reason enough for any woman to hate,' he said, thinking of the former lord of Ravenstow who he had always thought resembled a gluttonous boar atop a dung heap.

'As I remember, Judith was born late into the marriage after numerous slurs of barrenness had been cast in Alicia's direction,' Miles commented, folding his arms. 'I doubt it was all her fault. As far as I know, for all his lechery Maurice sired no bastards.'

Guyon donned a fur-lined bedrobe and called entry to the two servants who came to empty the water from the tub down a waste shaft in the corner of the room.

'At least Ravenstow is a formidable keep from which to establish your dominance,' Miles said. 'Whatever other sins lie on de Belleme's soul, he is a master architect.'

'And I suspect one way or another he will attempt to annex it to his earldom. Ravenstow

guards the approach to the Chester plain and all roads east - ideally suited to the purposes of robbery and extortion, would you not say?'

Miles eyed him and said nothing, although his jaw tightened.

'There is always the Holy Land, I suppose,' Guyon added with a twisted smile. 'Freedom from Rufus and de Belleme, and the glory of slaughtering infidels to gild my soul. I--' He broke off and drew a deep breath as Emma re-entered the room followed by a maid bearing food and wine.

Compressing his lips Guyon sat down on the bench near the hearth.

'Rhosyn is in the hall,' Emma announced as she dismissed the woman and poured the wine herself. 'You will have to tell her.'

Guyon eyed his sister warily as he took the cup and drank. 'What of it? She made it plain at Michaelmas she would not dwell as my mistress. She has no cause to complain.'

'She might not have had a cause at Michaelmas, Guy, but she certainly has one now.'

Guyon's wariness sharpened. 'Meaning?'

'Meaning she is not so skilled a herb wife as she thought and the rounding of her belly proves it. Midsummer I would say, to look at her.'

Guyon glanced from his sister's disapproval to his father's blank surprise. He took another swallow of wine to hide his consternation and feigned nonchalance. 'I'll speak to her tomorrow, but I do not see that this marriage will change anything. Willingly I will acknowledge and provide for a child if that is what she wants, but Rhosyn is a wild law unto herself.'

'I am not thinking of wild law, but Welsh law,' Emma said, as he reached for a piece of bread. 'A man's firstborn son, even begotten out of wedlock to a mistress, has equal rights with the other legitimate heirs of his body.'

Guyon discarded the notion with a shake of his head. 'I am Norman born, Em, and Welsh rights

do not pertain this side of the border. I could cede a couple of holdings to a chance-gotten child without too much hue and cry, but no more than that. Besides, the child is yet unborn and might well be a daughter, in which case I will find her a good marriage when the time comes.'

Emma's full mouth pursed. 'It needn't have happened at all.'

'Don't be so finicky, sister,' he growled. 'The sin of fornication is a peccadillo compared with the ones I could have perpetrated at court.'

Colour flooded his sister's face. Her husband, as a minor chamberlain, knew most of what transpired in the immediate circle surrounding the King: the scandals, the petty power struggles, the prevalent vices, and Guyon, with his striking looks, disregard for propriety and hint of Welsh barbarity was a magnet to which all three were drawn whether he wished it or no. 'I expect you and Prince Henry keep tallies to compare your ruttings,' she snapped.

'Indeed we do,' Guyon said with a sarcastic

flourish. 'How did you guess?'

Miles eased tactfully to his feet and stretched like a cat uncoiling. 'Time enough for discussion tomorrow,' he said. 'I'm for my bed and I'm sure Guyon is too.' He gave his daughter an eloquent stare. Guyon had his trencher piled high enough already without her heavy-handed seasoning of moral chastisement and righteous advice.

'A conspiracy of men,' Emma declared with a sniff, and then gave a tight smile. 'I know when I am beaten.' Going to her brother, she stooped and kissed his stubble-blurred cheek.

He tugged the copper-coloured braid peeping from beneath her veil. 'That does not mean you will give in!'

'Does it not?' She arched her brow at him. 'Let me tell you, I will gladly relinquish the battle to your wife and hope she has better fortune in taming your ways!'

'Know when you are beaten, do you?' he needed as she went towards the curtain. 'Is that

why you always have to have the last word?'

C HA PTER **2**

In the great hall, Rhosyn rolled over on her lumpy makeshift pallet and sat up, irritated to discover that yet again her bladder was full. Beside her, oblivious, her father snored. He was a prosperous wool merchant these days, with a paunch to prove it. Complacent. They had fared well since their business dealings with Miles le Gallois. There was much profit to be had in wool and the cloth woven from the fleeces. Lord Miles bred it raw on the hoof. Her father sold the clip in Flanders and speculated a little on the wider trade markets - spices and leather, silks and glass - and they prospered.

Beside their grandfather, the children of her first, now widowed marriage slept in a puppy huddle. Rhys was ten, a sturdy, dark-eyed replica of his father. Eluned, seven, resembled herself - slender and fey with raven hair, autumnal eyes and a luminous complexion. This coming child, as yet scarcely realised; well, if a boy, she could only

hope by God's charity that he inherited Guyon's beauty married to a less difficult nature.

Stupid, she thought, irritated at herself as she quietly left her children and her father to seek out the garderobe. Stupid to have been so easily caught, she who knew all her herbs and simples, or thought she knew because they had always worked before. Too late now, too dangerous, and not the season for the plants that would have cured her condition.

She had been in two minds whether to make this trip to Hereford with her father, but had reasoned that it would be her last opportunity before the weather grew too difficult for travel. She needed to purchase linen for swaddling bands that she could stitch during the dark, half-bound months of winter; and winter's threat was already upon them. The knife-bitter wind and the scudding snow squalls had caused them to curtail their journey early in the day and seek shelter under Lord Miles's roof.

Guyon's arrival at dusk had been a surprise,

and she was not sure if it was a welcome one. The news of his impending marriage had caused her no grief. She had always known the day would come, indeed, had held herself a little aloof with that knowledge in mind. He had a duty to take a wife of his own status and beget heirs, a wife who would have more in common with him than she ever would.

Rhosyn's practical nature told her there was no point in building upon their tenuous relationship. For all his fluency in the Welsh tongue and his ability to adapt to Welsh ways, he was only one quarter of the Cymru and he was raised to be a marcher lord who would ride into Wales on the back of a warhorse to ravage the land if his King so commanded. He regarded the towering Norman border keeps as home and refuge, not as grey, enclosing prisons that hemmed in the soul.

The latrine was cold and stank of its main function, and she did not linger. Instead of returning to the hall, however, Rhosyn made her

way to the small wall chamber where Guyon usually lodged when he stayed here. His gazehound, Cadi, lay outside the entrance, her nose tucked into her tail, but rose with a joyous whine of greeting. Rhosyn paused to stroke the dog and make a fuss of her, before lifting the heavy curtain.

Guyon had been sound asleep, but came immediately to his senses at the first soft clink of the curtain rings and the muffled whine of the dog. This was the keep where he had been born and raised, his welcome here guaranteed, but these days he was so conditioned to react to danger, and complete security was so seldom his, that he was out of bed and across the room in the space of a heartbeat. He lunged at the figure outlined in the glow from the corridor flare. The crown of his captive's head butted his chin, jarring his teeth together. He bit his tongue and tasted blood. A supple body writhed against his and he felt the swell of a woman's breast beneath his fingers.

'It's me, Rhosyn!' she gasped indignantly, her

French bearing the lilting accent of Wales. 'Have you lost your wits?'

'More likely you have lost yours!' he retorted, but with amusement now that he was fully awake and enjoying the feel of her body against his own. 'It is a foolish thing to creep up on a man in the middle of the night, *cariad*. Oft-times I sleep with a naked sword at my side. I might have cut off your head!'

'I have seen your naked sword frequently enough for it not to concern me,' Rhosyn replied with spurious innocence and pressed against him in the darkness. She tangled her fingers in his hair and stood on tiptoe to bite his ear and then whisper into it: 'But perhaps it would be safer to sheathe it, my lord.'

Guyon laughed huskily. 'That sounds like a fine idea,' he said, before closing her mouth with a kiss, his fingers busy with the lacings of her gown. 'Do you happen to know of a fitting scabbard?'

Rhosyn stretched languidly like a cat and then relaxed, a contented half-smile curving her lips. 'I had forgotten what a pleasure it was,' she purred,

eyeing Guyon sidelong across the tossed coverlet in the glow from a cresset lamp.

'Your fault,' he remarked, but easily, without accusation. 'I wanted you to come with me.'

'I would have stuck out like a sore thumb among those Norman women and been as miserable as sin.'

'Sin is never miserable,' Guyon remarked, thereby earning himself a playful slap. He caught her wrist and pulled her across him and they tussled for a moment, before he let her go and she drew back to study him. With his dark hair and eyes, he could easily have passed for one of the Cymru, although his height and breadth spoke of his Anglo-Norman descent.

'I hear that you are with child,' he said, giving her a serious look now.

Her gaze grew wary. 'What of it?'

'Were you going to tell me?'

Rhosyn bit her lip. 'Probably.' She avoided his

eyes. 'My father and yours do too much business together to keep such a matter secret and Rhys and Eluned both chatter like jack-daws. You would have discovered sooner or later.'

Guyon felt a pang at her intimation that had she been able to keep it from him, she would have done so. 'My sister seems to think that you will invoke Welsh law on the child's behalf.'

Rhosyn stared at him.

'In Welsh law the son of the handmaiden is equal to the son begotten on a legal spouse,' he clarified.

She shook her head. 'Your sister is wrong. What good would it do on this side of the border where Norman custom reigns? It would be a hobble of broken straw indeed and I am not sure I would want a child of mine to dwell among *saesnegs* in a great stone tomb like this.' Her eyes roved the comfort of the room with disparagement.

Guyon almost retorted that he was not sure he

wanted a child of his to grow up running barefoot over the Welsh hills or huckstering in wool for a living, but he curbed the words, knowing from bitter experience that they too were hobbles of broken straw.

'Emma spoke from the viewpoint of a Norman lady,' he said instead. 'She imagines what she would do in your position, and that would be to fight tooth and nail to have that child accepted as my responsibility.' He reached to twine a tendril of her hair through his fingers. 'Also, I think she said it to put me in dread of ever doing the like again. She disapproves of what she sees as my casual fornications.'

Rhosyn made a face, remembering Emma's frosty expression as her family arranged their pallets in the hall, and then her grimace became a smile as she imagined the lady Emma's response had she witnessed herself and Guyon a few moments ago.

The lamp sputtered in its pool of fat and Guyon gently tugged the strand of hair. 'But our concern

is not with Emma, but with you.' His gaze ranged over her body which was just beginning to show the changes of pregnancy.

Rhosyn stared at the coverlet and chewed her lip. 'I try to learn by my mistakes,' he said gently. 'I will not try to hold you; nor, though it be my greatest desire, is it fitting that I should.'

'Your bride, you mean?' she said without rancour.

Guyon made a face. 'You know about that? Ach, how can you not when gossip travels so fast? Rhosyn *cariad*, you are well out of this coil. Take the road to Wales and in the name of God, do not look back.'

'Guy?'

He flashed her a grim look. 'Did you also hear that I am to wed into the house of Montgomery? It is by royal command and the girl's mother is an old family acquaintance. My refusal would put her in mortal danger from Robert de Belleme, the new Earl of Shrewsbury. If he can lock up his own

wife in some dark oubliette and put out his own godson's eyes, what need to cavil at tossing his sister-in-law and niece over Ravenstow's battlements? It is about power, my love, and you are well out of it. When your father has finished his business in England, go home, keep to your own hearth and forget about venturing across the border unless you have a well-armed and determined escort. Robert de Belleme and his minions will turn the marches into hell for such men as your father.'

Rhosyn shuddered, wanting to believe he was exaggerating, but denied that comfort.

'I will speak with your father tomorrow before our roads part, make sure he knows not to take short cuts across Shrewsbury's domain.'

'Is it really so dangerous?'

'Yes.' His voice filled with emphasis. 'I mean what I say, Rhosyn. Either go into the heart of Wales and do not venture forth again, or stay here with me, under my protection. There can be no middle path.'

She shook her head numbly and shivered. He drew her back down beside and against his body, pulling the coverlet around them. She pressed herself against him but continued to shiver. This was the end of it. She could no more live in one of these great, grim fortresses than a Norman lady could sit milking a ewe on the slopes of Yr Wyddfa. She needed her measure of freedom and, aside from that, Norman women had entirely different views upon the subject of mistresses and their offspring. She had no desire to feud over a lost cause with Guyon's new wife. If he wanted to see her and the child, then let him come to Wales.

'Ffarwel fy llewpart du,' she murmured against his throat, and kissed him first there in the brown hollow and then raised her head to find his lips. *'Rwy'n dy garu di.'*

Guyon's arms tightened around her. 'I love you too, *cariad*,' he muttered, and silently cursed the whole Montgomery clan into the deepest pit of hell.

CHAPTER 3

Judith hissed through her clenched teeth as Agnes, her mother's maid, discovered a hitherto overlooked snarl in the mass of tawny-bronze hair she was combing.

'Stand still, sweeting and it won't hurt so much,' Agnes said, a hint of exasperation in her voice, perspiration streaking her double chin. 'It's nearly done now.'

'I'm not a babe to be cozened!' snapped Judith, shifting from foot to foot.

Agnes's mouth puckered to become another fold in her fleshy face and she turned away to pick up a rope of polished agate beads. Judith sniffed, set her jaw and refused to cry. Tears availed her nothing - a lesson hard-learned in early childhood. Her father had dismissed them as a silly female weakness. Her mother had wept too many herself in grief over lost causes to encourage her daughter in like indulgences.

Judith looked down at her wedding garments. A pale green linen undergown, close-fitting to her slender, almost thin body was topped by a dress of dark green silk damask, gorgeously embroidered with thread of gold at throat and hem and trailing sleeve. Her narrow waist was accentuated by a girdle of jewel-embroidered braid. She felt like the centrepiece at a feast, dressed to be devoured.

In a few hours she was to make her marriage vows in the castle chapel to a man she had never before set eyes upon.

She was to leave her home, go with him, his property to deal with as he pleased; to be bedded by him tonight and perhaps bear his child nine months from now. She was a week short of her sixteenth birthday and terrified. She knew how much her mother had suffered at the hands of her father before his death in September. The growls, the curses, the frequent slaps, the drunken beatings, the disdain that tore at the foundations of confidence. Her mother had borne the brunt,

shielded her daughter from the worst of it, but Judith had known, had observed the hell, and could not bear that it might be her own fate.

'Hold still, my sweeting,' said Agnes. 'Let me pin these in your hair, there's a good girl.'

The maid's fingers tweaked and tugged, trailing pain in their wake. Resentment flared in Judith's breast, not just at Agnes, but at everything. She uncoiled her clenched fists and slapped Agnes's hand aside. 'You should have been a butcher's wife, not a lady's maid!' she spat.

Affronted, Agnes clucked like a hen.

The curtain rings rattled, announcing the arrival of Alicia de Montgomery. Taking in the scene before her eyes and sensing the atmosphere, the faint vertical marks between her brows became more defined.

'Thank you, Agnes, you have wrought wonders. Our cygnet is a swan. Will you go and ask the chamberlain's lad to bring fresh candles ready for tonight?'

Head carried high, the maid swept out.

'Agnes is an old besom at times,' Alicia said when they were alone, 'but that is no excuse to strike out. Is it what I have taught you? You will become no better than your father.'

Judith bit her lip and held her chin rigid to stop it from quivering. 'I am sorry, mama,' she said unsteadily, 'but she hurt me. I feel like a filly being groomed for a horse-coper's approval!'

Alicia shook her head and, uttering a sigh, folded her daughter in a rose-scented embrace. 'I know you do not think it now, but you are most fortunate in this match.'

Judith's response was a stifled sob and her hands gripped suddenly tight on her mother's sleeves.

'Hush now, you'll undo all Agnes's good work.' Alicia stroked Judith's hair. 'This match was made for men's political purposes, but it is a blessing for you could you but understand it. The man whose son you will wed ... I was almost his

bride myself. Would to God that I had been so fortunate.'

Judith wiped her face on her sleeve and stared at her mother.

'Your grandfather FitzOsbern offered me to him, but he chose to wed an English heiress instead because it better suited his plans and besides, he was smitten. Christen had been widowed on Hastings field and she was a grown woman. I was your age and unknowing of the world. Your grandfather was not displeased when the offer was rejected because in the meantime he had received an offer from Maurice de Montgomery.' Who had beaten her for the slightest transgression and behaved with all the finesse of a rutting boar. Occasional baronial gatherings had afforded her glimpses of Miles le Gallois as he grew into middle age. The cat-like grace of his twenties had set, becoming less supple and rangy, but in essence remaining. Maurice had grown ever more to resemble a boar as his waistline overspread the bounds of his belt.

'I know very little of Guyon, but with Miles and Christen for examples I do believe your marriage will be easier than mine.' Alicia gave a regretful shrug. 'If circumstances had been different, you would have had time to know each other before the wedding, but as it is I would rather you had a strong protector when your uncle Robert comes to claim his earldom. Already the vultures are gathering.'

Judith eyed at her mother whose expression revealed nothing - too much of nothing. Judith well knew the rumours surrounding Robert de Belleme. The maids delighted in terrifying each other of a night with tales of his brutality and Judith understood more English and Welsh than was seemly for a girl of her station. They said that he tortured for sport and robbed and murdered without conscience. The more fanciful of them even said that he possessed a forked tail and cloven hooves, but Judith gave no credence to their imagination. What need when the truth was already so lurid?

He had designed Ravenstow himself and loaned her father the money to build it. They were still in his debt to the tune of several hundred marks. She knew her mother was afraid he would come immediately to claim it, being himself in debt to the King. It was the reason that this marriage had been arranged so quickly - before he had a chance to reach out and seize and strangle.

Judith shuddered. The wedding was supposed to be a quiet affair with a select number of guests and vassals - supposed to be, but de Belleme's brother Arnulf of Pembroke had ridden in yestereve and with him had been Walter de Lacey who was a powerful vassal of de Belleme's, a hunting crony of her father's and former suitor for her hand. Her mother had been hard put to find them either house-room or cordiality, for it was obvious they were not present for the sake of wishing joy on the marriage; however, such eminent men could not be turned away and thus guested in the hall with those of official invitation such as Hugh d'Avrenches, Earl

of Chester and FitzHamon, Lord of Gloucester.

The curtain swished and Agnes reappeared followed by a youth bearing a basket of fresh candles. 'They're sighted, my lady. Be here within the hour, so de Bec says,' Agnes announced.

Judith began to tremble. The walls seemed to be closing in on her, caging her in a space so small that there was no room to breathe. She felt hot and sick, but her hands were icy. 'Agnes, I'm sorry, I shouldn't have struck you,' she said in a choked voice.

'That's all right, my love,' Agnes said comfortingly. 'Bound to be a bit strung up today, aren't you?' She held out her hand. 'Child, what's wrong?'

Judith knew she would die if she did not escape. Gathering her skirts in one hand, the other clapped across her mouth, she bolted from the room. The chamberlain's lad leaped out of the way, dropping his candles. Alicia and Agnes called out to her, but Judith was gone, fleeing heedless of the dangerous spiralling stairs,

fleeing with the wild instinct of a hunted animal to escape. While she was running, she did not have to think. While she was running, she was not fettered.

'Shall I go after her, my lady?'

Alicia gnawed her lip and gazed at the still swaying curtain. 'No, Agnes,' she said after a moment. 'We have hemmed her about too much. Let her be alone awhile. It will be her last chance.'

'She is not ready for this yet,' Agnes said grimly. 'They say he's used to the women of the court - that he plays fast with other men's wives.'

'Gossip!' Alicia snapped. 'And you know better than to listen, Agnes. Do not give me that pitying look. I do not doubt he has owned casual mistresses, but tales are always embroidered to give them colour and I trust to his breeding more than I do to third-hand tittle-tattle. Besides, whatever marriage to him holds for Judith, it can be no worse than a fate at the hands of her uncle Robert, or Walter de Lacey.' Her lips tightened.

'She has to be ready.'

When Judith returned to her senses, there was a tight stitch in her side and she was leaning against a jagged lump of stone. Her breathing rasped in her throat, her recently combed hair was dishevelled and a dark stain was spreading upwards from the hem of her gown where she had splashed heedlessly through the bailey puddles. Her gilded shoes were soaked and her toes clung cold together inside them.

Sleet spattered fitfully in the wind which was as raw as an open wound. Judith's teeth chattered. Her new cloak with its warm fur lining was hanging upon her clothing pole in the chamber she had fled, and not for anything would she return to fetch it.

'I cannot do it,' she whispered miserably, knowing that her words were empty. If she did not agree to this marriage, she exposed them all to the threat of her uncle Robert. Sooner or later she would have been contracted to wed anyway, probably to Walter de Lacey, and nothing could

be worse than that, she told herself as she stared at the grey choppy water of the river below.

Guyon FitzMiles, lord of Ledworth. She tested the name on her tongue and tried to envisage the man, but nothing came except sick fear. What if his teeth were rotten or he stank? What if he was gross and balding like Hugh, Earl of Chester? What if he beat her just because his mood was sour? For a wild moment she contemplated flinging herself from the promontory to break like spume upon the rocks below, but she dared not, because such an act would earn eternal damnation for her soul. Gasping, the wind blinding her face with her hair, Judith drew back from the treacherous edge.

A plaintive mew drew her gaze down to the golden tabby cat that was twining sinuously around her skirts, back arched, round head butting and rubbing.

'Melyn!' Momentarily diverted from her unhappy dilemma, Judith bent to scoop the cat into her arms. 'In the name of the saints, where have you

been?'

The cat, missing for three days, purred and kneaded Judith's sleeve with her paws, her yellow eyes filled with smugness and disdain.

Melyn was unusual in being a house pet. Usually cats roamed the undercrofts and barns, tolerated to keep vermin at bay, essentially wild, sometimes caught and skinned for their fur. Judith had discovered Melyn last year out on this headland, as a mangy kitten with an infected paw. Alicia had been teaching Judith her herbs and simples at the time and had let Judith develop her knowledge on the kitten, Lord Maurice not being at home to see the little creature destroyed. By the time he returned, Melyn was fully recovered, had become accustomed to life in the bower and had learned manners to suit. Her feline sense of self-preservation sent her either out of the room or into hiding whenever Maurice appeared. Following his death, the cat had stalked the keep like a queen surveying her domain, imperious and aloof. Her disappearance three days ago

had been an ill omen. It was as if Melyn knew a new tyrant was coming to Ravenstow and wanted no part of it ... except that now, when his arrival was imminent, she was back.

Melyn suddenly and painfully dug her hind legs into the crook of Judith's arm and clawed herself on to her favourite perch across her mistress's shoulder. Judith yelped in protest, but bore with the discomfort because she was so relieved by her pet's return. She tugged her hair to one side out of the way. Melyn uttered a strange noise, halfway between whine and growl. Her claws needled Judith's neck as another cat emerged from the tangled dank grass and padded without haste across their path towards the keep. He was sleek, rangy, and as black as jet.

'Sweet Mary!' Judith exclaimed in exasperation, not knowing whether to be annoyed or amused, and most definitely concerned. God alone knew how her future husband would react to a bowerful of kittens. God alone knew how her future husband would react to anything.

CHAPTER 4

Guyon drew rein and, while the herald rode forward to announce him formally, stared up at the limewashed keep, gleaming against the heavy grey clouds and wind-whipped tussocks on its slope.

'I must be mad,' he muttered as the drawbridge thumped down across the ditch and, beyond, the serjeants in the gate-house made shrift to raise the portcullis and open the door into hell. Foreboding scuttled down Guyon's spine. One of the most impregnable keeps along the northern march Ravenstow might be, desirable in the extreme, but for two pins he would have ridden away and left it. But as there were more than two pins at stake, he heeled Arian's flanks and the stallion stepped delicately on to the planks. Cadi bounded joyously forward with no such reservations, and Guyon whistled her sternly to heel.

'The Welsh won't take this in a hurry,' Miles said

as they turned at a sharp angle to ride between the outer defences and the palisade of the inner bailey before turning again to enter the inner court through a second gateway.

Guyon grunted in reply and studied the formidable defences with a jaundiced eye, appreciating their strength even while he felt revulsion. If only Robert de Belleme was not so closely connected with the place, he would have been much easier of conscience and mind.

Upon dismounting, they were greeted by an officious little man in a scarlet silk robe that embraced his paunch and made him look as if he were heavily pregnant. Behind him stood a taller, iron-thewed greybeard in full armour and a welcoming party of what looked like the more prominent vassals and household knights.

'God's greeting my lords, and welcome,' said the paunch in red silk, hands clasped together like a suppliant. 'I am Richard FitzWarren, chamberlain to the lady Alicia, and this is her constable, Michel de Bec ...'

Guyon forced himself to listen and look polite as he was introduced one by one to all the members of the group. It was politic to remember names, since it was a valuable asset when it came to handling their owners, but it gave him cause to wonder what was amiss that the constable and his underling should emerge to greet them instead of the hostess herself and then freeze them here in the bailey, drivelling of matters that could wait.

Glancing briefly beyond the men while he made acknowledgement, he noticed a woman hurrying from the forebuilding towards them, her manner agitated. Her cloak was fur-lined and her rose-coloured gown shimmered beneath it as she moved. Exposed below her veil, her braids were a handspan thick and lustrous as jet.

'The lady Alicia,' Miles said in a tone of voice that caused Guyon to divert his gaze and eye his father sharply instead.

She approached the men with a fixed smile on her lips and a slightly desperate expression in her

eyes. 'I am sorry, my lords, I should have been here to greet you. I apologise for my lack. The more I try, the more obstacles seem to be cast in my path. Forgive me, welcome now, and come within, I pray you.' She gestured with an open hand.

'What is wrong, my lady?' Miles asked. 'Can we be of service?

Alicia drew breath to deny, but then let it out on a heavy sigh. 'Nothing of great import, my lords. The guests are squabbling; the cook has just tipped boiling lard all over the spit boy and the bread is burnt to cinders. The maids don't know their heads from their heels; my constable, when told to play for time, keeps you standing in the ward in the cold as I am doing now; and to season the stew, my daughter has taken fright and run off heaven knows where. Otherwise, everything is as normal as you would expect for a wedding so quickly arranged.'

Miles stifled a grin. Guyon started to ask a question, but the words were driven from his mind

as Cadi gave a bark of antagonistic joy and sprang from his side to hurtle across the ward towards a girl who was trying to slink unnoticed around the side of the forebuilding, and would have succeeded were it not for the dog.

The cat that was curled around her shoulders became a hissing arch of erect orange fur. The bitch launched herself at the girl, who overbalanced and sat down hard on the muddy bailey floor. A feline paw flashed. Blood sprang to the accompaniment of an anguished yelp. The cat leaped over the dog, avoiding the belated snap of her teeth, whisked, through the legs of a startled guard and into the keep.

Hampered by her gown, Judith floundered to rise. A swift glance around made her wish that she had been knocked unconscious. The grooms, guards and kitchen maids on errands were gawping in horrified delight. Her mother's face as she bore down upon her was set like stone. Someone sniggered. She closed her eyes, decided that shutting out the situation was not

going to make it go away and opened them again upon a neatly built greying man of middle years who had overtaken Alicia to set a hand beneath her elbow.

'I take this for an omen,' he chuckled. 'You and my son are bound to fight like cat and dog and scandalise the entire castle!'

Judith gaped at him too stunned to respond. Her father would have shaken her for this until her teeth rattled.

'No more than you and mama ever did!' a younger man retorted amiably, appearing beside them, his fingers gripped around the white dog's collar as she strove, forepaws flailing, to pursue her quarry into the keep. 'It is my fault,' he owned with a smile. 'Cadi's still a pup and has yet to learn her manners.'

Judith looked down. He was beautiful and unreal. A courtier, a gilded image with a voice as smooth as dark mead. Her uncle Robert was handsome and smooth too, and rotten to the core beneath the gilding, and her fear increased.

Having delivered Judith to the bower to repair the ravages of the first encounter between bride and groom, Alicia summoned her courage and returned to the hall to attend to her guests.

Miles le Gallois smiled and waved his hand at her apology. 'It is already to be an irregular wedding,' he said. 'I am sure my son's memory of his first encounter with his bride will remain vivid for the rest of his life.'

Alicia cast a glance over her shoulder to where Guyon was giving the dog into the temporary care of one of his knights, then returned her attention to Miles. 'You are laughing at me, my lord.'

'I may be.'

Her mouth began to curve. She straightened it. 'Judith is anxious,' she said. 'Tonight she will be a wife, when this morning she was a child.'

Miles sobered. 'Guyon has a sister and nieces and is by no means green about women.'

'So we hear,' Alicia replied waspishly, and then

shook her head. 'No surprise when you consider his looks and the ways of the court.'

'I am not at court now, my lady,' Guyon said, joining them.

Alicia jumped. He moved as softly as Judith's cat.

'You need not fear,' Guyon continued. 'I promise I will treat your daughter with every respect and courtesy.'

'Judith is young, but she is quick to learn and quite capable of managing a household,' Alicia replied, recovering herself. 'If she appeared in a bad light just now, it is because she has been unsettled by her father's death and this sudden change in her situation.'

In other words, Guyon thought wryly, she was a resentful, frightened little girl who would take a deal of delicate handling if anything was to be salvaged from the morass.

The wine arrived, and with it Hugh d'Avrenches, Earl of Chester, thus sparing Guyon the need to

make Alicia a reply.

'It is bound to be difficult at first,' Miles said to Alicia as Guyon lent a relieved ear to what his neighbour had to say concerning the Welsh alliances of the region. 'Given different circumstances, there would have been the time we all need.'

'Given different circumstances,' Alicia said with a side-long look at Guyon, 'there would have been no arrangement at all, would there?'

Lost for a reply, Miles lifted his cup and drank.

Guyon looked at the girl to whom he had just bound himself in Ravenstow's freezing chapel, his vows committing him to her protection for the rest of his life, no matter how short that might now be. Her own voice making the responses had been tremulous and more than once swallowed in tears.

He had felt the daggers in men's eyes as they witnessed his marriage. Arnulf of Pembroke had barely been civil in greeting and Walter de Lacey

was sneeringly hostile. Judith's face was turned towards him, awaiting the sacrificial kiss of tradition. The high cheekbones gave a distinctly feline expression to her eyes, which were a peculiar mingling of brown upon grey like water in spate.

Dear Christ, what had he sold himself into? Probably an early grave, he thought as he slipped his arm around her waist. She was rigid and trembling beneath the glowing green damask. It was a grown woman's gown cladding the thin frame of a child and he knew that he could no more bed with her tonight than he could with one of his nieces. He kissed her cheek as he would a vassal, the touch brief and impersonal. Her skin smelled faintly of rosewater, and her hair of the rosemary and camomile in which it had been washed for the wedding.

Judith shuddered at the contact and Guyon immediately released her. Together they turned to receive the congratulations of the guests and witnesses; few in number because of the hasty

arrangements, to Judith they seemed a claustrophobic throng.

The entire occasion for her was a nightmare endured through a fog. Sporadically the mist would lift to reveal a sharply coloured tableau with herself bound victim at its centre. The awful moment when the dog had sent her flying, her arrival at the chapel, the faces turned towards her, their expressions stamped with speculation, with pity, with predatory greed. Now, clearly, she could see her hand resting upon her husband's dark sleeve, her wedding ring of Welsh gold proclaiming his ownership. She was as much his property now as his horse or that dog, to be used and abused as he chose.

The guests mingled in the great hall. Below the dais they danced in honour of the bride and groom. Guyon watched his new wife perform the steps with one of Ravenstow's neighbours. Ralph de Serigny was another of de Belleme's vassals, a thoroughly disagreeable, parsimonious old ferret who, according to Alicia, was only here in

order to eat and drink at another's expense. As his borders marched with Ravenstow's on the Welsh boundary, it had been necessary to invite him lest he take offence. His wife, apparently, was dull-witted and had been left at home tended by her women. At least, Guyon thought half smiling, if Ralph de Serigny was only here to eat, drink and escape his wife, he was a deal more welcome than certain others claiming the right of hospitality at his wedding.

The dance progressed and Judith was passed on to the arm of her uncle, Arnulf de Montgomery. He had a nose like a pitted stone and possessed a dour, unsmiling character. De Montgomery had none of Robert de Belleme's charisma or genius but was the owner of a low, dull cunning. Not having the inventiveness to scheme, he was sufficiently shrewd to attach himself to the plots of others if there was benefit to himself - a man to be watched from the eye corners, frank confrontation not being his style. But how did one look before and behind and to the side at one and the same time?

De Montgomery swept his niece into the clutch of Walter de Lacey who was waiting at the end of the line. The younger man pulled her against his lean body, caught her wrist and turned her around. Judith's face wore a fixed smile. His hand lingered at her waist and he murmured something against her ear.

'More oil than you'd find in an entire olive grove,' muttered the Earl of Chester from the corner of his mouth. Guyon glanced round and up. Hugh d'Avrenches, known as Hugh le Gros on account of his enormous height and girth, was the ugliest man Guyon had ever seen and even now, long acquaintance had not bred the indifference of familiarity.

He had small, hooded eyes of watery pale blue. His cheeks were pendulous red-veined jowls and his mouth was small and soft with a sweet, surprisingly childlike smile, the similarity enhanced by the gap where his two upper front teeth were missing. He cultivated a jolly, bumbling personality to match his gross figure and the

unwary stepped in, never thinking of the dangers lurking beneath the shallows. A good friend, an implacable enemy.

'Enough to slip his feet from under him, I would say,' Guyon agreed.

Hugh d'Avrenches folded his arms and regarded Guyon with a twinkling stare. 'Good soldier, though. He led a competent command on the Mon campaign.'

Guyon's lip curled. 'He also amused himself with torture and the rape of girls not old enough to be women.'

The Earl shrugged. 'We all have our own little foibles and sometimes tortured men can be made to sing a very pretty tune.'

Guyon's nostrils flared. 'Yes,' he said without inflection.

Chester laid a hand on Guyon's shoulder. 'Son, you're too finicky and you can't afford the luxury of principles in the present company.'

Guyon watched Walter de Lacey set his hands on Judith's hips and swing her round. The stiff smile on her face threatened to shatter. 'I realise that. De Lacey offered for the girl himself shortly before her father was killed; he had de Belleme's sanction to the suit.'

Chester pursed his soft, small lips. 'Did he so?' He eyed the dancers with interest. 'He'll bear watching then, because it doesn't look as though he's willing to concede you the victory.'

Guyon turned and his gaze narrowed in anger. The music had finished on a flourish and Walter de Lacey had pulled Judith hard to his chest and was kissing her passionately on the mouth, one hand roving and probing the curve of her buttocks. Guyon swore, thrust his wine into the Earl's hastily held out paw and stalked across the room to reclaim his bride.

'The privilege is mine, I believe,' he said icily as he forced himself between de Lacey and Judith. 'I do not want the wedding guests to confuse the identity of the bridegroom.'

De Lacey bestowed on Guyon a snarled smile. 'I doubt they are in any confusion, my lord. Be welcome to the wench while you have the wherewithal.'

'And guard yours if you wish to keep it intact, and mind with whom you drink.' He snapped his fingers at the musicians, who fumbled and then struck up a lively *carole*. Guyon held out his arm to Judith.

She pressed her lips together and shook her head. 'I cannot,' she muttered. 'My lord, I ... I think I am going to ...' She clapped her hand to her mouth.

Her face reflected the green of her gown. Taking her arm, Guyon propelled her out of the hall, ignoring salacious remarks and concerned enquiries alike.

Outside it had begun to snow. Judith leaned miserably against the wall of the forebuilding and vomited until her stomach was empty and her muscles ached. The feel of de Lacey's tongue

slithering slug-like around her mouth had filled her with shuddering revulsion. She could still taste him, feel his hand digging into her buttocks, forefinger slyly probing, and the hard thrust of his pelvis against her belly and loins. It had been horrible. Tonight she must endure that and worse in her marriage bed.

'Did he hurt you?'

She shook her head, unable to speak.

'There are always men like him,' her new husband said contemptuously. 'It was thrown down to me by way of a challenge. I am sorry that he chose to use you as his gage.'

Judith bit her lip and wished that he would go away. The snow floated down.

'You need not be afraid of me, child,' he said gently. 'I will do you no harm.'

'I am not a child!' she snarled at him, jerking away. Sleeving her eyes, she wondered if he would hit her.

He touched her shoulder. 'I know it is hard for you.'

Judith raised her chin. 'Do you, my lord?' she demanded flatly.

'You have been forced into a match made for the purposes of others and to a partner you had not set eyes upon before today. How should you not be afraid and resentful? I understand more than you think.'

She gave him a surprised look. Whatever else she had expected, it was not this rueful candour. It had not occurred to her that the resentment was mutual, that he might not want her rich lands and the burdens that accompanied them, not least herself.

He applied gentle pressure to her shoulder with his fingertips until she turned hesitantly to face him.

'I have said you need not fear me for any reason ... The bedding ceremony, it worries you?'

Judith looked down, wondering where all this

was leading. She did not desire a lesson in enlightenment, no matter how kindly meant.

Guyon took her downcast silence for modest assent. 'The first part is something that will have to be borne. The second we can abandon. Rape has never appealed to me.'

'I ... I know my duty, my lord,' she stammered.

'I have no doubt, but it would be rape all the same and I prefer the pleasure to be mutual. In your own time, *fy Cath fach*.' He lightly brushed a strand of hair from her cheek. She lifted her lids, eyes torn between relief and doubt.

'You truly mean that, my lord?' He had called her a small cat - a kitten.

'I would be a fool if I did not. There is enough on your trencher already without burdening your body so young.'

Judith wiped her eyes again and sniffed. 'I am not always such a wet fish my lord, truly,' she excused. 'It is just that I was so afraid. Before you came, I almost threw myself off the headland ...

And then, when I saw you ...' she looked at her toes. The snow whispered down. 'I was even more afraid.'

He looked nonplussed. 'I gave you no cause, surely!'

Judith screwed up her face. She could not say that she knew how a flower must feel when it turns towards the sun only to find its blaze too hot to be endured. 'I did not know what you would think of me, sprawled in the mud at your feet.'

'Unique,' he chuckled. 'No girl has ever tried to claim my attention like that before!'

With fortuitous timing, Melyn appeared from one of the storeheds and walked daintily over to Judith and Guyon, her ginger tail carried erect. Before Judith could scoop her up from the settling snow, Melyn came to her own decision and sprang with practised ease on to Guyon's shoulder, hooking her claws firmly into tunic and shirt to retain her grip. Guyon winced.

Judith's eyes widened in dismay.

'You live dangerously, puss,' Guyon addressed the cat, but he made no move to dislodge her as he turned towards the steps. 'Your mistress values your life, but I am not necessarily of the same mind. You may keep your claws to yourself.' He looked at Judith over his unoccupied shoulder and winked. 'Come,' he coaxed. 'Let us see what our guests think of my new fur collar.'

Alicia saw Guyon enter the hall with Judith at his side and breathed a heartfelt sigh of relief. Whatever he had said or done outside had obviously been the right thing. The rigidity had left Judith's body and her eyes had lost their wild expression.

'What in God's name has Guy got on his shoulder?' Miles laughed.

Alicia gave a cluck of amused annoyance. 'That cat has no sense of propriety, although how she comes to be there I don't know. Usually she avoids men. They tend to kick her or bellow when she gets underfoot.'

'A good sign then,' Miles said.

'Not necessarily. I have heard that women are particularly susceptible to your son's brand of charm. Melyn is perhaps just another she-cat bedazzled by her instincts.'

Miles grinned, but shook his head. 'Guy's reputation far outmatches his deeds. I'm not saying he's an angel, far from it, but tales become exaggerated in the telling and part of it when at court is self-defence, the King being what he is.'

Alicia made a gesture of self-irritation. 'Only this morning, I rebuked Agnes for listening to gossip and here I am no better. I am a mother hen fussing over her chick.' She sighed and gave him a pensive look. She felt worn out, but knew she couldn't yield to her exhaustion.

'Guyon will treat Judith with all honour,' Miles said. Taking her arm, he led her to a bench set into the thickness of the wall.

'I am sure he will.' Alicia paused, looked at Miles and suddenly poured out her main concern. 'But she is so young and inexperienced. Even if

more than half the tales told of your son are untrue, that still leaves a wealth of living in the other part and he is a full twelve years older ... a man. What do I do if she comes screaming to me on the morrow that she will have no more to do with him? It will break my heart. I remember leaning over the latrine hole, sick with revulsion and praying to die after my own wedding night - after what Maurice visited on me.'

'Then Guy's experience is to the good. He will not force her and, as you have seen, he is capable of charming the birds - or cats - down from the trees.' He frowned at her. 'Have you said anything to Judith to give her a distaste for coupling?'

Alicia drew herself up. 'I am not stupid. More harm than good would come of that, although I fear her attitude has been tainted by her father's behaviour. Slaps and curses and drunken rough handling have not led her to view the state of marriage in a very favourable light. She may find joy; I pray she does, but it is a fickle world.'

'You have little cause to like men, either of you.'

'I do not need your pity, my lord,' Alicia said curtly. Her eyes went to Judith where she stood at Guyon's side. The tawny hair had taken on a fiery glint from the glow of the candles and, with that half-smile on her face and the way her head was tilted, Alicia saw Judith's father for a fleeting instant most clearly. 'No,' she said, a hard smile on her lips. 'I have had my moment of glory and it pays for all that Maurice did to me. My concern is with Judith now. I can see she has a leopard by the tail and must either tame it or become its prey. I know her capable, her blood dictates it so, but she is young for the challenge, perhaps too young.'

Miles gave her a sidelong look and wished that Christen or Emma were here; they would have known instinctively what to say or do, but the former was beyond him for ever and the latter had been summoned to the court by her husband. 'I'll fetch wine,' he muttered, and went to accost a servant.

Alicia drew several deep breaths and controlled herself, aware that Miles was regarding her as he might a skittish horse. If she gained that kind of reputation, she would be shunned or sold off to another marriage and then locked up, conveniently labelled a lackwit like Ralph de Serigny's poor wife.

Miles returned with the wine. She took it from him and looked out over the assembled guests. 'I am not usually so overwrought,' she said ruefully.

'I did not think that you were.'

'Nevertheless you panicked.'

Miles laughed and rubbed the back of his neck. 'A little,' he admitted.

Alicia tasted the wine and set it down. She needed a clear head, for as hostess she was required to mingle among the guests and there was still the bedding ceremony to organise. The humour left her face at the thought and her glance sought out the newly-weds. Melyn had draped herself comfortably around Guyon's neck and half

closed her eyes. His hand sat lightly at Judith's waist. She was saying something to him and his head was cocked attentively, although his gaze was elsewhere, sifting and assessing, paring down, focusing on Walter de Lacey and Arnulf of Pembroke even as he answered Judith with a smile. Alicia shivered and offered up a silent prayer. A leopard by the tail indeed.

* * *

Judith stood obediently calm, raising and lowering her limbs as Agnes dictated until she stood naked in the bedchamber that had belonged to her parents. The bed had been aired and made up with crisp new linen sheets. Dried herbs to perfume the clothes and promote fertility had been liberally strewn over the bed and the priest had sprinkled holy water everywhere. The droplets on her body made her shiver. Agnes finished combing down Judith's hair and draped a bedrobe around her shoulders.

The female guests crooned and clucked around the bride, turning the room into a hen house.

Judith stared at the wall, feeling as numb as the coffer across which her clothes had been draped. Someone giggled a piece of advice in her ear. Someone else of a more practical mind thrust a pot of dead nettle salve into her hand, an ointment used to soothe the female passage after childbed and other rough treatment.

'I won't need this,' she said and looked round in surprise at the laughter. Fear returned to claim her, and uncertainty. She did not know if she could trust Guyon. What if he went back on his word? What if he used her as brutally as her father had been wont to use her mother? Men lied. She couldn't help the whimper that escaped from her throat.

As her mother tried to comfort her the curtain was flurried aside and the room was suddenly full of men, most of them less than sober, their jokes bawdy, crude and raucous. Judith withdrew into the mist again. She did not hear the jests. She did not feel them removing her bedrobe and tugging her to the bed, nor the cup of spiced

hippocras that was pressed into her hand to replace the pot of salve. The pink silk of her mother's embrace was a haven but as she tried to cling to it, it was abruptly gone with a sound very much like a sob. Sounds faded to silence. She stared at the wall. The cup of hippocras shook in her hand.

Leaning over, Guyon gently removed the cup. Judith blinked and refocused. Like herself he was naked, his torso lean but powerfully muscled and marked with minor battle scars. Her gaze skimmed over and fled from the curling mat of dark hair at his groin and its nestling occupants. He set the cup down beside the pot of salve, quirking a brow at the latter, then swung on his heel and padded to the curtain. She heard him speak a command in Welsh and then an endearment and her interest sharpened.

'Cadi might hate cats, but she makes an excellent guard dog,' he explained with a grin as he returned to the bed. 'Not that she'll bite anyone, but she'll greet them with such enthusiasm that

we'll have warning enough of eavesdroppers.'

Judith smiled wanly. Her eyes flickered again to his crotch. Guyon sought out his indoor cloak, swept it around himself and handed Judith her chemise from an arm's length distance. She took it and struggled clumsily into the garment, feeling all fingers and thumbs.

Guyon paced over to the narrow window and pulled back the hide covering to look out on a slit of whirling white darkness. 'I meant what I said, *Cath fach*,' he murmured without turning round. 'You need not fear me.'

The logs in the hearth crackled and settled. 'I am not afraid,' Judith lied, clutching the bedrobe across her breasts.

'No?' He glanced over his shoulder.

'Well, only a little. I know mama and the others meant well, but they besieged me with their good advice.'

'Such as pots of salve,' he said and, pinning back the hide, turned around. She was watching

him anxiously, like a dog desiring desperately to please but afraid of being kicked. Her tawny hair tumbled over the coverlet taking on ruddy highlights from the fire, and was really quite attractive. Her eyes were mingled grey and brown like the muddy water churning beneath the battlements and equally full of turbulence. A veil of honey-gold freckles dappled her face and throat and, for an infinitesimal moment, she reminded Guyon of someone else. The impression, however, was too fleeting to be caught as she moved her head, changing the play of light on the angles of bone.

'My mother is skilled in herb lore,' she said. 'So it would seem,' he said drily. 'Do you have the same competence?'

'She has taught me what she knows.'

He poured himself some wine from the flagon left on the chest and, returning to the bed with it, seated himself on the end and considered her. 'So if I cut my arm with a blade, what would you do?'

'Self-inflicted? I would dose you with valerian to rectify your disordered wits!' she answered with spirit and then, at his silence, sobered and looked down, thinking that she had gone too far.

'No, inflicted by the blade of my wife's tongue!' he chuckled, 'which I hazard is as keen as a sword once unsheathed!'

Judith eyed him warily, but saw nothing in his face to contradict the honesty of his amusement. 'If it was a deep wound,' she said, 'I would sprinkle it with powdered comfrey root to ease the bleeding, then stitch it and bind it with a piece of mouldy bread.'

'Mouldy bread!'

'It is a remedy handed down from Grandma FitzOsbern and it usually works. Deep wounds heal cleanly without going proud or filling with pus. The main danger is from the stiffening sickness. If the wound was only a scratch, I would clean it with water in which pine needles had been steeped and then smear it with honey and bind as

necessary.'

Guyon studied her as she spoke so earnestly and fought a battle to keep his amusement from showing on his face. In itself, the information was interesting and her obviously detailed knowledge showed that Alicia was justified in commending her daughter's skill. It was just so incongruous that this slender willow-twigg of a girl with all her innocence and uncertainty should hold forth like a grey-haired matron of sedentary years.

The incongruity continued to deepen as he further explored her knowledge of matters domestic. He learned the best way to salt pork and hang sausages, exactly how much madder was required to dye cloth a certain shade of red and which water to use, the correct ingredients to make a venison ragout, how to buy spices without being cheated. He almost choked on his wine when she began to explain to him the best way to go about honing a sword.

'Your mother taught you that too!'

'Of course not!' she retorted, tone indignant now

that she had gained a spark of confidence. 'De Bec showed me last winter when we were snowed in. He showed me how to use a knife too ... Are you all right my lord?'

Guyon wiped his streaming eyes, speechless between laughter and coughing. 'God's eyes!' he croaked at last. 'When I said that this marriage would kill me, I never thought that you would be the hazard!'

'My lord?'

He waved her away as she leaned towards him, her face full of concern. 'Do you number riding among your many talents too?' he asked after a moment, when he had contained his mirth.

Judith shook her head regretfully. 'Mama prefers to travel by litter and my father said it was a waste of time for a girl to master a saddle when she should be at her distaff. I know a little, but not enough to venture out on more than the most docile rouncy - but I am willing to learn.'

'Good. There are several estates in my honours

that are not negotiable by litter.'

'You intend taking me, my lord?'

He lay full length on the bed, plumping up the bolster and pillows to support his back. Judith moved away, but with more wariness than fear. 'My parents always went together and the people have become used to the arrangement. Besides,' he added with a smile, 'there is nothing like the imminent visit of a chatelaine to set a manor humming with industry.'

Judith stirred uneasily. 'My lord, I fear I will not be equal to the burden you lay on me.'

'If you can sharpen a sword and dagger-fight your way out of a corner, you are wholly capable of handling anything else I ask of you!'

She looked doubtful. True, she could manage Ravenstow efficiently. It had been drilled into her without surcease ever since she could remember, but to venture further, tackle people and situations she did not know, that was daunting. It was easy for him to speak. He was a marcher lord with

access to the royal ear, his experience far beyond hers.

'Trust me,' he said and kissed her cheek lightly as he might have done to a child. The gesture magically bolstered her flagging resolve and she sat up straight.

Her chemise gaped open at the neck affording Guyon a glimpse of her breasts, scarcely raised from her narrow ribcage. Judith saw the direction of his gaze, and hastily fastened the ties, colour scorching her face.

There was an uncomfortable silence. Guyon bit his tongue to avoid being unkind. He would need to be desperate to take advantage, and he was far from that. Tonight was probably the least amorous he had ever felt when alone with an available young woman.

'Do you have a mistress, my lord?'

'What!' Once more he found himself utterly thrown off balance. 'What kind of question is that!'

'Do not be angry with me, my lord!' She held out

a supplicating hand. The fingers were long and elegant and not at all the hands of a child. 'It is only that I do not want to make mistakes. Mama once threw out one of my father's women for insolence and my father beat both of them when he found out.'

Guyon looted disgusted. 'Your father was a fool and a tyrant. I am surprised that with all your knowledge of simples, one of you did not seek to spice his food with monkshood.'

'And have Uncle Robert assure our welfare? How long do you think we would live?'

He grimaced and finished the wine. 'No, *Cathfach*, since you ask, I do not have a mistress. I did have but we parted last month. The borders are no longer safe for her to travel in her father's wool train and, being Welsh, she would not be constrained within one of my keeps.' He shrugged and looked down at his hands, remembering them lost in the black waterfall of Rhosyn's hair. 'A marcher lord and a girl from the Welsh hills. Such matches are fleeting at the

most.'

Judith swallowed, wishing that she had not asked the question.

'Even if Rhosyn had agreed to live a Norman life, there are still such things as courtesy and discretion,' he said after a moment. 'It is neither considerate nor far-sighted to have a mistress and a wife beneath the same roof. Grief is bound to come of it.'

Judith nodded sensibly. It never occurred to her that Guyon would be faithful. Her father had been lecherous and indiscriminate in his ruttings and the friends and vassals who dined at his board, the same. Discretion was not a word they knew. Gratitude was an emotion Judith seldom felt.

'You are kind, my lord.'

He shrugged. 'Not necessarily, but I have had no choice but to learn the ways of women. My sister rules her roost and she has three daughters, all of them lively, and Rhosyn has a daughter too, Eluned. One learns to tread with

care.'

He spoke with such obvious affection for his womenfolk that another shard of fear broke from the frozen lump at Judith's core and dissolved away. 'Will you tell me about your family, my lord? The marriage was arranged so quickly that I know very little.'

Guyon obliged. It was safer ground than talk of mistresses, or so in his ignorance he thought. Indeed, all went sweetly until he spoke of his half-sister Emma and her marriage to a royal official. From there, the conversation drifted into the murkier waters surrounding life at court.

'De Bec says that the King is a ...' Judith caught herself just in time from committing another *faux pas*. 'A mincing ferblet' was not a safe remark.

Guyon had not missed her sudden dismayed check. He could well guess the reason. Rufus's tendencies were common guardroom scandal and one did not learn how to sharpen a sword and fight with knife without ingesting gossip.

It was not really amusing, not when the King, who was short, portly and red complexioned, preferred his partners to be tall, honed and possessed of dark good looks. On several occasions the royal groin had stood in imminent danger of damage from Guyon's knee. That had been in the early days before he discovered the amicable company of the ambitious Prince Henry and that the occasional night spent carousing with him amid women of doubtful character, and wine of opposite excellence, was sufficient to dampen Rufus's ardour and send him in pursuit of more co-operative game.

'... De Bec says that the King spends more money on clothes in one week than mama would be allowed to spend in an entire year,' Judith amended, regarding him anxiously.

Guyon chuckled. 'Rufus likes to think that he spends more on his wardrobe than other men, but he is outwitted by his own vanity. Last time I was at court my brother-in-law, who was dressing him, fetched him a pair of gilded leather boots. Rufus

asked how much they cost, so Richard told him. Rufus was furious and demanded that he go away and find a pair that were worth a full mark of silver, claiming that those he had been offered were fit only for shovelling dung.' His laughter deepened. 'I do not tell a tale like Richard; he had the alehouse in uproar!'

'What happened?'

'Richard went away, found a hideous red pair with green fringing that cost less than the first pair and took them to Rufus, telling him they were the most expensive boots he could lay hands on.'

'And Rufus swallowed the bait?'

'Well, he paraded round all day in them, thinking himself a peacock and looking like a Southwark pimp and Richard pocketed the profit. God knows if the tale has got back to Rufus yet. I'd hate to be in Richard's boots when it does!'

Judith made a face at his weak pun and then laughed, the sound a delicious feminine tumble of notes, as surprising to Guyon as the fine strength

of her hands.

'Tell me about de Bec,' he said when they had ceased laughing at the royal vanity. 'How long has he been here at Ravenstow?'

'He arrived soon after the main keep began to go up, the year before I was born, I think. My father was away fighting the Welsh and it was my mother who employed him.'

'And he has been her man ever since?'

'Whenever it has been possible. If he had defied my father's authority he would have been straight away dismissed and he is too old to travel the roads with his sword for hire.' She gave him a concerned look. 'You do not intend to turn him out, my lord? He is most loyal and he knows this keep better than any man alive ... saving my uncle Robert of course.'

'No, of course I do not intend turning him out - unless he proves unsatisfactory to my own assessment. Seventeen years of service are not dismissed lightly.' He made a face. 'I am not so

sure about your constable however.'

Judith tossed her head. 'FitzWarren's all right. Dry as dust and too full of his own importance by half, but he's loyal and very efficient. He can conjure a feast out of nothing - I've seen him do it, and his accounts are meticulous.'

'I am sure they are. It just troubles me as to where he obtains the wealth to clothe himself in scarlet saracenet.'

'It was my father's, new last Candlemas. He and FitzWarren were much of a height. Mama gave it to him after the funeral. You can see the account rolls on the morrow if you want ... Oh, do you read and write?'

'Both. Do you?'

'A little, my lord.' Actually, it was considerably more than a little, gleaned from the household scribe on cold winter days and polished in private moments to an astute skill, but most men preferred their women to dwell in ignorance, or at least in more ignorance than themselves.

'After the hunt tomorrow you can show me - I don't want FitzWarren standing at my shoulder watching me even if he is honest.' He glanced towards the shutters. 'If there is a hunt, with all this snow blowing about.'

Judith stretched and yawned. The wine had made her eyes heavy and it was very late.

Guyon glanced at her. He was not averse to the prospect of sleep himself, for the day had been long and fraught and the morrow seemed set to continue the same. He leaned over and pinched out the night candle and in the darkness removed his cloak. Fabric slid silkily against skin as Judith shed her own garment and burrowed down beneath the covers.

'Nos da, Cath fach,' he said compassionately.

'Nos da, fy gwr,' she replied in passable Welsh.

Guyon mentally added the skill of language to her numerous talents and wondered how in God's name an oaf like Maurice FitzRoger had managed to beget a child like this. His last

thought before sleep claimed him, and not to be remembered in the morning, was that perhaps Maurice had not begotten her at all.

C HAPTER 5

Judith blearily opened her eyes in response to the persistent thrust of a small, cold nose pressing against her cheek and a thunderous vibration in her ear. Melyn uttered a purr of greeting, striped orange tail waving jauntily. Judith groaned and buried her face in the pillow. There was an ache behind her eyes that spoke of an excess of wine and an insufficiency of sleep. The room was lit by weak grey light penetrating the membrane screen across the arrowslit. Given the time of year, it must be well beyond the hour of first mass which meant that there was no time left to turn over and go back to sleep.

Judith pushed Melyn aside, gathered her hair and sat up. The cat stalked across the pillow to the turned back of the other occupant, sniffed the rumpled black hair and patted a playful sheathed paw on the man's face.

'Rhosyn,' Guyon murmured, opened his eyes and received a cold, wet kiss that dispelled all

dreaming illusions. 'God's blood!' He jerked upright, seeking his non-existent sword - a man did not come thus armed to his marriage bed. The cat, having achieved her purpose, leaped nimbly to the floor and commenced an inquisitive investigation of Guyon's baggage. Glowering at Melyn's graceful form, he dug his fingers through his hair. Judith decided he was suffering from her own malaise and best left in peace to gather his wits ... except that this morning there was no time.

She sought her bedrobe and put it on. Guyon pressed his face into his hands. Tactfully, Judith left the bed, scooped up Melyn and went to the arrowslit. 'It is not snowing now, my lord,' she remarked. 'And the clouds are high. The hunt can be held. It will provide fresh meat and it will prevent quarrels from developing. There was a terrible fight last Christmas when Mama's niece got married. The groom's cousin lost three fingers and an ear and the hall was completely wrecked.'

'God forbid,' he said.

'You should watch Walter de Lacey today,' she

warned. 'I suppose you know that he offered for me before Papa died and he is one of Uncle Robert's friends.'

'I did not think your uncle Robert had any friends.'

Glancing round, she saw that he had begun to assemble his clothing. His eyes, although bleary were fully open now.

'Do not worry, I know well he is one of the *Cwmni Annwn*. I will be on my guard.'

'The what?'

'Hounds of hell,' he translated, tugging on his shirt. 'The Wild Hunt. Damned souls who hunt in perpetuity and never come to rest. Appropriate, would you not say?'

His flippant tone was a barrier. His father would have recognised it immediately and cut straight beneath it. Judith stood blocked, unsure what to do. She watched him dress, setting aside his wedding finery for a warm, fur-trimmed tunic of green plaid wool, thick hose and tough, calf-hide

boots.

Abandoning Judith, Melyn leaped on to the bed and began to wash. Judith's eyes followed the cat and then settled on the linen undersheet. White as the snow that had fallen in the night. Pristine. Unstained. She gave a gasp of panic. Any moment now they were likely to be disturbed by their guests and the first task of the morning would be to display that sheet to all, stained with the sanguine proof of her virginity ... or lack of it.

Startled, Guyon left off buckling his belt. 'What's the matter?'

'The bed ... the sheet. They will think that I am impure, or else that you were unable.'

He gaped at her.

'There is no blood!' she almost shrieked at him.

Enlightenment tardily dawned and with it a glint of amusement. 'Ah.' He rubbed the back of his neck. 'I don't make a habit of deflowering virgins.' He shot her a sour grin. 'I wonder which choice they would settle upon.' Pushing Melyn gently to

one side, he drew his short eating knife from the sheath at his belt and, forcing up his left sleeve, made a shallow cut upon the inside of his forearm. As the blood welled in a thin, bright line, he smeared it over the centre of the sheet.

'Self-inflicted,' he remarked with wry humour as he stanchd the bleeding on his shirt sleeve. 'I beg a cup of valerian to mend my disordered wits, and a pot of honey to smear this slit in my hide.'

Judith handed him the jar of nettle salve. 'This will serve just as well for the nonce.'

His tone was self-mocking. 'And have all the women condemn me for a clumsy oaf and risk your mother's censure? I have a reputation to keep up, you know.'

Judith blushed, for she had not thought of how others would misconstrue the finger marks in the ointment.

'It's a scratch, don't concern yourself.' He rolled down his sleeve and grinned at her. 'I dare say it

is not the last wound I'll take defending a lady's honour.'

Before Judith could decide how to reply, Cadi began to bark outside the entrance curtain and a woman cried out in anxiety. On the bed Melyn became a stiff horseshoe of growling orange fur.

Guyon tugged a strand of Judith's hair, gave her an encouraging wink and went to draw aside the curtain and wish good morning to his mother-by-marriage, the small entourage of female wedding guests in her wake and the plump maid bearing a ewer of warm, scented water and a towel.

Cadi greeted her master boisterously. He commanded her down, but although she obeyed him, her forepaws danced on the floor and her whole body quivered with precariously subdued enthusiasm. Alicia returned Guyon's courtesy with a tepid nod and entered the room. At her side an older woman, a second cousin or some such as he remembered, fastidiously brushed white dog hairs from her dark blue gown.

Alicia's gaze went from the bloodied sheet to

Judith who was clutching the salve pot in her hand. Judith flashed a dismayed glance at Guyon, caught her under-lip in her teeth and quickly put the salve down, but the damage was already done. Alicia's mouth tightened.

Frightened by the crowd and the dog, Melyn leaped off the bed to make her escape and was immediately spotted by Cadi. Barking excitedly, the hound took a flying lunge at the cat. As Cadi flung past Agnes, the ewer flew out of the maid's hands and a warm deluge christened the two women immediately in front of her. Screams and squawks rent the air, intermingled with a cat's snarls and the hysterical barking of the dog. Melyn streaked for the door and with Cadi hot on her heels, scorched up the thick curtain to cling yowling at the top, claws fiercely dug in.

Guyon seized Cadi's collar, drew breath to speak, saw from the basilisk glares turned his way that it would be a waste of time and beat a hasty retreat with the bitch to the haven of male company breaking their fast in the hall.

Judith, tears of laughter brimming in her eyes, went to coax Melyn down from her precarious refuge.

The breaking of fast was an uncomfortable affair, fortunately not prolonged because the men were eager to be out on the trail of the boar that Ravenstow's chief huntsman assured them lurked in the forests on the western edge.

The bride put in a tardy appearance as the men were preparing to leave, her manner much subdued, the glances she cast at her husband swift and furtive. When the bloodied bridal sheet was displayed by the women, she almost lost control. Her narrow shoulders heaved and she covered her face briefly with her veil while she mastered herself. Alicia's arm went protectively around her daughter's shoulders and she threw Guyon a look boiling with murder.

'Why was Judith weeping, were you clumsy with her?' Miles demanded of his son as they slowed their mounts to enter a patch of bramble-tangled woodland. Ahead of them the dogs could be

heard barking as they trailed the rank scent of boar.

Guyon drew himself up. 'Credit me with a little more experience than that. The blasted wench was laughing. I ought to drown that cat of hers!'

Miles raised his brows, justifiably baffled and more than a little worried, remembering Alicia's fear of the previous evening, his own reassurances and then the look on her face this morning. If looks could kill, his son would have been a dead man and himself frozen to stone.

Guyon regaled him with the details of the morning's disaster and Miles's eyebrows disappeared into his hair.

'So there we were,' Guyon said ruefully, 'Judith with the pot of salve in her hand, not daring to look at me lest she laugh, and the sheet all bloody and my mother-in-law itching to geld me ...' He paused on a breath and turned in the saddle as the constable de Bec rode up to join them on his sturdy dun.

His manner was tangibly cool, his mouth tight within its neat grey bracket of beard. He too had witnessed Judith's struggle for composure in the hall and had been filled with a protective anger, at first so hot that he had almost enquired of Lady Alicia whether she desired to be rid of her new son-by-marriage. Almost, but not quite, for as he had been gulping down his bread and wine and preparing to leave, he could have sworn Judith had smiled at him, a sparkle of mischief in her eyes. Girls distraught to the point of tears did not do such things. Besides, he had reasoned, if Guyon died, the King would only select another man to fill the position, probably of far worse moral fibre and, when he thought about it rationally, the new lord had only had his right and seemed in public gently disposed towards the child.

'Judith tells me that you have been teaching her to hone a blade and use it,' Guyon remarked pleasantly to the constable.

De Bec rubbed his fist over his beard. 'She

asked me so I showed her, my lord. Nothing wrong in knowing a bit about weapons, especially here in the marches.'

'No,' Guyon agreed, hiding a smile at de Bec's stony expression and his father's sudden wide stare. 'Did her parents share your opinion?'

'Lord Maurice never knew. Lady Alicia wasn't keen, but she knew when to give a little and when to rein in.'

'So you have been a nursemaid as well as constable,' Guyon needled gently. 'Devotion to duty indeed.'

De Bec glinted him a look. 'Mistress Judith is the daughter I never had the opportunity to settle down and sire. Don't be deceived by what you saw yesterday. She is one of a kind.' He cleared his throat. 'Have a care, my lord, or you may wake up one morning to find yourself gelded.'

'She is maiden still,' Guyon replied. 'I have no taste for rape. The blood on the sheets is my own and freely given.'

De Bec cleared his throat. 'It is your right,' he muttered gruffly into his chest.

'Indeed so,' Guyon answered, 'but one I exercise at my peril. I hazard that if I harmed so much as one hair of her head, I'd not wake up at all the next morning.'

Their eyes locked and held for a moment before the older man dropped his gaze to the smooth muscle of his mount's shoulder, knowing he had gone as far as he dared with a man he did not know. Guyon turned his head. Distantly the hounds gave tongue in a new key, a sustained tocsin, belling deep.

'Boar's up and running,' Miles said, jerking his courser around.

Guyon swung his own horse.

De Bec spoke abruptly. 'Keep your eyes open, my lord. You have as many enemies among your guests as you have allies and when I see men huddling in corners and glimpse the exchange of silver in the darkness, I know that no good will

come of it.'

Guyon smiled thinly. By disclosing his suspicions when he could have held silent, de Bec had accepted his new master, even if the man had yet to realise the fact. 'I was not blind myself last night, but I thank you for the warning. The sooner this mockery of a celebration is over, the better.' He set his heels to his courser's flanks and urged him in pursuit of the dogs. De Bec wrenched the dun around and followed.

Guyon bent low over his mount's neck to avoid the tangled branches that whipped at him. Shallow snow flurried beneath the chestnut's hooves. The frozen air burned Guyon's lungs as he breathed. His eyes filled and he blinked hard to clear them, and braced himself as the horse leaped a fallen tree in their path. Ahead he could hear the loud halloos and whistlings urging the dogs on and the excited belling of the dogs themselves.

The hunters pressed further into the depths of the forest. Thorns snagged their cloaks.

Hoofbeats thudded eerily in the echo chambers created by the vaulted span of huge beeches, the daylight showing luminous grey through the fretwork of empty black branches. They galloped across a clearing, the snow fetlock deep, splashed through a swift-flowing stream, picked their way delicately round a tumble of boulders and plunged back into the tangled darkness of the winter woods. A branch snapped off and snarled in Guyon's bridle. He plucked it loose, eased the chestnut for an instant, then guided him hard right down a narrow avenue of trunks pied silver and black, following the frenzied yelping of the dogs and the excited shouts of men.

The boar at bay was a sow, a matron of prime years, weighing almost two hundredweight. She had met and tussled with man before. A Welsh poacher had lost his life to her tushes when he came hunting piglets for his pot. The huntsmen had found his bleaching bones last spring when they came to mark the game. The sow bore her own scar from the encounter in a thick ridge of hide along her left flank where the boar spear had

scored sideways and turned along the bone.

She stood her ground now, backed against an overgrown jut of rock, raking clods of beech mast from the forest floor. Her huge head tossed left and right, the vicious tusches threatening to disembowel any dog or human foolish enough to come within their reach.

Guyon drew rein and dismounted. The senior huntsman tossed him a boar spear which he caught in mid-air. It was a stout weapon, broad of blade, with a crossbar set beneath to prevent the boar from running up the shaft and tearing the hunter to pieces. A dog ran in to snap at the sow's powerful black shoulder, was not swift enough to disengage and was flung howling across the path of the other dogs, a red slash opening in its side. Cadi barked and darted. She was a gazehound, bred to course hare, not boar, but her narrow-loined lightness made her too swift to be caught.

The men began cautiously to close upon the sow, their spears braced, knives loose in their

belts, every muscle taut to leap, for until the moment she charged no man knew if he was her intended victim. It was exhilarating, the tension unbearable. She raked the leaves with her trotters, rolled her small black eyes and tushed the ground, smearing her bloody incisors with soil.

'Come on girl, get on with it,' muttered Hugh of Chester licking his lips. Another man whistled loudly, trying to attract her attention and waved his spear over his head. Ralph de Serigny wiped his mouth, a pulse beating hard in his neck. Walter de Lacey remained immobile, his only movement a darting glance of challenge at Guyon. Guyon returned the look with glittering eyes and crouched, the spear braced.

The sow paused, quivering; the massive head went down; the damp leaves churned. A squealing snort erupted through her nostrils and she made a sudden powerful lunge from her hams, straight at Guyon. Driven by her charging weight, the levelled spear reamed her chest.

Guyon braced the butt against the forest soil, the muscles locking in his forearms and shoulders as he strove to hold her. The barbed tip lodged in bone and the shaft shuddered. Guyon heard the wood creak, felt it begin to give as the sow pressed forward, and knew that there was nothing he could do. The spear snapped. Razored tushes slashed open his chausses and drew a bloody line down his thigh. The sow, red foam frothing her jaws and screaming mad with pain, plunged and spun to gore him, the broken stump of the spear protruding from her breast. Guyon rammed the other half of the boar spear down her throat. A fierce pain burned his arm. Miles's hunting knife found the sow's jugular at the same time that de Bec's spear found her heart.

Silence fell, broken only by the eager yelping of the dogs and the whimpers of the injured one. Blood soaked the trampled soil and snow. The chief huntsman whipped the hounds from the dead pig, his face grey. He darted a look once at de Lacey and Pembroke behind, and then away. They ignored him.

'Are you all right?' Anxiously Hugh of Chester laid hold of Guyon's ripped sleeve to examine the pulsing gash.

Guyon nodded and smiled for the benefit of those who would have been only too pleased to see him seriously injured or killed and wadded his cloak against the wound to stanch the blood.

De Bec crouched beside the broken spear shaft and examined it. Then he rose and stalked to the senior huntsman and thrust the stump beneath his nose. The man shook his head, his complexion pasty. De Bec began to shout. Arnulf of Pembroke moved between the two men. Guyon shouldered him aside.

'Let it go,' he commanded. 'There was a weakness in the wood. It could have happened to any one of us.'

'A weakness in the w--?' de Bec began indignantly, but caught the look in Guyon's eye and realised that the young lord was totally aware of the situation. 'Faugh!' de Bec spat, threw down

the shaft and stalked to his horse, muttering under his breath.

'My lord, I did not know, I swear I did not!' stuttered the huntsman, his throat jerking as if a noose was already tightening there.

'Oh stop gibbering, man, and see to the pig!' Guyon snapped and turned away. There was time enough later to grill him for details, and the wilds of these border woods was no place to hold an impromptu court with tempers running high and blood lust rife.

Miles picked up the shaft, saw how it had broken, and narrowed his eyes.

Guyon whistled Cadi to heel, stepped over a rivulet of pig blood and went to mount up.

Judith sat in the solar, distaff in hand, longing to set about her companions with it. They had offered her all manner of advice, both well meaning and malicious and had asked her some very intimate questions that made her realise how innocent she really was. All she could do was

blush, her embarrassment scarcely feigned. The women's curiosity was bottomless and avid and at least one of them with connections at court knew things about the groom that were better left unsaid. It did not prevent her from relating the information with grisly relish. Alicia parried frostily. Judith retreated behind downcast lids and wished the gaggle of them out of the keep.

Steps scuffed the stairs outside the chamber and the curtain was thrust aside. The women rose, flustered and twittering at the sight of the bridegroom whose reputation they had just been so salaciously maligning. Guyon regarded them without favour. 'Ladies,' he acknowledged, and looked beyond them to Judith. She hastened to his side. There were thorns and burrs in his cloak and a narrow graze down one cheek. There was also, she noticed, a tear in his chausses.

'My lord?'

He reached his right hand to take hers, an odd move since his left was the nearer. 'I need you to look at a scratch for me.'

'Your leg?' Her eyes dropped to his chausses.

'My arm. I fear you may need your mouldy bread.' He spoke softly, his words not carrying beyond the air that breathed them. All the women saw was his hand possessively on hers, the movement of his lips close to her ear and the sudden dismayed widening of her eyes.

'Go to the bedchamber,' said Judith. 'I will bring whatever is necessary. I take it that you do not want them to know.'

'No.'

Her lips twitched. 'You are begetting a foul reputation, my lord.'

'Not half as foul as their minds.' He cast a jaundiced glance at the women.

'Is there a difficulty, my lord?' Alicia enquired, coming forward, prepared to do battle. She was furious. It was bad enough that he should have used Judith roughly last night as attested by the bridal sheet and her daughter's trembling fight with tears, but that he should stride in here,

dishevelled from the hunt and demand her body again, using her like a whore to ease his blood lust, was disgusting.

'I should be grateful for a word if you can free yourself from your duties.'

Alicia stared at him. 'Now, my lord?'

'Come above with Judith, I will explain.'

Her eyes flickered with bewilderment as the ground of expectation was swept from beneath her feet. Guyon bowed formally to her, saluted the others with mockery and left the room, drawing Judith after him. Alicia collected her reeling wits, made her excuses and left them to think what they would.

Judith snipped away the blood-soaked sleeve from his left arm. Guyon clenched his fist on his thigh and winced.

'Boar?' Judith peered at the jagged tear. It was not deep to the bone, but neither was it superficial enough to just bandage and leave. 'It will have to be stitched.'

He gave a resigned shrug. 'At least I am testing your abilities to the full.' He managed a weak grin as she soaked a linen pad in a strong-smelling liquid decocted from pine needles.

'Just pray that they do not fail. It's a nasty wound. What happened?'

Guyon almost hit the rafters as she pressed the pad to his arm and began to clean away the dirt slashed into the wound by the boar's tush.

Alicia walked into the room to hear her daughter breathlessly apologising, a quiver in her voice.

'Get on with it!' Guyon gasped through clenched teeth. 'If you stop every time I flinch, we'll be here all day, and that really will set the fat into the fire!'

Judith bit her lip. Alicia looked down at the raw, still seeping wound. 'You will need the mouldy bread,' she said neutrally.

'I have it, mama.'

Alicia eyed Guyon thoughtfully. 'I have just heard

from one of the beaters. He says the boar spear snapped and that you were lucky to escape with your life, let alone a few small scratches.'

'This is more than a small scratch, Mama!' Judith protested, staring round.

'I can see that. I am only repeating what the beater said, and he had it from your uncle's squire.'

'They were both right,' said Guyon.

The women stared at him. After her first startled declaration, Judith's wits quickened. Plainly Guyon was not disclaiming this tear as a mere scratch just to be manly. He wanted the wound kept a secret, or at least reduced to nothing.

'Boar spears do not just snap,' she said. 'My father was always very strict about the state of the hunting equipment, particularly when it came to boar. He had the spears checked regularly.'

'By your senior huntsman?'

Alicia reached for a roll of bandage while Judith

threaded a needle. 'Maurice never made any complaints against Rannulf's efficiency,' she said carefully. 'I cannot say that I know him well myself. He came to us from Belleme on Robert's recommendation.'

'Would he be willing to commit murder for the right amount of silver?'

'Truly I do not know, my lord. Anything is possible if my brother-in-law has his hand in the pie.'

'Has someone then offered Rannulf silver to give you a weakened spear?' Judith asked to the point.

'Probably. De Lacey was talking to him most earnestly in the hall last night and he's not the kind to mingle with servants unless it be for a specific purpose. I will know more when I have had an opportunity to question Rannulf and ... ouch!'

'Hold still, my lord, and it will not hurt as much.'

'I think you are enjoying this,' he grumbled.

Judith wrinkled her nose at him. 'Tush, my lord. So much complaint for such a "little scratch".'

'Insolent wench,' he growled, eyes laughing.

Baffled, Alicia watched the two of them as she prepared the poultice of mouldy bread. Here was no frightened child flickering nervous glances at the world through a haze of tears and, despite Guyon's obvious pain and preoccupation, he was handling Judith with the ease of a man accustomed to women, not one who would deflower her savagely in a fit of unbridled lust.

Guyon clenched his teeth and endured in stoical silence until Judith and Alicia had finished with him. Judith wiped her hands and brought him a cup. He sniffed the contents suspiciously. 'Valerian, yarrow and poppy in wine,' she told him. Guyon tasted, grimaced, put down the cup and began to ease his sleeve over the bandage.

'It will relieve the pain.'

'And dull my wits,' he retorted.

Judith sighed and went to find him a fresh pair

of chausses and some salve for his grazed cheek and thigh.

'It seems that I have misjudged you,' Alicia said to him softly.

Guyon finished arranging his sleeve. 'I hope I have enough common sense to realise that rape is not the best way to begin a marriage. I haven't touched her and I won't until she's ready ...' He stopped and looked round as his father swept aside the curtain and strode into the room.

'Your huntsman's bolted,' he announced starkly. 'Snatched de Lacey's courser from a groom and was out over the drawbridge before anyone could stop him.'

Guyon's eyes darkened. 'God's teeth!'

'That is not the worst of it. De Lacey's gone after him and with every right to kill. Pembroke's with him and de Serigny. Chester's taken de Bec and some of the garrison and ridden after them.'

Guyon swore again and reached for his swordbelt.

'I'll meet you in the bailey,' Miles said.

Guyon struggled to tighten the belt with his injured left arm. Judith hastened to help him. 'Have a care, my lord,'

she said anxiously. 'I fear that Rannulf may not be the only quarry.'

He looked down at her upturned face and with a humourless smile, tugged her braid. 'Forewarned is forearmed, so they say,' he replied. 'I promise you I'll do my best to stay alive.'

Riding hard they caught up with de Bec and Chester a little beyond the village and de Lacey upon the track that led eventually across the border into Wales.

'I thought I had him!' de Lacey growled, 'but the bastard's doubled back on me. Bones of Christ, when I catch him I'll string him up by the balls. Do you know how much that stallion is worth?'

'Nevertheless, I will have him alive,' Guyon said curtly.

'God knows why,' Arnulf de Montgomery snorted. 'First that "weak spear" and now Walter's best courser. The man's guilty, no doubt about it.'

'Yes,' Guyon said, 'and I want to talk to him about why.'

Pembroke flushed. Ralph de Serigny looked puzzled. De Lacey drew his sword and turned his horse, momentarily blocking the road.

Guyon and his father exchanged glances. Without a word Miles dismounted and disappeared into the woods bordering the road. He had spent his boyhood among the Welsh hills and, saving the supernatural, could track anything that trod the earth, including a rat that smelled so bad the stench of it was all pervading.

'Put up your sword,' Guyon said to de Lacey, 'Rannulf will meet his end in justice, not hot blood, when the time comes.'

De Lacey returned his stare for a long moment before breaking the contact. The sword flashed

again as he shrugged and began sheathing it. 'This is justice,' he said.

Unease prickled down Guyon's spine. He began reining the chestnut about. Simultaneously there was a warning shout and the whirr of an arrow's flight. He flung himself flat on the courser's neck and the arrow sang over his spine and lodged in a beech sapling on the other side of the road.

De Lacey drew his sword again and spurred his stallion into the forest. De Bec bellowed and kicked the dun after him while Hugh of Chester rammed his own mount into Montgomery's horse, preventing him from pursuit. Among the trees, someone screamed. Guyon hauled on his rein and urged the chestnut in pursuit of de Lacey and de Bec.

He was too late. The huntsman Rannulf sprawled in sightless regard of the bare winter branches. Walter de Lacey, his tunic splashed with blood, stood over him, his eyes blazing and his whole body trembling with the aftermath of

violently expended effort and continuing rage. Miles was leaning against a tree, face screwed up with pain and arms clutching his torso.

Ignoring his injured arm, Guyon flung himself down from the courser and hastened to him.

'I'm all right,' Miles said huskily. 'Just winded. I'm not as fast as I was ... more's the pity.' He flashed a dark look at de Lacey and pushed himself upright.

Guyon glanced him over and, reassured, swung to the other man. 'I said I wanted him alive!' he snapped.

De Lacey bared his teeth. 'Should I have let him knife your father and escape?'

'If you were close enough to kill him, you were close enough to stop him by other means, but then dead men don't talk, do they?'

De Lacey's sword twitched level and the red edge glinted at Guyon, who reached to draw from his own scabbard. Hugh of Chester, moving swiftly for a man so bulky, placed himself between

the men, his back to Guyon, his formidable blue glare for de Lacey. 'My lord, you forget yourself,' he said coldly.

'I forget nothing!' de Lacey spat, but lowered his blade to wipe it on the corpse before ramming it back in his scabbard. He turned on his heel to examine the stolen horse, running his hands down its legs to check for signs of lameness.

Guyon compressed his lips and struggled to contain his fury.

De Lacey mounted the black, looped his other mount's reins at the cantle and after a contemptuous look at Guyon, rode over to where Montgomery waited.

Guyon watched de Lacey with narrowed eyes and with conscious effort, slowly unclenched his fingers from the hilt of his sword.

Chester bent down beside the dead man and picked up the bow. 'You were drawn here to be killed, you realise that, lad?'

Guyon grimaced. 'I suspected it back at the

keep and knew for certain the moment we caught up with them. A man so anxious to retrieve his horse would hardly lag to wait for us. Did you see the way he blocked my path to make me a sitting target for this poor greedy wretch?'

'It was all arranged last night,' de Bec said, leading over Guyon's courser and Miles's grey. 'I'm sure of it now. If you search his pouch, you'll probably find the cost of his betrayal.'

Chester reached to the purse threaded upon the huntsman's belt, unlatched the buckle and delved. The small silver coins, minted with the head of the Conqueror, gleamed on his broad, fleshy palm in mute evidence of treachery. He trickled them from hand to hand, eyes following their flow and then looked up at Guyon. 'Will you take it further?'

Guyon gingerly remounted. 'How can I? Oh, I know that's proof in your hands, but it's not damning. It could easily be claimed that Rannulf won it at dice. Besides, with this arm I'd be mad to risk challenging de Lacey or Montgomery to a

trial by combat which would be the sure outcome of a public accusation. No, let it be. Each of us--' He broke off and looked around as his father, who had reached for his mount's bridle, uttered an involuntary hiss of pain. 'Sir?'

Miles made a face. 'I think I must have a couple of cracked ribs - and my pride is sore wounded. In the old days I'd have taken Rannulf like a wraith from behind and him none the wiser until my dagger was at his throat. The flesh grows old and the mind forgets.' He shook his head regretfully. 'De Lacey has come out of this coil with a halo of glory, hasn't he?'

'Shining with corruption,' Guyon agreed. 'But at least I know where his intentions are nailed.'

C HAPTER 6

Alicia fetched the comfrey salve and a fresh dressing and went to Miles where he sat on the bed. He was stripped to the waist and she had just unbound the yards of swaddling bands from his injured ribs in order to treat again the nasty graze that swept over his left side, legacy of yesterday's scrimmage.

'You and your son between you seem determined to exhaust our supplies,' she remarked to break the silence.

'Entirely unintentional,' he said ruefully and stroked the head of the white bitch sitting at his knee. Now that their guests had departed - some of them in haste following the incidents of yesterday - Guyon and Judith were in a wall chamber examining the account rolls. Since Melyn was tucked around Judith's shoulders, Cadi had been banished.

Alicia flicked him a swift glance. 'Hold this for

me.'

He took the ointment and sniffed its green herbal aroma. 'It's only a scrape and a couple of cracked ribs. You need not go to all this trouble.'

'It could have been your life!' She dipped two fingers in the jar and began to smear the salve over his ribs. He tensed at the first, cold touch. Alicia murmured an apology, her colour heightening. He made a disclaimer and slowly relaxed. The light touch of her fingers was soothing. He fondled the dog's ears and gazed at a colourful hanging on the wall.

'What happens now?'

Miles shrugged. 'Nothing. We keep a close watch on all future moves of Walter de Lacey and our new Montgomery kin.'

'You are not going to pursue the matter? Murder and twice attempted murder?'

'And no proof. You cannot make a corpse speak. It is Guyon's word against de Lacey's with an equal number of witnesses to swear for either

side.'

'But ...'

'I like it as little as you, but our hands are tied. If it went to justice, it would end in trial by combat. You've seen Guy's arm. Every marcher lord is bred from the cradle to fight. The odds are too close to load them in de Lacey's favour. Perhaps I'll just stick a knife in his ribs on a dark night. My Welsh blood permits me such lapses of honour.'

'You'll do no such thing!' Alicia's eyes widened in fear as she wiped her fingers on the edge of one of the swaddling bands. 'He is Arnulf's friend and de Belleme's vassal. Robert would impale you on a stake at the Shrewsbury crossroads and leave you there until your flesh rotted off it!'

He flashed her a brief, distorted smile. It was at moments like this that he realised the true depth of his loss. Christen had been one of four within the keep to succumb to the sweating sickness. It came, it claimed haphazardly and it moved on. Even now, two years later, the wounds were unhealed and inadvertently Alicia was laying them

open again, reminding him of what he no longer had.

He was drawn from his introspection by the awareness that she was trembling. 'What's the matter? I was jesting, I swear it.'

'You would not jest if you had lived beneath Maurice's code of cruelty,' she said bitterly. 'You have not had to sit at meat with Robert de Belleme and Walter de Lacey when they have come red-handed from torturing some poor wretch out of his life and wonder if you or your daughter might be their next victim!' Abruptly she pressed the end of the swaddling band against his ribs. 'Hold this,' she commanded.

'Alicia ...'

She reached around him. He felt the warmth emanating from her body and smelled the drifting scent of attar of roses. He let go of the bandage, slipped his arm around her waist and kissed her.

He felt her quiver. She hesitated as if on a brink, and then she made a soft sound in her

throat. Her lips parted beneath his and her arms circled his neck, the bandage falling to the floor at their feet.

As impulse gave way to a deeper need, Miles forgot that he had been going to give her detailed reassurances about himself, Guyon and Robert de Belleme, forgot everything but the quickening beat of his blood responding to the feel and taste of her - like fresh water after a long drought.

Alicia gasped and pressed against him as he unwound her braids and threaded his fingers through the thick black twists of her hair. He took his time, kissing her face and nuzzling her throat before claiming her lips again. He ran one hand lightly up her ribcage, found the soft curve of her breast and lightly stroked.

'Tell your maid to keep watch so we are not disturbed,' he muttered hoarsely against her temple.

She heard his words through a haze of sensual delight, and it took a moment for them to reach her brain, but when they did the effect was as

immediate as a deluge of frozen water. The thought of Agnes listening outside while she coupled with a man she barely knew, the notion of instructing the woman with her hair all unbound and her lips swollen by kisses, the memory of a time almost seventeen years ago when she had done just that ... The images coagulated and all the magic was lost. She removed her arms from around his neck, averted her mouth from his kiss and pushed him away.

'I am not a whore,' she said flatly.

'What?' He sought her blindly for a moment and then his eyes opened and slowly refocused. 'Alicia ...'

'If you want a woman to tumble, there are plenty of serving girls accustomed to Maurice's ways who would relieve your need.' Gathering her hair, she began clumsily to rebraid it.

'I don't want another woman, I want you.' His hand extended in supplication, he took a step towards her. Alicia backed away.

'You would make a whore of me in my own household before my servants and vassals!'

'Of course not! Why do you think I told you to speak to your maid?'

'What would you have me say to her?'

'Anything. That we wish to discuss a private matter concerned with the wedding or dowry.'

'With my hair all unbound?'

Miles turned away with an oath and scraped his fingers through his hair. 'You led me to believe you were willing ... more than willing.'

Alicia worked frantically at her braids. There was no answer to that, for she had indeed been eager to couple with him until brought abruptly to common sense, and her body still tingled with thwarted desire. 'You took advantage!' she said accusingly, and suddenly her throat was tight and her chest heaving.

'Yes,' he snapped. 'Blame me, because you dare not blame yourself!'

Alicia began to cry, deep-rooted sobs that shook her body from head to toe.

'God's sweet life, don't ...' Miles started towards her, then hesitated.

Cadi whined and wagged her tail as Guyon swished through the curtain, a roll of parchment in his hand. His grim expression changed on the instant to comical, slack-jawed amazement. 'I'm sorry, I did not realise ...'

'There is nothing to realise!' Alicia responded through her tears and, gathering her skirts, pushed blindly past him and out of the room.

Guyon stared at the curtain as it fell, then back at his sire.

'Do not ask me,' Miles groaned, subsiding on to the bed and putting his head in his hands. 'I seem to be making mistakes hand over fist these days. Where's Judith?'

'Ensuring the cooks know what they are about.' He eyed his father, wondering how to interpret what he had just seen. As Alicia had pushed past

him he had not missed the detail that the front of her dress was smothered in green unguent.

'Are you any good at binding cracked ribs?' Miles handed him the length of swaddling, his expression giving nothing away. Guyon took the linen from him and set about the task.

'What's this?' Miles took the parchment and squinted at it.

'The amount owed to Robert de Belleme for the stone and craftsmen to build this place.'

'The what?'

'According to that document, de Belleme lent Maurice five hundred marks to purchase men and materials. There are still three hundred owing and, knowing de Belleme, I doubt he will waive the sum as a wedding gift to his niece. In fact, it gives him the excuse he needs to claim Ravenstow if I cannot pay. With Maurice it did not matter - it was a convenient hold on his loyalty - but there is no profit to be had from me except in full payment, and he knows it.'

'Can you raise the silver?'

Guyon finished banding the linen around Miles's chest and secured it. 'Probably, but it will be no small inconvenience and will leave my new vassals considerably poorer than when they swore me homage.'

'Providing of course that they are willing to pay in the first place.'

Guyon smiled thinly. 'They are obliged by custom to render a relief on Judith's marriage and I will have that from them at the oath-taking tomorrow before they leave.'

Miles glanced uneasily at Guyon. He did not doubt his son's ability to wring the relief from his vassals, nor his ability to hold them loyal to their oaths of fealty. What did disturb him was the glint of devilry lurking beneath the surface of Guyon's thoughtful expression. He had seen that look before, usually preceding some act of rash lunacy. 'What are you plotting?' he demanded.

Guyon smiled. 'Naught, as yet. I'm a newly

married man, or had you forgotten? Speaking of which, that's a very pretty lover's bruise on your throat.'

Miles heard the warning behind the flippancy. He was being told to mind his own business and for a moment resentment flared. He fixed his son with a hard stare. Guyon's eyes returning the look were a melting luminous brown, edged with silky, thick lashes. They masked a will as flexible and strong as a willow wand. You might bend it, but the moment you let go it sprang back to its original way of growing, usually striking you into the bargain. It was useless to argue.

Miles dropped his regard to the parchment and heaved a sigh. 'As I said, I seem to be making mistakes hand over fist.'

C HA PT ER 7

The sky was the colour of a wild harebell, its expanse interrupted by small flocks of cloud herded west into Wales by a scudding wind. Judith clicked her tongue to the sedate brown gelding she was riding, and somewhat reluctantly he increased his pace. The wind gusted at their backs, flapping her cloak, threatening to snatch off her veil. She released the reins to feel for the pins holding it in place and secured them anew. It was a mark of her confidence astride a horse and her swift ability to learn new skills that she felt sufficiently safe to trust to balance while she performed her toilet.

Before her as they crossed the heathland between Guyon's manor of Oxley and his keep at Ledworth, rode his shield-bearer, Eric Godricson and six serjeants, with a like number behind. An attack by the Welsh or other hostile factions was unlikely but it was still better to be safe than sorry, particularly with Guyon absent raising revenues

among his other manors.

Judith stared at the dark trees beyond the heathland without really seeing them as she evaluated the three months that had passed since her precipitous marriage.

The oaths of fealty sworn two days after the boar hunt had mostly been sincere, with the occasional protest at the steepness of the marriage relief. Guyon had dealt smoothly with complaint. He had the silver tongue of a courtier and a merchant's shrewd acumen - men smiled and agreed with him, then scratched their heads and wondered how they had been manoeuvred into parting with their coin when they had intended fiercely to resist.

The incident with de Lacey and Arnulf de Montgomery had sunk out of sight like a rotten log into a quagmire. Guyon's arm had healed cleanly to leave a thin, pink scar. He seldom spoke of the boar hunt although occasionally, in repose, his expression gave her cause to wonder at his thoughts.

Arnulf de Montgomery was busy in south Wales. De Lacey was sitting on his lands like a disgruntled rook on a nest - God alone knew what he was hatching. Ralph de Serigny was ailing with pains in the chest, brought on by a severe winter cold from which he had not properly recovered. The harsh weather of January and February had also prevented Robert de Belleme from travelling further up the march than the seat of his new earldom, where an array of defences was being constructed beneath his critical architect's eye ... And defences cost money.

Judith was aware of Guyon's concern because he was as tense and alert as a hunting cat. For the most part, he kept his worries to himself, although occasionally he would snap. The first time she had recoiled, awaiting the blow that was certain to follow, but he had lowered his gaze to the tallies over which he was poring, set a pile to one side and continued to work. After a while, when her frightened silence had registered, he had raised his head, apologised briefly and told her to leave him alone. Since then, she had

learned to recognise the warning signs and would keep well away, attending to duties elsewhere.

A month ago, when the weather had eased enough to make travelling possible, they had moved down the march to Guyon's main holding of Ledworth, recently inherited from his uncle who had died in battle during the ill-fated summer campaign in north Wales.

The stone and timber castle was imposing, built upon a high crag to dominate the growing town below and the drovers' roads leading from these middle borders into the heart of Wales. It was also, despite its recent construction, musty and uncomfortable. The former lord had neglected the domestic side of keep matters when his wife had died. The seneschal's wife was crippled by stiff hips and the maids had taken advantage of her infirmity to do much as they pleased, which was very little.

Three weeks of purgative chaos had ensued as Alicia and Judith set the worst of the rot to rights so that at least the place was habitable. Alicia in

particular had thrown herself into the exercise, chivvyng the maids remorselessly, addressing them all as sluts and hussies, her tongue as abrasive as the brushes and lye with which she made them scour the dairy floor and slabs.

Judith was concerned, for the shrewish woman with whom she shared the bower was not her gentle mother. The bouts of feverish activity spoke of panic and a deeply troubled spirit. Once she had come across Alicia choking back tears in Ledworth's private chapel and begging whispered forgiveness. Forgiveness for what? Her mother was more sinned against than sinning, her confessions to the priest usually of oversights and peccadilloes, nothing that would stain the soul with such guilt.

Judith guided her mount with her knees and frowned, trying to remember when she had first noticed the change in her mother's manner. A couple of days after the wedding, it would have been. Alicia had retired to her chamber with a vicious headache and stayed there for two days,

refusing all ministrations save those of Agnes. She had emerged on the third day a full hour too late to wish Guyon's father God-speed on his road home. Miles, as she recalled, had been perturbed at her absence and by Agnes's firm declaration that her mistress was still asleep and had left instructions not to be woken.

'Riders to the rear!' cried one of Judith's escort, interrupting her thoughts.

'My lord is expected soon,' Eric said with a frown, 'but it is not the direction from which I would expect him to come.' He rubbed the side of his nose, considering. 'Best play safe,' he decided. 'If it is my lord, he'll take no offence at our caution. If it's another, we owe them no excuses. Are you able to gallop, my lady?'

Judith's heart began to thump but she gave a nonchalant shrug. 'If this nag is, then yes,' she responded and gathered the reins.

The serjeant who had first cried the warning circled away behind them to discover the identity of their pursuers. They quickened their pace. A

distance of about nine furlongs separated them from the safety of the keep, but much of that route was uphill.

Judith's gelding started to flag. She dug her heels into his sides and heard him wheeze.

'It's Robert de Belleme and Walter de Lacey!' yelled the serjeant, his voice indistinct but explicit with panic.

'Blood of Christ!' Eric spurred his horse afresh and laid his whip across the rump of Judith's gelding.

The drawbridge was down over the ditch. The wet winter and spring had raised the level of the water table and instead of the noisome sludge that usually offended the nose, there was a glistening moat of sky-blue water. The hooves drummed on the planks. Judith glimpsed the glittering ruffles. She flung a look over her shoulder but the wind whipped her braids across her face and all she could see between the tawny strands were the heaving horses behind her and

the solid mailed protection of her escort.

Her mount stumbled as they rode beneath the portcullis and into the ward. She pulled him up, his ribs heaving like bellows, his legs trembling, spent. Without waiting for aid to dismount, she kicked her feet from the stirrups and slipped over his side to the ground.

The last man pounded across the bridge at a hard gallop. The guards on duty began winching the bridge the moment he clattered on to it. The black fangs of the portcullis came down and Ledworth snarled defiance at one of the most powerful men in England and Normandy.

Eric spat and crossed himself as they heard the drawbridge thud flush with the outer wall. 'It is called burning your bridges,' he said grimly. 'Do you go inside, my lady, and join your mother.'

Judith frowned and laid her arm upon Eric's mail-clad sleeve. 'Wait,' she said. 'If we deny him entry we offer him unpardonable insult and he never allows a slight to remain swallowed for long.'

'But mistress--'

'I was prey to be snatched when I was outside the keep, but within he must preserve the civilities. I know why he is here. My lord husband has been expecting him all winter.'

Eric looked unhappily at the chequerboard spars of the portcullis and the security of the solid oak planks beyond. Faintly from without there came a hail. 'My lady, I am reluctant to admit him. Lord Guyon would string me from the highest tree on the demesne if ill should come of this.'

'Let me worry about Lord Guyon,' she replied with more than a spark of bravado. 'How many men does my uncle have with him ... Thierry?'

The young serjeant cleared his throat. 'About thirty at a rough guess, my lady,' he replied and fiddled with the hilt of his sword, eyes shifting from her to the closed drawbridge.

'Then admit my uncle and his five most senior companions,' she said. 'Eric, take custody of their weapons and put the guards on alert. Have a

messenger ride out and find my husband - one of his Welshmen, by preference; they have the stealth to go unseen.'

Eric spread his hands. 'What if the seigneur de Belleme refuses to disgorge his weapons and abandon his men outside?'

'He won't refuse,' she said. 'Delay them awhile until I am fittingly dressed to receive them.'

'But my lady ...'

She was gone, skirts gathered to reveal her ankles as she ran, her plaits dishevelled and snaking to the movement of her spine. Eric swallowed, muttered a prayer, and set about giving commands, although he was not at all sure he should be obeying Judith.

Alicia gaped in disbelief as her daughter seized a comb and began to mend her hair. She had discarded her riding dress in favour of a tunic of dark gold wool lavishly banded with embroidery in two shades of green.

'You have done what?' Alicia gasped. 'Are you

mad? You might as well open the chicken run and let the fox run amok inside!'

'Mama, I am not mad. I would as lief not grant him entry, but on this occasion, at least, he means us no harm.'

'It is not experience of years that has gained you such foresight!' her mother said acidly.

'I thought he and my father were fond kin and allies,' Judith answered in a preoccupied manner, fingers working with nimble haste.

Alicia sighed and looked at Judith with a mingling of sacrifice and exasperation. 'I suppose I will have to go down and face him now that you've been foolish enough to grant him entry.'

A spark of resentment flared in Judith's breast. 'It is my responsibility, Mama,' she said. 'Besides, he does not know me, and it will be easier than you greeting him with hatred when I can plead the ignorance of youth.' She returned to her toilet, clipping the ends of her braids with bronze fillets and smoothing her fresh gown.

Alicia stared at her daughter. The change from child to woman had accelerated rapidly since her marriage to Guyon. There was command in her voice and the same authority that made men perform her father's bidding, or else back off with frightened eyes. She had his way of looking, too. An open, fearless stare, locking will with will.

'Be careful, daughter,' she warned. 'Snakes bite slyly.'

'And cats have claws,' Judith retorted tossing her head, then belied her self-assurance by turning to her mother and hugging her fiercely.

Alicia returned the embrace full measure and prayed that they would emerge unscathed from what was to come.

Robert de Belleme, Earl of Shrewsbury, ranged his gaze over the construction of Ledworth's great hall and considered how to go about the matter of besieging the keep. Not that it was anything personal - yet - merely a constructive and pleasant pastime while he awaited his hostess. One never knew when such ruminations might be

called upon to bear fruit.

His eyes were without expression and almost without colour. A beautiful light glass-grey set beneath straight-slashed black brows. He was thirty-eight years old yet looked little more than twenty-five. Some men in their ignorance said he had sold his soul to the devil in exchange for the earthly trinkets of youth and power. Others, more knowledgeable, said that he had no soul. Robert de Belleme cared not what anyone thought, contemptuous to the core of all his fellow men.

He tapped his whip against his leg and eyed with amusement the scuttling avoidance of the servants, their sidelong stares, and their limbs poised to leap if he should uncoil to strike. It was sweet to see their terror which was, of course, totally justified.

A girl crossed the length of the hall and came towards the fire where he and his companions stood warming themselves. Her pace was confident, her head carried high, her eyes making direct contact with his. It was such a contrast to

the twittering fear he so usually encountered that his interest sharpened and he narrowed his eyes to appraise her.

'I am sorry we kept you waiting, my lord, but the times cause us to err on the side of caution,' Judith said in a low, sweet voice as she curtsyed.

He looked down on her bent head, and the long, fine-boned hands clutching the folds of her gown. 'Indeed, it is difficult to judge enemy from friend,' he concurred and cupped her chin to raise her face to his scrutiny.

There was naught of his half-brother to be seen. Her brow, cheekbones and softly curved lips belonged to Alicia, but the narrow nose, cleft chin and strange, grey-agate eyes were completely individual.

'It was a pity your marriage took place while I was occupied elsewhere. I would have liked to attend.' He raised her to her feet. She was as slender as a willow stripling, thin almost, with scarcely a figure to mention. If FitzMiles had got a child on her, it did not yet show. Probably as poor

a breeder as her dam, which was a pity. If the lord of Ravenstow were suddenly to die, the widow's lands would revert to the crown. Not that he foresaw any particular problem in wheedling them out of Rufus's pocket and into his own, but should FitzMiles die with a babe in the cradle, the estates of both parents would devolve upon that child's head and the wardship of such wealth would be power indeed to whoever owned it. Still, there were more ways than one to milk a cow.

He circled Judith's wrist in a grip of steel. 'Your husband should be here to take care of a prize so valuable,' he remarked. 'Is he always so careless?'

Behind him, Walter de Lacey sniggered. Judith was reminded of her mother's panic-stricken remark about the fox in the chicken run. Her mouth was dry, but she permitted no fear to show on her face and retained a facade of blank innocence. 'He had business elsewhere, my lord. I would not presume to question him ... Do you care to wait?' She signalled to a servant who

crept forward with a flagon and cups.

Robert de Belleme released her wrist and lounged against a low table. 'Playing at chatelaine,' he mocked as she waved the terrified creature away and served him and his men herself. 'How old are you, my dear?'

'Sixteen, my lord.'

'And sweet as a ripe apple on the tree.' He rotated the cup in his fingers to examine the interlaced English design. 'Tell me, Judith, does your lord hope for an heir before the anniversary of your marriage?'

Heat scorched her face and throat. 'If God wills it, my lord,' she managed, feeling as though the pale eyes had stripped her down to the truth.

'And if your husband can restrain himself from the company of his Welsh paramour and other whores and sluts,' de Lacey sneered.

Judith set the flagon carefully down. Anjou wine was too expensive to be flung, she reminded herself, and it was her best flagon. 'I do not

interfere in my lord's private business,' she said stonily. Her look flashed over de Lacey and quickly down before her revulsion betrayed her. 'He treats me well, and I thank God for it.'

De Belleme smiled. 'I have yet to meet a woman who is not taken in by Guyon's charm.'

'Or a man for that matter!' guffawed de Lacey. 'It is not every bride can count the King as her rival for her husband's body!'

'Shall I instruct the cooks to make a feast, or is this just a passing visit to express your joy upon my marriage?' Judith demanded in a choked voice.

De Belleme shrugged. 'I have to be in Shrewsbury tonight. I have a matter of business to discuss with your husband, but it can wait and in the meantime I have brought you a belated wedding gift.' He stood straight and half turned to pat the stitched bundle lying on the table behind him. De Lacey, a sudden sly grin on his face, presented his overlord with a sharp dagger to slit the threads.

Shaking inside like a custard, outwardly composed, Judith watched him apply the blade. The strands parted in staccato hard bursts of sound and the skins spilled out on to the table, glossy, supple, jet black against the coarse woven linen of their coverings.

'Norwegian sables to grace your gowns ... or your bed,' de Belleme said with an expansive sweep of his hand and presented her with one of the glowing furs.

The sable still possessed its face and feet. Judith swallowed her aversion - the thing looked as though it had been squashed in a siege - and thanked him. It was a costly gift, fit to grace the robes of a queen.

Her uncle dismissed her gratitude. 'It is nothing,' he said, and meant it. In the fullness of time he expected them to return to his keeping and all they had cost him was a little joyful exertion of his sword arm. 'Is your lady mother here with you?'

'Yes, my lord. She pleads your indulgence. She

has a megrim.'

'I have that effect on her.' Smiling, he toyed with the blade of the knife still in his hand.

Judith shivered, suddenly thankful that the majority of her uncle's men were outside the keep.

'Are you afraid of me, Judith?' He admired his reflection in the mirror-bright steel.

'Has she cause to be?' Guyon's voice was as soft as his entrance had been.

De Belleme spun round, his expression momentarily one of shocked surprise before he schooled it to neutrality. For all his height and breadth, Guyon FitzMiles moved like a wraith. It was a trait that irritated the Earl, for God alone knew what the man was capable of overhearing in his stealth.

'Christ's blood, no!' He tossed the dagger back to de Lacey. 'But you know how reputations travel.'

Guyon's eyes fell to the sables puddling the board. His nostrils flared and his luminous gaze struck de Belleme's. 'I know the very roads,' he answered and unpinned his cloak. 'I have granted your men a corner of the bailey. They may have their weapons when they leave.'

'Your hospitality dazzles me, nephew,' said de Belleme drily.

Guyon tossed his cloak on to the table and rested one haunch on the wood. 'Yours would blind. I wonder what you would have done had you caught up with my wife before the drawbridge?'

'Nothing improper, I assure you.'

'By whose code?'

'My uncle has brought us a wedding gift of these fine sables,' Judith said quickly. She could feel Guyon's hostility and knew they could not afford a rift with the Earl of Shrewsbury. There was a moment's silence. The balance teetered. Judith held her husband's gaze and silently pleaded. Joining him, she grasped his right arm

possessively as a bride might do, but actually to prevent him drawing his sword. His muscles were like iron and rigid with the effort of control, and his eyes were ablaze. Frantically she stood on tiptoe to kiss his tight lips, trying to break the terrible concentration.

Through a fog of rage Guyon became aware of her desperation and the spark of sanity that had prevented him from leaping at de Belleme's throat kindled to a steadier flame. He dropped his focus to her upturned face and filled his vision with her shining honesty instead of the contemptuous challenge of his uncle-by-marriage. 'I would set your worth even higher than sables, *Cath fach*,' he said with a strained smile as he slipped his arm around her waist and kissed her cheek, knowing that she had drawn him away from the edge of a very dangerous precipice.

'As it happens,' said de Belleme pleasantly, 'I do have other fish to fry, nothing too important. Indeed I am embarrassed to make mention of it.'

Guyon doubted the lord of Shrewsbury had ever

been embarrassed in his life. He lifted a brow and looked enquiringly blank, pretending not to see de Lacey's lounging smirk. Beside him Judith had clenched her jaw and he knew that she realised what was coming next.

'*Cariad*, go and bestow your wedding gift safely and organise some fitting repast for our guests,' he said.

Judith gave him a keen look. He extricated himself from her grip and ran one finger lightly down her freckled nose. 'If you please.' It was a charming, light dismissal, but a dismissal nevertheless. His gaze flickered to the sables and then quickly away.

Judith curtsied - she could do little else - and excused herself.

'You were saying?' Guyon folded his arms.

'It is a small matter of silver owed to me by my late brother Maurice for the building of Ravenstow ...' said the Earl of Shrewsbury with a smile

Judith smoothed one of the sables beneath her

palm, staring down at the glowing fur without really seeing her action or feeling the luxury beneath her caress.

The midday meal had been more elaborate than their customary bread, cheese and watered wine, the flustered cook having organised additions of roasted pigeons, mutton in pastry coffins, herrings seethed in milk and sprinkled with almonds and small honey cakes, crusty with chopped nuts and dried fruit.

Judith did not know if it was fare fit for an earl, but it was the best she could provide at such short notice. Certainly her uncle had not complained. Indeed, he had settled to the meal with a hearty appetite which was more than could be said for her husband, who had attacked the wine as voraciously as others attacked the food, seeming set to drink himself beneath the table in as short a time as possible. Barely a morsel of food had passed his lips and every time his cup neared the dregs he would signal the lad serving to replenish it to the brim. He had begun to slur his words and

his voice had grown over-loud.

Robert de Belleme had watched Guyon's disintegration with a contemptuous eye and a scornful smile. No more than a cupful of wine had flowed over his own tongue, which remained mellifluous and precise.

Judith's tentative plea to her husband had met with a snarl to mind her distaff, and a half-raised fist. At this juncture she had begged leave to retire, having no desire to bear the humiliation of a public beating. She could remember only too well how it had gone with her father in the past. He would drink. Someone would make a remark that he disliked and the blows would fall, cutting if he happened to be wearing rings.

Steeped in misery, she sat waiting now for she knew not what and wondered what had happened to drive Guyon over the brink like this. Her uncle was owed a large sum of money. Guyon had been thoughtful about that for some time, deeply thoughtful and busy, but certainly not depressed. She knew he enjoyed the taste of good wine, but

in three months of marriage she had yet to see him merry, let alone drunk. It was beyond her to fathom the reason for such deviation and her fear was all the more potent for her lack of understanding.

There was a sound outside the door. Melyn, coiled in a warm ball upon the bed, popped her head erect and uttered a soft greeting miaow. Judith dropped the sables and hastened to the door, unbarring it to admit Eric and one of the serjeants bearing Guyon's upright weight between them. Stinking of hippocras, he swayed on the threshold.

'Traitors!' he bellowed for all and sundry to hear, taking a wild swipe at Eric and almost overbalancing as he staggered into the room. 'I'm sober 'nough to see my guests on the road ... Lemme go!'

He continued to utter loud protests as they manhandled him to the bed. Judith watched him, her fingers at her throat, her whole body tensed to avoid him if need be.

Eric glanced at her and gave her of all things a wink and a smile. 'Don't you worry, mistress, he'll sober up quicker than you think,' he said comfortingly and, his grinning companion in tow, left her alone with her dread.

Melyn leaped on to Guyon's wine-drenched chest and kneaded the spoiled cloth with splayed claws. Guyon scooped her up and, depositing her on the coverlet, sat up.

'God help me,' he grimaced, pulling the garment over his head. 'I stink like the morning after in a Rouen brothel!' He slung the richly embroidered wool across the room and followed it with his shirt.

Still standing near the door, Judith's eyes were round with astonishment. 'You're not drunk!' she said.

'Sober as a stone, *Cath fach*.' Going purposefully to his clothing chest he rummaged among the contents. Sunlight rayed obliquely through the shutters and gilded his skin. It picked

out the scar from the boar hunt on his arm and the marks of stitches neatly made.

'But why?' she enquired in bewilderment. 'Why did you want us all to believe that you were sodden drunk?'

'You did not have to pretend your responses and they were more convincing than you could have feigned. Your uncle as well as most of the keep thinks that I have drowned in hippocras my despair at losing so much silver into his wanton care.'

'But I saw how much you swallowed. Your back teeth must be awash!'

Guyon flashed her a grin. 'A gut full of red-dyed water, and just enough hippocras to reek my clothes and skin. It was Eric's lad serving at table, did you notice?' He took a shirt and an overtunic of coarse, patchily dyed linen, devoid of embellishment, and threw them on the bed.

'But in God's name why? Why would you want my uncle to believe that you are a swiller?' Judith

moved away from the door and picked up the wine-soaked tunic and shirt to put them on the chest beside the sables.

He glanced at her from beneath his brows. 'He has my silver. I am a distraught weak reed and, as far as anyone knows, saving a precious few, I shall wallow abed in a drunken stupor for the next full day at least.'

'What are you planning?' Judith began to feel frightened again. 'And why are you dressing yourself in those disgusting rags?'

'An exercise in stealth, *Cath fach*. The less you know, the better.'

Her eyes flashed. 'I am not stupid!'

'No,' he agreed. 'You are too clever by half. And do not scowl at me like that. I mean it as a compliment. It is very hard to deceive you on any matter for long.'

'Such as your Welsh paramour and other sluts and whores!' she snapped and then pressed her hands to her mouth, wondering in shock what on

earth had made her quote de Lacey at him like an accusation.

His gaze held hers steadily. 'If I have been over the border of late, it is for reasons other than the pursuit of pleasure.'

Judith dropped her lids and felt heat scorch her face. She would not apologise. She picked up one of the sables to rub the cool pelt against her hot cheek. 'Why were you so angry when you first arrived?' she asked after a moment, as association brought sudden remembrance.

Guyon latched the buckle of his belt and for a moment frowned as though he was not going to answer. But then he shrugged and spoke. 'I passed a pack train two days ago, heading for Shrewsbury. The merchant, Huw ap Sior, was a likeable man. I've traded with him before now, my father too. If he had a fault, it was that he could talk the hind leg off a donkey and he was heedless of danger where he thought there might be gain ... They found his body in a ditch this morning, choked by the binding of his own

chausses and his limbs carved off, and of course not a sign of his goods. I believe the sheriff is blaming Huw's servant for the deed because the lad has vanished into thin air and, being in de Belleme's pay, he's not going to look further than the easiest scapegoat.' He drew a hard breath to steady his rising revulsion and anger.

'Huw knew that there were men of high import in Shrewsbury at the moment. He was taking his pack of silks and Norwegian sables there to sell ... only the poor idiot never arrived ... Look at the canvas in which your bride-gift is wrapped. Do you think those brown stains are merely blotches of mud from the road?'

Judith swallowed and flicked her gaze to the pack and its tell-tale pied markings, 'No,' she whispered hoarsely. 'It is not true.'

He turned from her to pull on a rough sheepskin jerkin and brown woollen hood. 'Then look the other way,' he said. 'Tell yourself that your husband has an over-active imagination.'

Shuddering, Judith dropped the sable back

among its companions and pressed the back of her wrist to her mouth, feeling sick. Tight-lipped, Guyon continued to make his preparations. After a moment, he straightened, alerted by a faint sound from behind. Her breath was shaking from her throat in small, effortful gasps as she fought to stifle her sobs. It was on his lips to snarl at her that grief came cheaply, but he remembered in time, reminded by her white, pinched face, that for all her cleverness she was still a child.

He swore beneath his breath and went to take her in his arms. She gripped his jerkin, struggling for control. 'My mother was right,' she gulped with loathing. 'Snakes do bite slyly.'

'Unless you pin them behind the neck and draw their fangs.'

Her head jerked up and she looked at him through her wet lashes. 'My lord, I do not know what is in your mind save that it be more than dangerous. In God's name, have a care to yourself!'

'You worry too much.' He kissed her cheek. She moved her head. For an instant their lips met, hers soft and unpractised; his gentle without possession or demand, and he was the first to disengage from the embrace. 'As far as everyone else in this keep is concerned, I am confined here in a drunken stupor. I trust you to keep up the pretence for a day at least.'

'When will you be back, my lord?'

'By moonlight I hope.' He drew up his hood. His face disappeared into brown shadow. 'God be with you, *Cath fach*.' He tugged her braid and slipped silently from the room. She stared at the door he had just closed, then went to drop the bar. Sitting down beside the bundle of sables, she set her mind upon what to do with this gift culled from murder.

To keep the sables was impossible. She could scarcely bear to look at them. The sight of the bloodstains upon the bindings curdled her stomach. Burn them? That was waste upon waste. Throw them back in her uncle's face? No.

Guyon would have done that had it been feasible.
Give them away? She steeped her fingers under
her chin, deep in thought.

CHAPTER 8

The Earl of Shrewsbury lounged in his saddle, his legs loosely straight, heels crowned by gilded prick spurs, supple boots reaching to mid-calf and laced by tasselled green thongs. His sword rode lightly in its scabbard, his left hand relaxed upon the curved pommel.

Behind him, sweet on the ear, the pony bells jingled, the sturdy bays laden with the Earl's travelling accoutrements. Flanked by two guards, another pony bore a load of scarred brown leather sacks. Three hundred marks in sweet silver pennies. Guyon FitzMiles had been sufficiently wise to pay up. The only element that had surprised de Belleme was the bridegroom's ability to pay in full, although he suspected the effort had nigh on beggared the young man.

Magnanimous in victory, he had offered to take two hundred marks now and leave the balance until the Michaelmas rents had been paid, and for his pains had been told on a swallowed snarl

where to put his largesse. A solicitous suggestion that FitzMiles could sell his mother-in-law to cut his losses had for a moment held them on the edge of an exciting precipice. He had felt his sword arm tingling with anticipation and de Lacey had begun to reach for his dagger, but FitzMiles, holding to the control he was later to lose in wine, had stalked from the room, crashing his fist into the door as he went.

De Belleme gave a superior smile, remembering the young man swilling his wine like a street drunkard, the loose-limbed grace growing clumsy, the cultured accent slurring, the eyes becoming slack-lidded and glazed. He had half expected it to happen. On more than one occasion at court, FitzMiles had roistered away the night with Prince Henry, drinking himself beneath the table, a woman on each arm. The lack of moral fibre was of no consequence to the Earl; it was the lack of self-discipline that gave him cause for scorn.

The bleating of sheep roused him from

contemplation of a ripe future to the more immediate contemplation of the road before his eyes which was blocked by an enormous cloud of baaing, smelly sheep.

His horse lashed out as de Lacey's mount, brought up short, collided with its rump. De Lacey swore and wrenched on his bridle.

'God's eyes!' snarled de Belleme. 'Get these stinking, tick-ridden beasts out of my way!'

His words were smothered in a chorus of mournful bleating as the sheep advanced and closed around the troop. His destrier began to plunge in earnest. The pack ponies kicked. Cursing, his men attempted to control them and their own mounts and draw their weapons at the same time.

Walter de Lacey swung his sword at a sheep, but stopped in mid-motion, his wrist arrested in response to the nocked arrow aimed at his breast. A range of ten yards made death a certainty.

There were men among the sheep, rising to their feet, their tunics wrong side out affording them a sheepskin camouflage, unseen until it was too late. Welshmen, dark and slender, with short swords at their hips and the deadly longbows in their hands.

'*Yr cled*,' said the nearest Welshman gruffly, jerking his nocked bow at de Lacey's sword. The Baron's mouth tightened. For a moment the blade gleamed in his hand as he turned it, contemplating folly and then, as the Welshman adjusted his line of sight, he spat and threw it down among the sheep.

'You'll die for this,' he said thickly.

Without reply, the Welshman gestured him and his over-lord down from their horses.

Robert de Belleme was not afraid. It was an emotion he seldom experienced even in the teeth of death, but his fury at being trapped and helpless to extract himself, surrounded as he was by bumping, bleating sheep, raged so hot that he was incandescent. His hands were lashed behind

his back. A black hood was forced down over his head and tied there, clogging his sight. Barbarian Welsh jostled his muffled ears. De Lacey's invective was cut off by the sound of a dull blow and then retching. Someone laughed. Rage stuck in de Belleme's gullet and almost choked him. Small coarse hairs from the cloth hood clung to his lips and tongue. He writhed and struggled and felt the bonds saw into his wrists.

Guyon lowered the bow, his eyes sparkling with laughter. His throat quivered as he controlled the impulse to shout his triumph aloud. Commands flickered in Welsh. Fresh pack ponies were brought and the loads transferred. Sheep, destriers and the now unladen ponies began their escorted journey deep into the wilds of Powys where, except by Welshmen, they would not soon be found.

Guyon murmured something to one of his companions, his voice warm with triumph as he studied the two men, bound like caterpillars in a web. In a single swift motion, he straddled the

mount that Eric had brought him.

The words were lost upon his victims, but not the rich delight with which they were spoken and, had de Belleme not seen with his own eyes Guyon FitzMiles sliding beneath the trestle, overcome with drink and had not his assailant been so obviously Welsh, he would have known immediately at whose feet to lay the blame.

As it was, he lay in the road, struggling within his cocoon, hearing the curses of men similarly encapsulated fighting to win free. Horses circled and plunged around him. The Welsh tossed banter cheerfully hither and yon in dips and swoops of singsong language, haranguing each other and their victims alike and then, like autumn swallows, they were gone. A hoof caught de Belleme's side as the last horse departed and involuntarily he arched at the sudden buffet of pain.

Silence descended and it began to rain.

C HAPTER 9

Rhosyn listened to the rain as an eddy of wind drove it against the hafod shutters. One of several spring squalls. In between, the stars would peek through the scudding clouds in pinprick points of diamond light.

The fire, banked for the night, gave off a low, comforting glow, glints of red jewel warmth winking beneath the aromatic logs of the diseased pear tree that Twm had cut down last year.

Rhys and Eluned were newly abed. She could hear their conspiratorial whispers behind the curtains. Her son had turned eleven last week and thought himself very grown up. At fourteen, in Wales, he could claim his manhood. She would be thirty then, Eluned ten and this new babe, if it survived the early months, would be rising from helpless infancy into sturdy childhood.

She picked up her sewing, took a few half-

hearted stitches and, with an irritated cluck, put it down again. The rush-light was too poor for this kind of delicate work and her mind was restless tonight, fluttering purposelessly like a moth at a candle flame. The baby turned in her womb, busily flexing new, delicate limbs. She felt the thrust and flicker with a protective hand. With almost four months of carrying left before the birth, she had not yet burgeoned into ungainly discomfort. Her ripening body was still a pleasure and she was lost in the wonder of it.

The old dog sitting with its moist nose at her knee suddenly growled deep in its chest and stiffened. Rhosyn stood up to face the cottage door, one hand reaching for the rake that Twm had earlier been using on the floor rushes.

It was Twm's voice she heard outside now, gruff and questioning. A horse snorted. A man replied with amusement, the tone deeper than her servant's and edged with a foreign inflection to the Welsh she would have known anywhere. She bade the dog lie and, dropping the rake, flew to

the door and unbarred it to the night.

'Guyon!' she cried and flung herself into his arms. Twm arched a knowing resigned brow and, completely ignored, dismissed himself to his bed. Rhosyn withdrew from the hard clasp of Guyon's arms and tugged him inside the hafod. Gelert whined and thumped his brindle tail on the rushes. She reset the bar and came once more into the circle of his arms.

'You smell of sheep,' she said against his mouth.

He nuzzled her cheek with a stubbly jaw. 'What kind of greeting is that for a man who has ridden hard for your sake?'

'Not for your own?' Rhosyn queried pertly, her eyes laughing, as green and gold as moss agates. 'You are overblown with vanity indeed.'

Her dark hair spilled down over his hands in a fine, cool cloak. Her breasts were ripe and warm against his chest. Within her belly the child kicked.

'How goes it with you?' he asked, his face suddenly all tenderness and concern.

Rhosyn gave a little shrug. 'I'm not sick any more, indeed, I've an appetite like a bacon pig. When I start to waddle like one, I will curse you and a certain hot, harvest night ... Have you come alo--' She stopped. Guyon lifted his head from contemplation of her glowing skin and brilliant eyes just in time to be almost bowled over by the two children.

They were like puppies, gambolling and clamouring; Rhys's new-found manhood had flown out of the window to leave only the excited child. Guyon bore with it very well, riding out the first storm with wry, rueful humour, curbed behind a half-turned head as their mother calmed them with dire threats and a voice suddenly grown as sharp as the flick of a lash.

Subdued, but not defeated, Eluned went to fetch Guyon something to drink and Rhys sat down before the banked fire, hugging his knees, a dark scowl on his face.

'How long will you stay?' he demanded, slanting Guyon a hard glance.

'Rhys!' his mother reprimanded more sharply than she had intended. It was a question she herself wanted to ask but dared not.

Guyon waved aside her anger with a grin. 'I am accustomed to it by now. If he was not so obviously a boy, I would think it was my wife sitting at my feet. She has that way with her too.'

There was a strained silence. Rhys's question was just the crust of the loaf, one of a thousand questions Rhosyn longed to ask him, but would not do so in the presence of the children and for the sake of her own pride.

'A few hours only, Rhys,' Guyon answered the boy. 'I have dared to pull the devil's tail and I must be in my own bed before dawn lest he scorch me with his pitchfork.' He smiled at Eluned and took the mead she offered him. It was strong and sweet and as honey-golden as the fragrant harvest evening on which the unborn child had

been conceived.

Rhys looked blank for a moment and then his quick mind took in the implications of the rough Welsh garb and coupled it with his knowledge that Guyon had skills most Normans did not. Something clandestine had been afoot and Lord Guyon did not intend the blame to lie lying at his door. Eluned, younger and impressionable when it came to tales, took his words at face value and regarded him wide-eyed.

'And precisely where is your own bed?' Rhosyn asked, setting a platter of bread and cheese before him and thinking with a hint of bitterness that they were like courtiers, feting him with adulation.

Guyon gave her one of his quicksilver glances. 'Ledworth,' he answered and did not elaborate. Instead, he tossed something to Rhys.

The boy caught the item deftly and transferred it to his lap. It was a leather sheath, lined with raw wool to hold in place the knife it contained and keep it naturally oiled. The knife itself was almost

a weapon. Eight inches long with a blade gleaming as bright as fish scales against the blue herringbone pattern that fanned from its centre. The hilt was carved from a narwhal tooth.

'I know it is a month after Candlemas, but I had not forgotten your year day,' Guyon said as Rhys examined the knife with speechless delight.

Rhosyn eyed the gift with mixed feelings. Childhood was almost behind the boy and the knife was a symbol of the man too soon to emerge. 'You should not,' she said to Guyon with a frown.

'Grant us both the indulgence,' he answered, his voice light, but his gaze eloquent as he drew Eluned into the circle of his arms. 'And I had not forgotten that it is your own year day come Easter and, since I am unlikely to be here, I have brought your gift early. Guess which hand.'

Delighted, Eluned played the game with him and he teased her, knuckles clenched, his sleight of hand eluding her. At length she pounced on

him, giggling and he conceded defeat, begging abjectly for mercy and presenting her with a small cloth pouch containing a string of amber beads. Eluned flung her arms around Guyon's neck and delivered him a smacking kiss. 'The surest way to a woman's heart,' he chuckled as he fastened the beads around Eluned's slender throat.

'You buy us all,' Rhosyn agreed and, blinking, turned away to mend the fire. Guyon watched her over the child's tumbled black hair.

'That is not true, *cariad*,' he said softly. 'I have never had the price of you and I doubt I ever will.'

Rhosyn savagely poked the logs. 'You have always had the pretty words to cozen what you cannot buy!' she snapped. 'Rhys, Eluned, it is long past time you were asleep. Go on, get to your beds now!'

'But Mam ... !'

Her eyes kindled with wrath. 'Do as you are told!'

Guyon lifted his brow at her tone, shot her a

speculative look and squeezed his warm, rebellious armful. 'Obey your mother, *anwylyd*,' he said gently. 'It is time she and I had a private word. Go now.'

Eluned pouted, unconvinced. Rhys stood up, the knife in his hand, his expression a mingling of childhood and maturity as selfishness warred with duty. After a hesitation, the latter dominated. He thanked Guyon most properly for the knife, kissed his mother on the cheek and crossed the hall to withdraw behind the bed curtain.

'It's not fair!' Eluned complained.

'Life never is, my love,' said Rhosyn bending to hug her daughter. 'You'll discover it time and again as you grow older. Now say good-night and be off with you.'

The child sighed heavily but did as she was bid. Her grip around Guyon's neck almost throttled him. 'I wish you could stay,' she said, her lips warm on his cheek.

'So do I, *anwylyd*,' Guyon replied and meant it.

When they were alone, Rhosyn again mended the fire even though it was unnecessary. The silence stretched out and the old dog whined. When she could bear it no longer, she threw down the poker and spun round to face him, her words almost a cry. 'Why have you come?'

'I thought you would be pleased to see me.'

Rhosyn drew breath to snap that he thought wrong, but changed her mind before the words were spoken. 'I am too pleased. You disrupt our lives. You come with your gifts and your ensorcelments, you beguile us into adoration and then you leave. I cannot bear it!'

'You have it in your power to change that,' he answered gently. 'You are welcome to make your home at one of my manors.'

'A pretty caged bird to sing at your pleasure!' she flung, turning back to the fire.

'I did not come here to quarrel, *cariad*. Nor do I intend to leave upon one. We know each other better than that. If I have rubbed salt into a wound

then I am sorry. You never gave me cause to believe that it ran any deeper than a mutual pleasuring.'

Rhosyn bit her lip and dug her nails into her palms, striving for the control to smile lightly and say that yes, he was right, it had not run any deeper. She felt his hand lightly on her shoulder turning her to face him. 'I needed to know how you fared.'

'Well, now you do,' Rhosyn would have drawn away except that he held her fast and kissed her averted temple, the corner of her eye, her cheek and her mouth, refusing to release her and, indeed, her struggles were only half-hearted and soon ceased.

'I am foolish, Guy,' she murmured, setting her arms around his neck. 'I see the moon in a pool and I am disappointed when my hand despoils the illusion instead of grasping the reality. Be welcome for whatever time you choose to stay.'

Their embrace deepened, warm, sweet and poignant, desire sweeping but hard-held by the

presence of the children a thin curtain away and, in Guyon, by a reluctance to cause Rhosyn a deeper wound than she had already suffered. He broke away first, his breathing ragged, and prowled to sit at the fire. His body protested. It had been a long time since he had lain with a woman and his hunger was keen. Keen, but not desperate. Whatever his detractors said, sexual liaisons were not to Guyon an immediate necessity of life. Given the leisure, the right circumstances and a willing partner, he enjoyed indulging his senses. But as now he possessed only the latter, he drew several deep, slow breaths and made his mind busy with other thoughts.

'Where is your father?'

Rhosyn sat down beside him, just out of touching distance and picked up her distaff. Her fingers were trembling. She concentrated on the raw wool until the hot weakness left her limbs. 'Gone to Bristol. We expect him home tomorrow or the day after. I worry about him, Guy. He is not

well. He gets pains in his chest and Rhys is too young to take more than an apprentice's responsibility.'

Guyon turned his head, eyes sharpening. 'The pack routes are no place for a woman,' he warned.

She did not answer, but the line of her mouth grew mulish and she gave all her attention diligently to the distaff.

'Rhosyn, so help me, if I hear you have stirred from your hearth to go tramping about the borders in a drover's cart, I will carry you off to Oxley myself and lock you up like a caged bird, in truth!'

'You have not the right!'

'I have every right. You carry my child. I will not see you dead in a ditch like Huw ap Sior!'

'I won't ... What did you say?' Her fingers ceased their nimble twirling. Her eyes opened upon him, wide with shock. 'Huw, dead?'

'At the hand of Robert de Belleme and his

gutter sweepings. Huw's pack-load of sables was brought to myself and Judith as a blood-smirched wedding gift.' Sparing her nothing, he gave her the details.

'He was my father's best friend,' she whispered jerkily when he had done. 'They were boys together ... Oh sweet Virgin!'

Their bodies closed again of necessity as Guyon grabbed hold of her, afraid that she was going to faint. She leaned her cheek against his jerkin, shivering, sick to the soul with grief and fear and shock.

'Promise me, *cariad*,' he murmured, stroking her hair.

She made a little movement against his chest. Her fingers gripped his arms.

'Promise me.'

'What good is an oath given under duress?' Rhosyn replied shakily. 'I could give you my word and it would be worthless.' She uttered a desolate laugh. 'Welsh oaths always are.'

'Rhosyn ...'

She pushed gently away from him and, having wiped her eyes, poured herself a cup of mead. 'I might be fickle, Guy, but I am not about to step deliberately within de Belleme's ring of fire. I will swear you this much honestly: that I will not stir from here until after the child is born and only then by necessity. And I will send to you for an escort.'

Guyon studied her through half-closed eyes but did not seek to persuade her further. He had her concessions in his grasp and was not going to jeopardise them with bitterness and anger.

'Very well, *cariad*,' he said quietly. 'I do not suppose I would care so much were you not so cursedly independent.' He sat down beside the fire and picked up the mead that Eluned had poured for him earlier.

Rhosyn stared at him in the firelight. With his Welsh clothing and dark complexion he might have been of her own race and class - no barrier but the fire's glow between them. It was a bitter-

sweet illusion. Merchant's daughter and marcher lord, already married for the sake of convenience and dynasty. He looked tired, she thought. The shadows beneath his eyes were not all the result of the dull light.

'Does your wife know your whereabouts, Guy?'

He took a swallow of mead, swirled its golden surface and looked at her with rueful amusement. 'She may have a suspicion,' he admitted. 'For sure, if I am not over the drawbridge come dawn, I'll have to deal with a hellcat ... and not for the reason I can see on your face.' The amusement became a wry chuckle. He drank the remainder of the mead and did not offer to elucidate.

Rhosyn swallowed the temptation to ask. If Guyon was on this side of the border after dark, dressed in native garments and murmuring about scorching the devil's tail, then it was best to know nothing. 'What is she like?'

'I think she would surprise you.' He put down the cup to fondle the cold thrust of Gelert's nose at his thigh. 'God knows, she certainly surprised me ...

and continues to do so.'

'Is she pretty?'

A curious, casually spoken woman's question with tension lurking beneath the surface.

'Not as you are pretty, *cariad*, but striking in her way, I suppose, or she will be when she grows into her bones. She's a child Rhos, man-shy and half wild.'

Rhosyn knelt at the hearth and felt the heat glow on her face. She had thought about him at the time of his marriage, imagined him abed with his unwanted young Norman bride and wondered if the skills of the bedchamber and sweet grass meadow had stood him in good stead then.

'I have not bedded her,' he said into the small silence of her thoughts. 'She has the frightened eyes of a lass half her age. She knows nothing of men except what her father was and her uncle is.'

Rhosyn turned her head in surprise.

'Even if she opened to me for the sake of duty,

it would be little less than rape. She is as flat as a kipper before and behind and the crown of her head scarce reaches to my armpit.'

'Jesu, Guy!'

'Wishing you had not asked?' He gave a mocking smile, then shook his head. 'The match is not entirely a disaster. Judith has abilities beyond most young women of her station.'

Rhosyn lifted her brows. Guyon laughed, this time with genuine mirth. 'It is not given to every wench to be able to handle a dagger, or hone it to perfection on a whetstone. She has a wicked sense of humour, too. I would not put it past her to grease a slope for the joy of seeing someone slide down it - probably me. I do not believe I shall grow bored - if I live. Walter de Lacey would dearly love to dance on my grave and rule in my stead and Robert de Belleme merely bides his time. Fool that I am, it offends my sensibilities to murder the pair of them in stealth as they would do to me without a qualm of conscience.'

Rhosyn considered him. He had spoken lightly,

but his eyes were hard and the fine mouth was set in a straight grim line. She realised how trivial her own complaints must seem when set against his various burdens. Crossing the space between them, she laid her hand on his shoulder and her cheek to his in a wordless embrace, her black hair spilling down over his rough jerkin and hood.

His own hand reached to grip hers, long-fingered and graceful. She wished suddenly that the child she carried should inherit those hands.

They sat like that while the silence of the night settled around them. Rain thudded against the hafod walls, rhythmic and heavy. Guyon closed his eyes, meaning only to rest them for a moment and instead fell asleep.

Rhosyn gently, stealthily, disengaged her hand from his and stared at him. Vulnerable and slack-limbed, his jaw was fuzzed with dark stubble, his eye sockets smudged with weariness. Swallowing the lump in her throat, she remembered the time she had first seen him.

She had been a bride of fifteen with her proud new husband indulgently buying her trinkets in Hereford. Guy had been nineteen then, awkward with his limbs, still filling them out but even then, coltish and immature as he was, his beauty had been striking. He had not noticed her then, nor yet in the times that she visited his father's keeps with her husband and her father. Not until four years ago when, widowed, she had personally bargained with him over the price of the wool clip. His wide brown eyes, so melting and innocent, had almost been her downfall. She had believed that innocence until realising belatedly that she was being ruthlessly manoeuvred into a corner from which the only extrication was agreement to his price. *Yr llewpart du*, they called him - the black leopard - and, like a cat, there were claws beneath the soft pads and the tuned instincts of a hunter.

She had not let him catch her; not then, nor when she went to his bed, and especially not now. She rubbed her sleeve over her damp eyes and gave a small, self-deprecatory smile as her

practical merchant's mind surfaced from the maelstrom of emotion in which it had been bogged down. She took his cloak and spread it across a stool to dry and prepared a small costrel of mead, her movements brisk but silent. In an hour, she would wake him and he would go, and their meshed worlds would slide apart like two sword blades gliding off each other in a spangle of sparks.

She sat down again when all was done and took up her distaff, and listened with pleasure to the slow, even rhythm of his breathing while she wondered idly what had brought him over the border in so clandestine a fashion.

Twenty miles away and some hours later, wondering was also the preoccupation of another who waited, vacillating between terror and rage at Guyon's continued absence. Judith's emotions were raw. The very touch of a thought agitated them to agony.

It was almost dawn. A glimpse through the arrowslit repeated several times this last hour had

revealed the sinking stars and a milky glimmer to the east. The words she hissed as she peered out on the imminent morning were hot with fury and filled with guilt lest she was cursing a dead man to hell for his tardiness. The thought of him staring sightless into the dawn, his body sword-cloven caused her to whirl from the arrowslit with a gasp.

Eric and the others had ridden in through the postern shortly before midnight. She would not have known of it had not Melyn yowled to be let out, thus disturbing her from a restless sleep. The arrowslit which looked out on the postern had revealed the stealthy entry of the men and ponies. She had expected Guyon then, but he had not come. The ponies had disappeared promptly like beasts of the Wild Hunt into the hollow hills and when she had let Melyn out and gone down to Eric, he had been taciturn and evasive. Lord Guyon had business in Wales. He would be back soon enough. He advised that she retire.

Judith knew that when she recovered her

equilibrium she would be thoroughly chagrined at losing her temper, but for the nonce, like a drunkard, she did not care. Eric had recoiled from the lash of her tongue, eyes wide in shock. When Guyon returned, she intended to do more than just make him recoil. He told her nothing, left her to worry, treated her like a child who did not have the skill to understand.

'Nor shall I if he does not give me the chance!' she said through clenched teeth as she flounced away from the arrowslit and began to dress.

She had just pulled on her stockings and shift and was scrabbling about on all fours searching for a wayward shoe, when Guyon entered the room as silently as a cat.

'Good morning, wife,' he said, grinning at the sight of her upturned posterior.

For a long moment she was still and then she rose to her feet and faced him, her complexion flushed with anger.

'Strange moonlight,' she said sarcastically. 'I

have been sick with worry! Eric rode in before midnight matins. Where have you been?

'I went to see Rhosyn and I fell asleep,' he replied matter-of-factly and came further into the room to sit on a stool and begin unlacing his boots.

'You went to see Rhosyn?' she repeated and swallowed the urge to hurl her newly found shoe at him. 'Have you changed your mind?'

'About what? Fetch me a drink, there's a good lass.'

Judith dropped the shoe and turned away, her back as rigid as a lance, her voice choked with the effort of controlling her rage. 'You said you had no mistress.'

Guyon flashed her a glance. 'I don't. Huw ap Sior was a close friend of her family. I took her the news of his death and a warning to be on guard. I am sorry if you are vexed, but expect apology for naught else.'

'Vexed is not the word!' Judith sloshed wine into

a cup with a shaking hand. 'I could kill you myself!'

'No doubt ... Pass me those clothes over there.'

'Those?' She swung to him, lids widening. 'But they stink!'

'I know.' He grimaced, took the wine she offered, drank a mouthful and then set it down. 'Spike it, will you?' he said. 'With white poppy.'

'What for?'

'To make me sufficiently difficult to rouse when Robert de Belleme hails at our drawbridge.'

'And why should he do that?' Judith had a strong inkling as to the reply, having had plenty of time to think during the long watches of the night while her absent husband enjoyed another woman's company without thought for his terrified wife. However, she wanted to hear the words from his own lips, not be treated like an imbecile who would give the game away if possessed of knowledge.

'He might think I was involved in a Welsh raid

upon him and his men that took place on the Shrewsbury road yestereve,' he answered. 'I did not tell you before in case we failed. At least you could truthfully have claimed your innocence.'

'What good would that do?' Judith was not impressed. 'You know what my uncle does to "innocents".' Her mouth tightened, but it was because he had been ensconced at another woman's hearth, perhaps even in her arms, while she paced the floor at Ledworth in a cold sweat of terror for his life.

'Look,' he said wearily, 'I do not expect you to go into the kitchen details of how you make a particular dish, but I will praise it or otherwise when it comes to table, and it is the same with certain of my doings. I told you what was needful.'

'What you thought was needful.'

Guyon swallowed and cast around for a fresh reserve of patience. A day of pretence and fencing with men he loathed, a night of clandestine work, an hour's sleep in a hard chair and some chancy riding over rough terrain in the

pitch dark made it difficult to find. 'Judith, don't push me,' he said softly.

A trickle of fear ran down her spine. The gentle tone was far more frightening than a bellow to mind her business, or a raised fist. She turned abruptly away to begin preparing a draught of the poppy syrup.

Guyon continued to strip. 'What about the rest of the keep?' he asked after a moment. 'What do they think?'

She looked round at him, her expression impassive. 'Some of them believe that it is good for you to release your tension in a surfeit of drink, all young men do it. Others say they always knew you were wild and incontinent. Mama is desperate for my safety. My father used to beat us both when he was in his cups ... He split my lip once ... Mama cannot act to save her life. I dare not tell her the truth.'

He snorted with brusque amusement. 'You accuse me and then do the same to your mother!'

Judith drew breath to retort that it was not the same at all, but clenched her teeth on the words. Do not push me, he had said, and she had no way of knowing how close to the edge he actually was.

'I am sorry your mother should be deceived in me, but there is no help for it. So much depends on de Belleme believing my innocence, or at least being unable to refute it.' Guyon came to take the cup from her, tilted her chin, and kissed her gently. 'Trust me, *Cath fach*.'

His lips were as subtle as silk, his beard stubble prickly on her tender skin. Warmth flowed through Judith's veins as if her blood had turned to wine. Disturbed, she drew quickly away from him. 'Will you tell me how you retrieved the silver?'

Guyon eyed her closely, but could read very little in her expression, so carefully was she guarding it. His own fault, he knew, for warning her off, but one contrary woman a night was enough on any man's trencher. He looked down into the wine and swirled it thoughtfully around. 'It was worth every

drop of this foul brew,' he said after a moment and took a gulp so that the heavy sweetness would not cloy his palate. And then, beginning to laugh, he told her precisely what they had done.

Foul-tempered, all insouciance flown, Robert de Belleme demanded hoarsely to see the lord of Ledworth.

'He's still abed, m'lord,' Eric answered staunchly. 'It'll be the devil of a job to rouse him.'

'Do it!' snarled de Belleme, 'or I'll flay your hide and use it for a saddlecloth!'

From another man, the speech would merely have been picturesque. But as it was the Earl of Shrewsbury who spoke, Eric knew the threat was not idle.

'If you will wait a moment, my lord--'

'Make haste, peasant!' growled Walter de Lacey from his place at the Earl's left shoulder and wiped his hand across his bruised mouth.

Eric bowed low, mouth tightening under cover

of his full brown moustache, and left the two men at the fire, a wine flagon close to hand.

It was late morning, the servants bustling. The smell of new bread wafted past the men's dust-caked nostrils as a maid laid out the dais table.

'Returning for hospitality so soon, my lords?'

De Belleme whirled to regard the icy glance of his former sister-in-law, Alicia de Montgomery. A bitch in blue silk with a milky collar of pearls at her still surprisingly young throat.

'Recovered entirely from yesterday's malady, I see,' he answered with mock pleasantry, continuing to look her up and down. 'You are remarkably well dressed for a drudge.'

'You should take a gazing-glass to yourself,' Alicia retorted, the pearls jumping hard on her collarbone. 'What can we offer you to be on your way this time?'

His right hand flashed out to grip her wrist and tighten over the knobs of bone. It was so sudden and so painful that involuntarily she cried out. A

servant with a pitcher in his hand hesitated. De Belleme flashed him a red-rimmed glare that sent the man scuttling for cover.

'You always were a clapper-tongued bitch too clever for your own good!' he hissed at her. 'My brother was a fool not to silence your jabber with the blade of his knife!'

'It runs in your family,' she retorted, struggling in his grip, feeling as if her bones were about to snap beneath the grinding pressure.

'Where was Guyon FitzMiles last night?' he demanded, his face so close that she could see the small open pores pinpricking his nose and feel the flecks of spittle on her face as he spoke.

'Blind drunk in his bed!' she gasped. 'My lord, you are breaking my arm!'

'And so I will if you do not tell me the truth, you whore!'

It was no idle threat and Alicia knew it. The pain was making her feel sick. One more slight twist and her bones would snap like dry twigs. 'It is the

truth. You saw him carried away yourself!'

De Lacey muttered a warning from the side of his mouth and the Earl flung her several paces away from him with a routier's oath.

Gasping, tears of pain and fury in her eyes, Alicia glared loathing at him.

De Belleme returned the look in equal measure and turned away to view the man staggering across the hall, supported on one side by the captain of the guard and on the other by his anxious wife.

De Lacey swore in dismayed surprise. The Earl stared blankly at Guyon who was stained and rumped, ungroomed, still stinking of wine and completely without co-ordination.

'Whatever you want,' Guyon enunciated slowly, his tongue stumbling round the words, his eyes owlishly squinting and unfocused. 'I pray you be quick before I am sick all over your boots.' He swayed alarmingly. Eric propped him up. Judith bit her lip and, looking tearfully concerned, clung

to her husband's wine-soiled sleeve.

De Belleme gazed round the circle of hostile faces. 'We were attacked on the road, pillaged, tied up and left for the wolves,' he snapped. 'I thought you might know something.'

Silence. Guyon's sluggish lids half lifted. 'Lost your silver too?' he said with a slow smile. It almost became a laugh but the movement of his shoulders brought on a sudden bout of nausea and he folded retching against his wife and his bodyguard.

Judith looked across at the enraged men. 'I am sorry to hear of your misfortune,' she said sweetly. 'Is there anything we can do? Horses? Food? Are there wounded among you?'

Impotent, beaten, Robert de Belleme stared into her hazel eyes with all their innocence and Eve-like deception and then flicked his gaze to the huddled man at her feet, the feline grace gone, the lank black hair grazing the rushes.

'Pray,' he snarled. 'Pray very hard that you are

innocent.' He swung on his heel. De Lacey followed him, sneering over his shoulder. Alicia flinched and crossed herself.

'Oh God,' Guyon groaned, half raising his head. 'You wretched girl, I ought to kill you before you kill me.'

'Perhaps I put too large a measure of the potion in your wine, but at least your display was convincing,' Judith answered judiciously. 'Do you feel sick, or are you able to stand?'

Alicia, about to set her foot where angels feared to tread, once more found herself a baffled outsider to the understanding that existed between Judith and the green-faced man now gingerly rising to his feet.

'You'll be all right by this evening,' Judith consoled him and gestured one of the household knights to help him back to bed.

'Witch,' he muttered, but managed a wan smile over his shoulder.

'I do not suppose you are going to explain any

of this to me?' Alicia asked, a line of exasperation between her brows.

'No, Mama,' Judith agreed, her smile the secretive one that was all her father's legacy.

C HAPTER 10

The shadows of the June evening had begun to lengthen. The sunlight was as golden as cider, but the wind that cut across the marches and ruffled the slate feathers of the peregrine on its eyrie was edged with cold.

Guyon stood upon Ravenstow's wall walk and inhaled the clean, meadow-scented air with appreciation. Below, the hall was hazed with the smell of the smoked fish that had been the main dish of the evening meal, it being Friday. A lingering aftermath of the deception practised upon de Belleme - a punishment and a penance - was the delicacy of his stomach where such food was concerned.

Cadi thumped her tail, eyes cocked adoringly, alert to move if he should, but he remained staring out over the demesne. The water meadows gave way to the peasants' strips sown with oats and beans, green-blowing in the wind that chased a contrast of shadows and amber

sunlight over the land. A harsh land, filled with the dangers of sudden Welsh raids and the slinking shadows of wolves.

As the summer advanced, the Welsh had grown bold in their raiding. A flock of sheep here, a bull there, a woman in one of Guyon's border hamlets. He had, of course, retaliated. An eye for an eye. Everyone knew the rules ... except Robert de Belleme who rampaged up and down his earldom like Grendel of the marsh, destroying and torturing. Doggedly the Welsh retreated into the hills where he could not follow, taking everything with them and letting their flimsy hafods burn. Reconstruction took only a matter of days and de Belleme was too great a lord to occupy his entire summer chasing shadows through wet Welsh woods. He left that to his vassals, men such as Walter de Lacey and Ralph de Serigny.

The latter had died last month during one such foray into Wales. He and his men had been ambushed and, while fighting his way out, he had

suffered a seizure and fallen dead from his horse. Guyon and Judith had attended the funeral as a mark of respect but, circumstances and the other mourners being what they were, had not remained beyond the ceremony.

Guyon had dealt efficiently with the raids on his own lands and kept a jaundiced, watchful eye on de Lacey's efforts to do the same. He did the rounds of his vassals and castellans, holding manor courts, advising, solving, replacing and recruiting, granting, denying, his finger firmly on the pulse.

He began to move slowly along the wall walk. Cadi leaped to her feet, shook herself and followed, nose grazing his heels. A young guard saluted him. Guyon paused a moment to speak, remembering from long training the man's name and family circumstances. It was a little effort that never failed to repay more than double its expenditure in willingness and loyalty.

The guard paused in mid-reply to Guyon's query and saluted again, this time flushing scarlet to the

tips of his ears.

Guyon turned to find his wife, pink and breathless from her climb, strands of hair escaping her braids and blowing wild. The guard's blush he attributed to the fact that women seldom came aloft and certainly not as informally as this. It never occurred to him to think the young man might find Judith attractive.

'I've found her!' Judith panted, clutching Guyon's arm, her eyes as bright as two polished agates. 'She was in one of the bailey storeheds nestled among a heap of fleeces.'

He slipped his arm absently around her waist and kissed her cheek. 'I told you she would not have gone far,' he said with a superior air.

Judith stiffened. 'You groaned the words at me from the bed because you wanted to be left in peace to sleep,' she said tartly. 'You could not have cared less!'

'Well, not at the time,' he conceded with a grin. 'But I knew she was bound to turn up. I've never

known a beast with a life so charmed.'

'She's taken a lover. The same one that sired her last lot of offspring. A great black mannerless leopard of a tom that lives wild on the slope!'

Guyon smiled and leaned upon the limewashed sandstone to watch the clouds chase past on the wind. 'Well, it is spring after all,' he said with amusement.

Judith blushed. He had been very patient with her thus far, his embraces light and fraternal, teasingly affectionate and 'safe'. Her stomach no longer lurched sickeningly when they retired of a night. She knew she was not about to be raped. Once, unconsciously he had reached an arm across her naked body and murmured a name into her hair, his lips nuzzling her nape and her blood had prickled, moved by something alien and unsettling that flushed her loins with moist heat. Afraid, she had tossed vigorously and coughed and, the pattern of his breathing had broken; he had removed his arm with a wry, half-waking apology and rolled over away from her.

The time would come, she knew, when she would have to know his flesh. He was his father's sole heir, the duty pressing upon him to beget more branches on the tree than Miles had done.

'If I was barren would you divorce me?' she asked curiously.

He left the merlon and walked onwards until they could overlook the river and its bustle of traffic at the toll as boats sought to moor before nightfall. 'Come now, *Cath fach*, where else would I find a wife capable of besting me at dagger play?'

'I do not suppose it would matter if she bore you half a dozen sons.'

'Kind of you to offer,' he grinned, deliberately misconstruing her words. 'I have the patience to wait on your ripening lust.' She pinched him. He recoiled with a protest, and then suddenly craned forward, narrowing his gaze the better to focus on the distance. 'Visitors,' he said.

Judith came to his side and stood on tiptoe.

Below them, a long barge had just nudged into its mooring and the crew were making her secure.

'Your father!' she exclaimed as Miles stepped on to the wharf.

'Cat among the pigeons,' Guyon said with a thoughtful smile.

'Who is that with him?' Judith bobbed against her husband and a stray tawny wisp of her hair cobwebbed his face.

'My half-sister, Emma. If you remember, she could not attend our nuptials because she was in London.'

'Those girls with her are your nieces?'

'Christen, Celie, and Marian,' he agreed, looking wryly amused.

Judith regarded the group for a moment. The older woman, even from this distance, was obviously lovely, and rich. The white fur lining of her cloak gleamed like silk on snow as it caught the sunlight and her braided hair was the precise

colour of a sweet chestnut new-hulled from its case. The girls too were elegantly robed and pristine. Delicately bred, gentle young ladies.

Dismayed, Judith bit her lip, aware that she was wearing her oldest gown and that it was rough with Melyn's moulting fur. Her hair was unkempt and there was nothing prepared to make them a fitting welcome.

'What am I going to do?' she asked.

Guyon turned, looked her up and down from the bird's nest crown of her head to the scuffed toes of her leather slippers and grinned. 'And yet you can face down Robert de Belleme with never a qualm.' He tilted her chin on his forefinger and kissed her nose before whirling her about to face the stairs down. 'Em's all right, she won't eat you.'

'She might if there's naught else on her trencher,' Judith responded.

'My sister has a heart of gold. She'll fold you to her breast like a waif and stray and I'll be the one to receive the scolding. She still thinks of me as a

brat of six filching griddle cakes from the bakehouse door and putting headless mice on her trencher.'

Momentarily diverted, Judith flashed him a glance compounded of horror and amusement. 'And things have changed?' she said saucily and ducked adroitly beneath his playful cuff.

'Headless cats now,' he retorted and hugged her.

They had reached the bottom of the stairs. 'I am very fortunate,' Judith said on a sudden, blushing impulse. 'And very grateful. My lord I--'

'Do not set your worth too cheaply,' he said and tugged her braid in an affectionate gesture with which she was now thoroughly familiar.

'Your wife is contrary to my expectations, Guy,' murmured Emma, reaching a well-tended hand to pick up her cup.

Guyon smiled and stretched out his legs to lounge more comfortably in his chair on the dais. 'What did you expect?' He followed her gaze to

the fire and the four girls who crouched there, heads close, intent over a game of knuckle-bones. Christen possessed her mother's chestnut-red colouring. The two younger girls were plain brown like their absent father. Judith's hair sparkled bronze-blond like the pelt of a young vixen. Christen said something. Judith capped it wittily and her laughter rang.

Emma sipped her wine. 'Well she's certainly not a Montgomery to look upon. I can see her mother's bones, but where on earth did she get those eyes and that hair?'

'From her grandam perhaps?' Guyon said with a shrug. 'Maurice was only a bastard son of the house. By all accounts his mother was a Danish widow out of York.'

'Yes, perhaps. I thought she would be slight and dark ... and less of a child. At her age I was extremely conscious of my appearance and how to use it on men to gain my own ends.'

'Oh, Judith has her ways and means,' he said easily. 'And if I ever had a yen for women who

primped and preened, I lost it swiftly enough at court. The difference between those harpies and Judith is the difference between dross and pure gold. No insult to yourself intended, Em. You use your talents with subtlety.'

'Thank you,' she retorted archly. 'I'll treasure the compliment.'

'Christen does not appear to have inherited your discretion,' he added as Christen looked up from the game and slanted a long-lashed glance at one of the youngest knights in the hall.

Emma sighed. 'You have noticed it too? There is a devil in her, Guy and it will destroy her unless it can be exorcised.'

'She is scarcely yet fourteen,' he said, all humour flown.

'And older than Eve.'

'And I hazard part of the reason you were summoned to London and are here now instead of with Richard at court?'

She gave him a sidelong look. 'I had forgotten how sharp you are. It seemed a sound idea to send her to housekeep for her father while my duty kept me here in the marches after Mama died. The girls see so little of him that I thought it would be of benefit to them both.'

Guyon grunted. 'You see little enough of Richard yourself.'

Emma shrugged. 'It is not given that every match should scorch the soul. We are content, Guy.'

'Have you spoken to Richard about her?'

'He says the sooner we match her the better, but I do not know. Perhaps she is merely playing at what she sees the court concubines do and, because she is pretty and men respond, she does it the more, never knowing how close to the fire her fingers are.'

He was silent for a time, considering the circle of girls. A serving lad replenished his cup and moved on. Cadi stirred restlessly at his feet. 'You

were right to bring her away,' he said at length. 'Christen has always been swayed by the actions of those around her. Do you remember when she was nine and wanted to become a nun because one of the maids took the veil?'

A pained smile curved Emma's lips. 'And last year the crusade. I caught her sewing a cross on her best cloak, her belongings packed in a travelling bundle and vowing to see Jerusalem or die.'

'So what she requires is a spell of gentle domestic harmony with myself and Judith for examples?'

Emma grimaced at him.

Eyes laughing, he said, 'I thought you had serious doubts concerning my state of grace?'

'That was just irritation at the weakness of all men,' she said impatiently. 'I know why you act the rutting stag at court and you and Rhosyn have long had a private understanding. You handle Christen better than any of us. She might listen to

you ... and she might listen to your Judith. There is not so much difference in age and they appear to like each other.'

'It depends upon what you want her to learn in lieu of coquetry,' Guyon chuckled, thinking of Judith's repertoire of dubious skills. He rose to his feet and, still smiling, left the table. Emma followed him.

His father and Eric were locked in mortal combat over a game of merels beside the hearth and neither paid any attention to Cadi's inquisitive nosings.

'Have you noticed any difference in our father these last few weeks, Em?' Guyon asked in a low voice.

She shook her head. 'Not really. Perhaps a little quieter, but you know how he broods. Before we set out, he spent a long time kneeling at Mama's tomb and then complained that his knees were stiff. Why do you ask?' Her voice sharpened. 'Is there something wrong?'

'No, nothing.' He set a reassuring hand on her arm. 'Just filial interest. 'What he needs is another wife ... or a mistress.'

Emma scowled at him. 'You don't seriously mean that, Guy.'

'Why not?'

'Would you welcome another woman in Mama's place - a stepmother?'

'You are deluding yourself if you think he has lived like a monk since her death.'

'I know he has taken casual women for comfort and pleasure,' Emma said with asperity. 'But they were in no wise partners for life.'

'That's what I mean. He needs something more. Our mother was his anchor and he is in danger of going adrift without one.' Having gained the information he sought, he went to play knucklebones with his wife and nieces.

'Rannulf Flambard has officially been granted the bishopric of Durham as payment for his tireless

endeavours,' said Miles, his face studiously blank.

The lantern swung gently on its hook and shadows lumbered upon the stable walls. Guyon looked up from the delectable golden mare he had been examining. The horse was a gift for Judith, the furtiveness of this night visit to the stable because she was to be a surprise. He stared at his father with bright interest. 'God preserve the devil when he gets to hell.' His mouth twitched. 'What's he going to do, strip the church from within and give it all to Rufus?'

'Of a certainty, weasling little runt.'

The mare lipped Guyon's tunic. He scratched her beneath the chin. 'But shrewd and clever with it. At least if he's snatching food from the mouths of monks, he's not snatching it from us.'

Rannulf Flambard, a common cleric, had risen by his own diligent efforts from obscurity to the ranks of the most powerful men in the land. He had become indispensable to Rufus and a menace to every member of the barony; a tax

collector with a Herculean grip on men's financial affairs and the ability to tighten that grip and squeeze his victims dry.

Guyon thoroughly disliked the man, for his attitude rather than from any squeamishness concerning his lowly birth or his task of crown revenue raiser. Indeed, with a numerical talent of his own, he had the good sense to respect Flambard's extraordinary skills and step warily around them.

'Of course,' Miles added sarcastically, 'Flambard is not the only hazard to our coffers. The Welsh take their tithe of silver too.'

Guyon eyed his father nonchalantly across the mare's satin withers. 'I thought you might have heard about de Belleme's misfortune,' he said with a hint of regret in his voice.

'And yours too?'

Guyon said nothing. He could not dissemble with his sire who knew him too well and saw too clearly. Silence was by far the better line of

defence.

'Have a care, son. Step very softly around the Earl of Shrewsbury. His rages are all the more deadly for being silent and the remains of his victims are not a pretty sight. He is stronger than ever now. Did you know that he has paid Rufus another relief to take Roger de Bully's lands?'

The flippancy vanished, replaced by startled attention. 'No, I didn't.'

'Blythe and Tickhill straight down the devil's throat. He's likely to be short of coin and temper. Don't try any more clever tricks like that last one ... You know what I mean.'

'So if he wants to eat the world, I just stand aside and let him?'

'You don't fling your gage in his teeth!'

'I haven't. A trip rope across his path perhaps, in revenge for a parcel of bloody sables.'

Miles scraped his fingers through his hair and reminded himself that Guyon was almost thirty

years old and the mould was too firmly set to be broken or altered by an exasperated lecture.

'Just be careful, that's all.'

'Meek as a virgin,' Guyon answered lightly.

'Just don't get deflowered,' Miles said curtly. 'I'm going to bed.'

The lightness left Guyon's face. 'Chance would be a fine thing,' he said to the horse and followed his father.

C HAPTER 11

Judith gasped and wriggled around in the bed, squinting through her lids as the brightness of daylight flooded the room.

Guyon wrenched the covers aside. 'On your feet, you lazy baggage, or are you going to sleep until noon?'

She sat up, glowering.

Guyon laughed. 'You'll miss a surprise if you do.'

Judith rubbed her eyes and regarded him blearily. He was wearing his hunting tunic of green plaid and leather hose. She had not heard him wake and dress, but then he could be as soft-footed as Melyn when he chose.

'What kind of surprise?'

'The kind that will not wait for ever.' He hooked his thumbs in his belt and studied her. Her hair spilled down. A freckled white shoulder gleamed through the untidy tresses and a small, apple-

sized breast. Flank and leg were lithe and long. Flustered, she lowered her eyes, a pink flush staining her throat and face. Abruptly he turned away to her clothing pole and, selecting garments, tossed them on the bed.

'I'll send in your maid. Don't be too long, *Cathfach*.'

His tone was light and his face wore its customary good humour so that her momentary qualm dissolved into an impudent grimace as he reached the door.

Most of the household was still asleep and, as Judith indignantly discovered on entering the hall, it was not long after dawn. A yawning boy was arranging the side trestles for the serving of bread and curd cheese. Guyon was leaning on the edge of the dais, deep in conversation with the steward and the reeve, Cadi as usual glued to his side.

The two standing men bowed. Judith smiled a greeting to the steward. To the reeve she spoke.

He had not long been appointed to the position - a young man with small children, well able to cope with the task of mediating between the lord and his tenants, but still finding his feet.

Guyon listened to her enquiries after the health of the man's family with whose every name and circumstance she was familiar and was once more amazed at her scope.

'I didn't know his aunt Winifred suffered from gout,' he chuckled as he led her out of the forebuilding and into the early morning bustle of the bailey.

'She doesn't.' Judith regarded him with grave clarity. 'She just likes their attention. There's nothing wrong with the cantankerous hag. I could think of several effective if drastic remedies to cure her condition. Cutting out her tongue, for one.'

'Judith!' he spluttered.

'It is the truth and only you to hear it. Why should I lie?'

Guyon shook his head, unable to think of a response or reprimand because in essence she was right

A lanky youth of about Judith's own age was forking soiled straw into the yard. Hens pecked and scratched near his feet. Balls of yellow fluff twinkled hither and yon, imitating in miniature the actions of their parents, miraculously avoiding the lad's stout boots and the sweeps of the fork.

'Good morning, Hob,' Judith greeted him. He turned a dusky campion-pink and mumbled into his chest.

'What's the surprise, Guy?' She smiled up at him as she had smiled at Hob.

'You are, constantly,' he replied, then said in English to the boy, 'Where's your father?'

'Just coming, sire. He's walking her round to stop her getting cold.'

'Who?' asked Judith.

Guyon took her arm and turned to face his head

groom who appeared around the edge of the building with a harnessed mare following behind in a well-mannered fashion.

'Guyon?' Judith twisted to look up at him and then back at the delicately stepping palfrey.

'I thought it was time you had a more mettlesome mount than that old bay nag you've adopted. Her name's Euraidd. She's five years old and from the stud herd down at Ashdyke.'

Judith stared at the vision filling her eyes and it swung its head to return the compliment with limpid black eyes. Euraidd - golden. A mare the colour of the sun. Darker dappled rings like gold coins shimmered on the silken haunches and contour of shoulder and belly. Her mane and tail were a flossy blonde, the former braided with tassels of scarlet silk. The harness, like the horse, was expensive.

'She's beautiful!' Judith gasped, more than a little awestruck. 'Are you sure you want me to have her?'

'How else do you expect to keep up with me when we go riding?' Guyon grinned. 'That bay bag of bones might as well have been standing still the other day.'

'He ran his heart out for me when we were fleeing Earl Robert,' she said, and stepped forward to stroke the soft tawny nose. The mare had a white star between her eyes and two small trails of stardust dribbled beneath. She lipped Judith's fingers, seeking a titbit, and the groom obligingly produced a wrinkled apple.

The under-groom emerged from the stables with Guyon's grey saddled up and ready.

'Care to try her paces?' Guyon cupped his hands.

'You should not make such an open display of your wealth,' she reproved, faintly troubled even in the midst of her joy.

'My father has one of the best stud herds in the land. Even impoverished as I am, I still have access to good horseflesh. Besides, you should

know not to look a gift horse in the mouth.'

Judith made an agonised face at the literal pun and set her foot into the bowl of his linked fingers.

They rode far and wide over Ravenstow's demesne. The mare's gait was like silk, her muscles flowing like water beneath a cloth of golden satin. Her mouth was sensitive to Judith's slightest touch on the reins. She moved effortlessly from walk to pacing trot, to canter and back to a walk and Judith felt not so much as a jolt as she changed step.

Guyon considered Judith's seat in the saddle with a critical eye and discovered that, as with all skills, she had mastered this one in a very short time.

'My mother used to hate riding horseback,' he said finally as they rode side by side for home. 'For my father's sake she bore it, but it was a sacrilegious waste of good horseflesh. The best in England and she appreciated it not one whit.'

Judith looked down at the mare. There was

exhilaration in riding such smooth power, a tingling of triumph in the knowledge of mastery.

'He misses her, doesn't he?' she said thoughtfully.

'My mother was the light of his life,' Guyon said, his eyelids tightening with pain. 'They fought on occasion fit to bring down the keep around our ears, but I remember the love. She would have given him her lifeblood to drink if he had asked, and vice versa.'

Judith gnawed her lip, unable to contemplate such a depth of feeling and trust. Her own parents had spent their time damning each other's souls into the pit of hell. Slaps, blows, ill-treatment, degradation, cruelty. She knew only too well the nature of marriage ... or thought she knew. She looked through her lashes at her husband's arrogant features and tried to imagine cutting her own veins at his command. No, she thought. I would take up a knife and defend myself to the last bitter drop of blood.

Hard on that thought followed a wave of guilt.

He had been so good to her, tolerating her whims, handling her with patience and consideration, gifting her richly, not least with this beautiful horse. She liked him well enough, knew that she had been more fortunate than her mother as a heifer in the ring, but it was too great a trust to give her soul into another's squandering.

'You are quiet, *Cath fach*,' he said.

Judith smiled and tossed her head. 'Foolish thoughts,' she laughed, her mouth twisting. 'Not worth a penny for their time. Does she gallop, is it safe to give her free rein?' Without waiting for his reply she used her hands and heels to command the mare into a sudden spectacular burst of speed. Guyon muttered a startled oath beneath his breath and spurred the grey in pursuit across the meadow.

Geese scattered honking from beneath the flying hooves. The swineherd, out with the keep's pigs, shaded his eyes against the slant of the sun and watched the horses hurtle past. Ground-nesting plovers broke cover and took hasty wing.

A blackbird chipped at them from a stump.

The golden mare flew lightly over the ground like a faery beast, her tail rippling like combed flax.

Inch by inch the grey gained on her, his stride that slight bit longer, but it was a slow process. The weight he carried was greater and the mare was determined to keep her head in front. He reached her shoulders, his neck outstretched, his shoulders and hindquarters working like pistons and slowly his nose began to draw level with hers.

Judith glanced round, her braids whipping her face, her eyes blazing with exhilaration and met Guyon's laughter, white-edged with triumph.

'Oh no!' she cried, laughing back at him. 'Not this time, my lord!' And as they pounded on towards the edge of the meadow, she leaned as far forward as the saddle would permit, gripping like a monkey, the reins clutched hard on Euraid's neck. From somewhere the mare found an extra thrust of speed and, aided by Judith's forward weight, once more pulled ahead of the

stallion to reach the marshy end of the meadow a length ahead.

Mud splattered up around the mare's forelegs and dappled her glowing coat with brown splotches and freckles as Judith breathlessly wound her down to a halt and hung over her braided mane, laughing with delight.

Guyon reined round beside her, drawing the stallion's head hard into the wide grey chest.

'That was wonderful!' Judith gasped, her eyes shining like two coins, her face flushed and vibrant.

'And you are a madwoman!' he answered, half angry, half amused. 'What if you had fallen off?'

'I would have broken my neck, but I didn't and it was wonderful. And if you are going to scowl at me like that, I'd rather ride on my own anyway!'

'Minx,' he chuckled despite himself.

'Fusspot,' she retorted, poking out her tongue. Guyon's eyebrows shot up. It was the first time

anyone had called him that! Before he could think of a suitable retort, Judith clicked her tongue to the mare and shook the reins, urging her across the stream and towards home. At a safe distance, she looked over her shoulder to where he sat staring after her and grinned impishly.

Guyon steadied his grip on the reins. He was painfully tumescent and very tempted to ride after her and soothe the irritation where it would do him the most good ... and her the least. She is a child, he reiterated to himself. It had been too long an abstinence, that was all. After a moment, the impulse and its source subsided. He walked the stallion meekly in her wake while he consolidated his hold on things rational.

At the keep they had visitors. Tethered in the bailey were a dozen sturdy pack ponies tended by an equally sturdy black-haired youth. He was loosening the pack of the foremost pony and speaking to a frowning, middle-aged man who was unloading what looked like bales of cloth.

The youth lifted his gaze and met Guyon's as

the latter dismounted. Unlatching the last buckle, he spoke a quick word to the servant, and came across the ward to greet them. Judith looked curiously at the lad as he arrived and stood smiling before them. He was as solid and stocky as a young oak tree and darkly Welsh, his eyes onyx black and extravagantly fringed. His wide-planted stance exuded the confidence of a man, the flush in his cheeks the uncertainty of boyhood.

'I'm here with my grandfather,' he said in rapid Welsh. 'We've brought cloth to trade and we need new ponies, and grandfather has other business besides.'

The grooms took the two mud-smirched horses.

'How fares your mother?'

'She had a baby girl two days since,' Rhys said, gaze darting to Judith, obviously wondering how much Welsh she understood. 'She is well and so is the baby ... Eluned is jealous.'

Before Guyon could compose himself to reply, Madoc ap Rhys himself strode out of the

forebuilding and clapped a brown, knotty hand on Rhys's shoulder.

'I thought you'd have finished unloading by now!' he declared, but his hazel eyes were laughing and his tone was indulgent. 'God's greeting, my lord. I see that you've had the good tidings. A fine, healthy babe and blessed with your grandsire's red hair and, to judge from the sound of her lungs, his temper too!' His manner was affable. Rhosyn's liaison with Guyon FitzMiles and the resulting child were useful bonds to future profit as far as he was concerned.

Judith opened her mouth to speak, but changed her mind and compressed her lips instead, not trusting herself.

Guyon invited the merchant into the hall to drink to the infant's health and discuss the business he had brought with him upon the back of a dozen ponies. Belatedly, he remembered to introduce Madoc and Rhys to his wife.

Master Madoc made the proper responses in impeccable Norman French and concealed his

curiosity and surprise behind deep-set lowered lids. The girl who tepidly smiled her duty was not the fey, frightened thing that Rhosyn had led him to expect. Her agate-coloured eyes were cool, her voice clear and firm. Slender, yes, with barely a curve to her name, but possessed of a certain gauche grace and also a certain coldness of manner and, from the quick look she had tossed at Guyon as they entered the forebuilding, it did not take much of his merchant's shrewdness to guess the cause.

At first he and Guyon discussed the merits of the new downland rams that had been introduced to Guyon's herds and the effect they would have on the quality of future wool clips.

'It will make your fleeces whiter and increase the length of the staple. The Flanders looms are crying out for good-quality wool. If God grants me my health, I should be crossing the sea after harvest to see for myself.'

'Rhosyn said you had been unwell.'

Madoc gave a dismissive shrug. 'I lack breath occasionally and my chest gripes, but the bouts are usually when I've done more than I should, or the weather grows too cold. A few more years and Rhys will be old enough to shoulder much of the burden.' He smiled at his grandson, who smiled in return as he plied his meat with a fine, ivory-hilted knife.

Madoc applied himself to his own meal for a while, then turned his shrewd gaze upon Guyon's young wife who had been silent throughout the previous conversation. 'My lady, if you permit, there is a matter I would like to discuss with you.'

Judith inclined her head. 'Master Madoc?'

'I believe you wrote to the widow of Huw ap Sior, offering to her the sables that had come by underhand means into your possession. She has asked me to act for her in this business and gratefully accepts your generosity.'

'It is naught of generosity, it is her rightful due,' Judith said with a grimace. She had put the sables away at the bottom of a chest, wrapped in

fresh canvas, and had thrown the bloodstained coverings on the back of the fire. Even to think of them made her shudder.

Guyon looked at her with surprise and approval. He had not asked her what she had done with the furs, merely assumed that their disappearance marked their disposal.

Madoc too studied her and wondered if she knew her own power. Probably not; she was still very young and her eyes were innocent of all guile. One day she would be formidable. A black leopard and his golden mate. He smiled at the whimsy.

'You will need an escort,' Guyon said. 'Sables these days are worth their weight in blood.'

'Is Rhys yours too?' Judith enquired a trifle acidly when they were alone in their bedchamber.

Madoc and his grandson were asleep on bracken pallets in the hall among the other casual guests and travellers seeking a night's hospitality.

Guyon scratched the sensitive spot just behind

Melyn's ginger ears. The cat purred and kneaded his tunic with ecstatic paws. 'No,' he said, giving his attention to the cat.

'You look alike.'

'Colouring mainly. His father was black of hair and eye. You're not the first to assume my paternity. I wish it were true. He's a fine lad.'

'You have a daughter of his mother's blood,' she said, watching him through her lids.

Guyon's fingers stilled in the cat's thick cream and bronze fur. 'Not one who will know me as more than a shadow,' he said carefully.

'Why did you not tell me about the child before?'

'Where would have been the point? It is not as though she is going to be raised beneath my roof. Rhosyn will give her a Welsh name and raise her to be Welsh.'

'And you have no say in the matter?' she demanded incredulously.

Melyn leaped from his knee and lay down to

wash beside the hearth. 'What should I do?' he growled testily. 'Snatch her from her mother's arms and bring her to Ravenstow and salve my pain at the expense of Rhosyn's hatred and a blood feud with her people?' He rose and, going to the flagon, splashed wine into a cup. 'My say has been said. I once asked Rhosyn to stay with me and she refused. I could no more constrain her to live with me, or give up the child, than I could bear one of those caged birds in my bedchamber.'

'Will you go to her tomorrow?'

He looked at Judith over the rim of the cup. Her expression was guarded, her face milk-pale, the stubborn chin lifted in challenge.

'Probably.'

Judith's fingers were claws. She fought a completely new and unsettling emotion that left her wanting to shriek at him that she was not going to stand for him riding off into the arms of another woman, and longing to scratch out that woman's eyes and call her whore.

Frightened, she turned away and busied herself unlocking the chest that contained the sables. True to his word, Guyon had not taken a maidservant or mistress into his bed, or if he had, it had been discreetly elsewhere without insult or humiliation to herself. Having lived beneath the cruelty of her father's code, she should have been grateful and was both confused and chagrined to find that instead she felt betrayed. Desperately she scrabbled in the chest.

'Why ask me if you do not want to know?' Guyon said and crouched beside her to put his arm lightly across her shoulders. 'I have known Rhosyn for many years and her father since I was your own age. You cannot expect me to sever those ties.'

The package of sables came into her hands. She lifted them and turned. 'I do not, my lord.' She gave him one swift look before lowering her lids. 'It is just that you pat me on the head and give me presents and laugh when I amuse you, but I wonder if you ever see me as more than a

troublesome child with whom you are saddled.' She put the furs on top of the chest and stood up. So did he, a frown between his eyes.

Her gaze was still lowered. After a moment, he tilted up her chin and kissed her gently. 'Come, *Cath fach*, look at me.'

Her lashes flickered up to reveal a shine of tears. She pushed herself away from him. 'Don't patronise me!'

Guyon let his hands fall to his sides and drew a slow breath. Then, carefully, he let it out. 'How should I treat you?' he asked with baffled exasperation. 'You are not a woman, you are not a child. You waver over the line between the two like a drunkard. You laugh and play knucklebones with my nieces and skip around the keep hoyden-wild. You tease me like an experienced coquette, but were I to take up the offer in your smile you'd bolt in terror. In God's name, Judith, make up your mind!' He swallowed down the wine and picked up the flagon.

Her gaze widened. 'Where are you going?' she

said breathlessly.

'To think,' he said with a twisted smile. 'Don't wait up for me.'

The curtain dropped behind him. Melyn stretched in a leisurely fashion, eyed her mistress from golden agate slits and padded to sit expectantly at her feet. Judith scooped her up, buried her cheek in the thick, soft fur and refused to cry.

In the event, Guyon did very little thinking. He took his flagon to the guardroom, sat down, propped his feet on the trestle and with relief, was soon thoroughly absorbed in the convivial, vulgar gossip of his soldiers. It was a long time since he had spent an evening thus and, besides relishing the salty, masculine conversation, he was able to bring himself abreast of current marcher gossip.

Walbert of Seisdon's wife was pregnant yet again. One of the mills at Elford had a broken grindstone. The remains of a butchered deer had been found in the woods on Ravenstow's border

with Wales. Robert de Belleme had brought a grey Flemish stallion to run with his native mares. Robert de Belleme had offered the widow of Ralph de Serigny in marriage to Walter de Lacey.

Guyon's face emerged abruptly from the depths of his cup. 'What?'

'It's true, sire. My sister's married to a Serigny retainer and is a seamstress up at the keep. Regular upset it has caused, I can tell you.'

Guyon wiped his mouth and removed his feet from the trestle. 'You are telling me that Walter de Lacey is to marry Mabel de Serigny?'

'Yes, sire. Not common knowledge yet, but it soon will be.'

'Imagine waking up wi' that in bed beside you.'

'De Lacey won't be too impressed himself!' quipped the joker in their ranks to a response of loud groans.

De Bec leaned over to refill Guyon's cup. 'De Serigny's estates are rich,' he said. 'Mabel's

dowry was huge and Sir Ralph a regular miser.'

Guyon sent him a look that said far more than words, then he drank. 'Do you think he'll invite me to the wedding?' he asked.

'More likely the funeral,' grunted de Bec. 'Mabel's not likely to outlive her second husband, is she?'

Guyon pursed his lips. The Serigny lands and the keep at Thornford lay on Ravenstow's south-west border, separated from Wales by a deep, defensive ditch. There were other keeps in the honour too, forming part of the fortifications ringing Shrewsbury and, coupled with what de Lacey already possessed, it would make him a baron of some considerable standing along the middle marches and increase threefold the threat he posed to Guyon's interests.

One step forward and two steps back, Guyon thought, staring at a puddle of wine on the trestle. 'You'd better tighten up on the patrols,' he said to de Bec. 'I don't want him cutting his new-found teeth on my borders.'

'You reckon he would, sire?'

'Depends on how much backing he gets from de Belleme and how good a grievance he can find to start a war. Knowing our respective overlords, I do not suppose an excuse will be long in presenting itself.' Grimly, he held out his cup to be refilled. 'Do you think de Lacey will celebrate his nuptials with a boar hunt?' Prudently, de Bec forbore to answer.

C_{CHAPTER} 12

Judith stared into the Saracen hand mirror and found nothing that pleased. Her eyes were dark-circled for want of sleep and her complexion was pallid, bedevilled here and there by blemishes. Her women's courses which for the past two years had been an erratic inconvenience seemed to have settled down into less than welcome four-weekly visitations of cramp and messy discomfort. That it was supposedly Eve's curse and thoroughly sanctioned by the church was no comfort; nor was the kind of information imparted by Christen, her fourteen-year-old niece-by-marriage - that they would cease as soon as she conceived.

'I should have been a man!' Judith said rebelliously.

'They don't live as long,' Christen pointed out. 'And they are easy enough to handle once you have learned the knack.'

'If you had known my father, you would not say that.' Judith began combing her hair. 'His remedy for everything was a bellyful of wine and the thrashing of the nearest scapegoat. Has your father ever beaten you?'

'Sometimes,' Christen answered with a dismissive shrug.

'And left bruises that took weeks to fade?'

Christen made a swift gesture. 'That was your father. Guy's not like that and his needs are obvious if you know where to look.'

'Indeed?' Judith arched her brow, wishing the precocious child would leave her alone. Her thoughts skimmed back over the last few hours. Guyon had come late to bed, smelling of drink and had fallen asleep the moment he lay down with never a word in her direction. Probably he assumed she was already asleep and she had done nothing to contradict that assumption, afraid of what he might do in his cups.

The morning saw him in possession of a

splitting headache, a rolling gut and numerous duties to carry out. The cramps in her stomach had made her feel sluggish and sick. They had scarcely exchanged a word. Neither of them had the time or inclination to be civil and his kiss on her cheek before he rode away had been a matter of form. He had looked through her to the waiting grey and the train of pack ponies and had omitted to tug her braid as was his usual wont. *Don't patronise me*, she had said. Perhaps last night he had thought and decided how he should treat her. She blinked very hard. 'Where then do I look?' she challenged the other girl.

Christen eyed her thoughtfully. 'Guyon likes to hunt,' she said after a pause. 'You must twist and turn and evade and, even if he catches you, refuse to give in.'

Judith's wayward eyebrows rose higher.

'And of course,' Christen added with a knowing look at the bed, 'there is always that particular method of persuasion.'

'You know all this from experience?' Judith

snapped.

'Of course not! I had it from Alais de Clare. She used to be his main solace at court until her husband found out.'

'I see,' said Judith, tight-lipped.

'No you don't,' Christen giggled. 'Her husband wanted her to sweeten Prince Henry, not waste her time on a minor fish like Guyon ... only she preferred Guy's looks and got waylaid, so to speak.'

'And she told you, his niece, all about it?' Judith said scathingly.

Christen blushed beneath the scorn in Judith's voice. 'It wasn't like that.'

'If Guyon offered me to another man by way of a bribe, I'd make hell seem cold by comparison!' Judith replied savagely. 'God help me, I'd kill them both before I'd be sold like a slab of meat!' And then she clamped her bottom lip in her teeth, remembering that being sold like a slab of meat was precisely the manner of most marriages.

'But you love Guy, and Alais's husband is fat and getting old and--'

'Do not be so sure about the love!' Judith spat.

Christen stared at her with round eyes. 'I do not think Guyon really wanted Alais,' she said anxiously, afraid that she had roused Judith's jealousy and that it would cause trouble for her uncle. 'It was just that the King was chasing him and Guy literally had his back to the wall. He would not have looked at Alais otherwise.'

Judith firmed her lips. There was no malice in Christen; she meant well enough, but her perception was a trifle clouded. However, she had given Judith pause for thought here. There were lessons to be learned, both from Christen and this Alais de Clare who had been bartered by her husband for the favour of a prince. Subtle persuasion. The use of her body as weapon and defence. It had not occurred to her to think in those terms before and, now that it did, she required leisure to digest the notion. She looked

covertly at Christen, some of her irritation waning. The girl was only just fourteen, but already she had a ready command of the art that Judith was suddenly aware of lacking.

Subtlety. The chestnut eyebrows were plucked, but only to remove the straggling hairs, and the well-defined, strong lines went unaffected. Her hair was plaited in one shining, heavy braid threaded with gold ribbon and her gown was of a flattering holly-green wool, moulded to display her figure to its best advantage and embellished only by a girdle of silk braid. She looked exquisite with very little effort and Judith knew how those blue-green eyes could angle across the hall, hiding a wealth of promise and refusal behind the down-swept lashes.

It was not an area Judith had previously dared consider, but perhaps in the light of last night's conversation, she ought to do so. Did she want to attract Guyon's notice in that sense? That was something else to be pondered at leisure rather than panicking in his presence. He was

susceptible to the persuasions of the bed. She coloured and, over her shoulder, eyed the object with disfavour, wondering how one acquired such skills. Through practice, she supposed, and shuddered at the thought, remembering two of the keep dogs copulating in the hall and the bawdy shouts of the men egging them on. She knew all the words for what male and female did together, precious few of them mentioned in the Bible, and was reluctant to join the circus. If only she could see the thing as power, not a humiliating subjugation.

'Perhaps you are right,' Judith conceded, frowning. 'Honesty may be the best policy, but a crust slips down better if it is spread with honey first ... I think I have a great deal to learn.' She put the comb down and stood up. 'For the moment, I've to instruct the cook and see about employing a new seamstress and I need to check the spice cabinet and fabric chests. Master Madoc promised to fulfil any commissions I had for him ... and then,' she added, drawing a deep breath, 'I will consider the matter of subtlety.'

Christen smiled in return without knowing why and decided in future to keep her mouth firmly closed.

In her own chamber, Alicia shook out the drab-coloured gown she had worn in the first weeks of her widowhood. A linen bag of dried lavender and rose leaves fell from its folds along with severe evidence of moths. She clicked her tongue and tossed the garment on the bed.

'Not taking it, my lady?' enquired Agnes, reaching to inspect the damage.

Alicia shook her head and regarded the half-packed baggage chest. She had gowns enough for her retirement upon her dower manor, indeed too many. Her estates, although prosperous, were a backwater compared to the border violence of her former husband's holdings. At least she could be alone with her unseemly hunger.

'What about this belt, my lady. Shall I put ... ?' Agnes stopped and bobbed a curtsy.

Alicia turned round and her heart began to drum to a battle beat.

Miles le Gallois studied the travelling chests, open to reveal their neatly packed contents - clothes, cups, vials, combs and embroidery. His eyes ranged over the strewn bed and the bare clothing pole, then returned to Alicia. 'If it is on account of me,' he said, 'there is no need. I am leaving tomorrow.'

Alicia mutely shook her head.

'I need to talk to you alone,' he said and as she answered him with stricken eyes, added, 'you may tie me up if you wish, but I swear on my honour not to harm you.'

Alicia carefully folded the veil she had been holding and, after a hesitation, drew a deep breath and gestured Agnes to leave. The maid's mouth thinned, but she dropped a curtsy and retreated beyond the thick woollen curtain.

Miles sat down on the bed and picked up the veil that Alicia had so painstakingly folded. 'Last

time we were alone I acted like a green youth in rut,' he said. 'I have come to apologise if you will accept.'

'There is no need of apology,' she said in a low voice, 'unless it be mine.'

'Alicia, look at me.'

Wearily she raised her lids. Her eyes were the colour of twilight and storms and full of vulnerability.

'Do you think that it has gone unnoticed? For the sake of our children, we must come at least to a truce.'

'Why do you think I am going to my dower lands?' she replied.

'Because you are running away?'

Her mouth twisted. 'Not for the reasons you think.'

Miles unfolded the veil. It was made of fragile gauze, the embroidery edging it skilfully worked in gold thread. 'You will miss her,' he said gently.

'She has her own life to live and will the sooner grow into a woman without me for a leaning post. In time I would become the child. Indeed, it has begun already. She shuts me from her thoughts and she is very strong willed.'

'Not a whit like her father, is she?' he mused.

There was a hesitation that made him look up. Alicia's face had blanched. Then she rallied, smiled and drew a shaky breath. 'I wouldn't say that.' She turned her face into the shadows. 'There are many similarities.'

Something rang false. Memory searched and pieced disjointed fragments. 'Who is he?' Miles asked.

He saw the silent vibration of her shoulders. 'That is my own affair,' she answered in a choked voice.

'And mine too since it will touch the blood of my grandchildren.' He rose and went to her and turned her to face him.

'And if I say a baseborn groom or a passing

pedlar?' she challenged.

'If that were true, you'd not have denied me the day of the boar hunt.'

Alicia shook beneath his light touch, knowing what she risked if she told him the truth.

'Does he still live?'

'Yes.'

'Does he know?'

'No,' she said. 'To him it was a night of pleasure, a comfort along the road to be forgotten in the dawn.'

'And to you?' He watched her with checked tension.

She laughed at some private bitterness. 'Expedient. When your cow fails to calf, get a different bull to service her.'

Miles released her and, folding his arms, frowned.

'Not pretty, is it?' she said. 'I cuckolded my

husband in his own keep and deceived him with my lover's child. You see too much, my lord, or perhaps I have just grown careless of late.'

'I see too much,' he said, smiling painfully, 'because I want you.'

'You don't know me.'

'Well enough to see too clearly.' He tried to decide from her expression the approach he should take. 'I've known you for a long time, ever since you were Judith's age and defying your father's will. And in the years since then, I've watched you from a distance grow and change.'

'And wanted me?' she challenged.

Miles saw the trap yawning at his feet and skirted it deftly. 'I had Christen,' he said. 'There was no space in me to want another woman. You know that.'

Some of the hostility left her eyes, but she remained strongly cautious.

Miles shrugged. 'It is two years since I lost her.'

Sometimes it seems as close as yesterday. Sometimes the loneliness rides me so hard I think I will go mad. I have taken women to my bed so that I do not have to sleep alone, but there is no lasting solace in that. What I need is another wife and, if I can get a dispensation, your consent.'

Alicia stared at him, dumbfounded. 'It is impossible!' she said huskily.

'The dispensation or your consent? Rannulf Flambard will perform any miracle for the right amount of gold and I will not take no for an answer from you ... not without excellent reasons.'

Alicia sat down. 'I could give you them,' she said shakily.

Miles persisted. For every protest that she made, he had an answer ready, a reasonable solution. He made a nonsense of her fears ... all but one. She told him the name of Judith's father.

Miles drew breath, held it, stared at her in dawning amazement, and very slowly exhaled.

She saw his mind make that final, vital connection, saw his eyes flicker.

'Yes,' she said harshly. 'He was fourteen years old and I was twenty-eight, and in one night he taught me everything that Maurice did not have the imagination to know.'

'Sweet Christ and his mother,' Miles swore, staring at her while he tried to assimilate what she had just told him.

She watched his face, waiting for the revulsion, but it did not come. It was a blank mask behind which any thought could have lurked. She covered her face and turned away.

After a moment, Miles mustered his wits. She was trembling so hard that he thought her flesh would shiver free of her bones. He laid a firm hand on her shoulder. 'It makes no difference to me,' he said finally. 'It is in the past and, knowing him, even at fourteen he was no innocent to be seduced unless he so wished.'

Alicia swallowed, remembering how it had

been. She with a plan half formed, afraid to dare, and he with his mind already made up.

'So you will marry me?'

Alicia removed her hands tentatively from her face and looked at him. 'How can you say it makes no difference? I set out deliberately to cheat my husband. I bedded with a boy whose voice had barely broken, I--'

'You flay yourself with guilt,' he interrupted, capturing her hands in his. 'I do not doubt you. The Welsh have a saying: *Oer yw'r cariad a ddiffydd ar un chwa o wynt*. Cold is the love that is put out by one gust of wind. I have taken women to my bed for the comfort and the pleasure they offer, never out of forced desperation. I account your sin the lesser.'

Alicia's mouth trembled with a smile. 'You are very persistent, my lord.'

'It's the mix of Welsh and Norman blood,' he agreed cheerfully.

She shook her head and sniffed. 'I cannot give

you an answer. I am so confused that I do not know my head from my heels.'

He put out his hand as if to touch her, but let it drop again to his side, aware of how much was at stake. It was like stalking a deer. Softly, slowly and no sudden moves. 'Perhaps you should remove to your dower lands,' he said thoughtfully. 'It will give you time to think.'

Alicia stepped away from his disturbing proximity. It was obvious that his own mind was made up. She had shown him the black secret lurking at the bottom of her soul and he had dismissed it as of no consequence, still valuing her enough to offer her marriage. It was the first time she had felt her worth to be above that of a mere chattel. A pity it was thirty years too late.

'I hazard you do not often lose an argument,' she said.

'It depends on the subject.' He gestured. 'I could escort you home if you wish it. I have business with Hugh of Chester, but I could take you when I return, say in four days' time'

'And if I say no?' Her tone was sharp, for she received the distinct impression that she was being manipulated in the direction he desired her to go.

'I'll have to think of something else, won't I?' he replied, still smiling.

C_{CHAPTER} 13

It was fortunate for Guyon that the journey into Wales proved uneventful, for he felt as though his brains had swollen to twice their size and were thumping the cage of his skull in a vigorous attempt to escape. It was a long, long time since he had fallen victim to an overindulgence of wine. Since quitting the court, he had held to sobriety and his capacity to drink had thus diminished.

He knew he had not been considerate of Judith, but her sulky expression, her frown as he mounted up to ride out and his own malaise had not lent him the inclination to tug her braid or smile and bear with her. The guilt and the knowledge that he would have to make amends and somehow smooth their differences when he returned only made his headache worse, while his stomach churned like a dyer's vat.

By the time they reached the hafod it was full noon, the sun shimmering the men's mail to fish scales of light, dazzling the eye. Madoc, in his

heavy woollen gown with coney trim was as red as clay, sweat dribbling down his face so that he looked as if he were melting.

Guyon tethered his grey to a post in the yard and then, his skull feeling as if it would split asunder, removed his helm and followed Madoc over the threshold.

Eluned ran to her grandfather and embraced him with enthusiasm. Tossing back her silky black hair, she saw Guyon and went to him. 'Mam's had the baby,' she announced. Her eyes, bright hazel like Rhosyn's, were anxious. 'It's a girl.' She clung tightly to his arm.

'I know, *anwylyd*.' He kissed the top of her head.

The midwife paused in ladling a cup of broth into a wooden bowl and looked at Guyon. 'Birth went easy enough,' she said to him with a curt nod. 'Babe's small, but she'll thrive.'

'May I see them?' he asked in Welsh, his tone deferential, for one did not trifle with the great respect in which these women were held. Other

than the will of God, it was upon their skill that the life of a mother and child often depended.

'Take this in to her, lord,' she said, giving him the cup of broth. 'But do not be too long; she is tired.'

Eluned made to follow, but her grandfather caught her back and asked her to find him a drink.

Guyon pushed aside the curtain that screened Rhosyn's bed from the main room, and put down the bowl of broth on the coffer beside it. His movement stirred the air and Rhosyn raised her lids. For a moment she thought she was dreaming or that she had contracted the deadly childbed fever and was hallucinating. Then she rallied herself because Guyon was too travel worn and sweat-streaked to be an illusion. He was watching her with dark, pensive eyes as if he did not know how she would receive him. She sat up and softly spoke his name.

'Beloved.' He knelt beside her and took her hands in his.

He was wearing his mail shirt, the rivets glistening a sullen grey in the dim light. His business over the border this time was official.

'I am glad you have come,' she said and was annoyed by the betraying wobble in her voice.

'Did you doubt I would?'

'There was no obligation on you to do so.'

'No obligation?'

She watched his gaze turn to the wooden crib at the bedside and the swaddled scrap of life it contained and she bit her lip, afraid, knowing she did not have the strength to fight him if he chose to make of his daughter a battleground.

Oblivious, the baby slept, a fluff of red-gold hair peeping from beneath its swaddling cap.

'There will always be an obligation, *carriad*.'

'Guy ...'

'No,' he said softly, touching the baby's fledgling fuzz before giving Rhosyn a look filled with pain. 'I

am as leashed to your bidding as that hound out there ... Just don't kick me out of the door without giving me a chance. Does the little one have a name?'

Rhosyn shook her head.

'Permit me?'

'I ... I do not know.'

He took her hand. 'Why do I receive the impression that you do not trust me?'

'Because I don't. Naming is a kind of possession for life.'

'What else am I ever likely to have of her, Rhos? A distant glimpse from a tower top. A snatched meeting here and there. From babe to child to woman in the blink of an eye. She is yours. I accept that, but at least grant me the grace of her naming.'

'Your way with words has always been your deadliest weapon,' Rhosyn accused him, shaking her head, her eyes brilliant with unshed tears.

'Very well, I grant you that grace. Do not abuse it.'

'Not Hegelina or Aiglentine then,' he agreed incorrigibly, but kissed her tenderly, almost but not quite with reverence, before he leaned over the cradle again to look at his sleeping daughter.

'Have you told your wife?' Rhosyn wiped her eyes on her shift.

'Judith knows,' he said without inflection.

'And is not best pleased?'

He rubbed his aching forehead. 'She's developing a sense of possession,' he said ruefully, 'and sometimes it is uncomfortable.'

'I read her letter to Huw's wife. They were not the words of a child. Children grow up, especially at that age. It may be that suddenly you have a woman on your hands.'

His mouth twisted. 'It would still be rape,' he said laconically. 'Not that much of a woman.'

'Even so, bear it in mind, Guy,' she said and then was silent, drinking her broth before it went

cold.

'Heulwen,' he said after a time. 'What do you think?'

She put down the cup, looking surprised. 'Heulwen?'

'I promised no Norman monstrosities.'

'I thought you would choose Christen, for your mother.'

'I already have a flighty niece to bear that name. No, let her be called for my Welsh grandmother, Heulwen uerch Owain. Besides, she has the colouring to suit the name.'

Rhosyn cocked her head, considered, and then slowly smiled. 'Yes,' she said softly, 'I approve, Guy. I approve very much.'

The midwife appeared to shoo him out of the room and Madoc was waiting to usher him to the table, still short of wind but a better colour and full of self-satisfied bonhomie. Eluned clamoured for his attention and he gave it with half a mind and

smiled at Madoc with another portion, locking away what was left until it could be reviewed without tearing the fabric of his soul. Heulwen. Sunshine. Clouds across his vision.

Travelling home, he would have been at Ravenstow's gates by compline had not Arian cast a shoe and begun to limp. The fine weather had broken up, the innocent, fluffy clouds of early morning displaced by a seething mass of charcoal grey, laden with rain.

'Best rest up for the night, my lord,' said Eric. 'There's a village not far and there's bound to be a farrier.'

Guyon blinked through the downpour. The ground beneath his feet was a brown tapestry of mud and puddles and his boots and chausses had long since become saturated. Despite it being summer, he felt chilled to the bone. Beyond the lush June-green of the trees and against the lowering sky, a church tower reared through the rain. Further away, dominating its knoll, crouched the timber keep formerly belonging to Ralph of

Serigny, but now the property by marriage of Walter de Lacey.

'You reckon it safe?' Guyon said wryly to his captain and slid the wet reins through his fingers, eyes half closed against the rain.

'No, we'll bide at the alehouse if they have one while the farrier sees to Arian, then we'll be on our way. I'd rather ride whole into Ravenstow than carved into joints and stuffed into my saddlebags.'

Eric grimaced. The Chester road at night in this deluge was not a heartening prospect, but his lord was right. They were too close to the Serigny keep at Thornford for comfort and Walter de Lacey, if he discovered their proximity, would not baulk at murder.

The village proved substantial enough to own not only a smithy, but a good-sized alehouse and while Arian was shod, Guyon and his men repaired to the latter to fortify themselves for the damp miles remaining.

The floor of the main room was covered in a thick layer of rushes upon which were set two well-scrubbed long trestles. Rush dips gave light of a kind and a fire burned cleanly in the hearth. The ale-wife was a florid, handsome woman of middle years whose voice bore a strong Gwynedd lilt. Her husband, bluffly English by contrast, sent their son outside to tend the horses.

The only other customers were a young couple seated unobtrusively in the darkest corner of the room, quietly attending their meal. The girl raised her head at their entrance and stared at the armed men with wide, frightened eyes. She had fragile bones and delicate gauzy colouring. Her husband was a plain, wide-shouldered young man, somewhere between twenty and Guyon's own age. He looked warily at the newcomers and put his left hand protectively on top of the girl's. His right stayed loose, within easy reach of the long knife at his belt.

Guyon, after one startled glance at the girl's luminous beauty, ignored the couple and sat

down. Water dripped from his garments and soaked into the rushes. Eric gingerly eased himself down beside his lord and rubbed his aching knees.

The woman brought them bowls of mutton stew, fairly fresh wheaten loaves and pitchers of cider and ale, her manner deferential but briskly efficient. 'Foul night to be travelling, sire,' she addressed Guyon. 'You can bed down here if you've a mind to stay.'

He thanked her and shook his head. 'You've a new lord over at Thornford and I'd as lief not encounter him.'

'Worse for business than the plague!' complained the landlord, adding a bowl of honey cakes to the table. 'Started already it has and Sir Ralph barely in his grave. He could be a bastard, but he was so mean that it was good for business. Folks would come here rather than claim a night of hospitality up at the keep, what with him and mad Mabel for hosts.'

'Now folk don't come at all,' his wife sniffed. 'Or

if they do, they're like yourselves, here and gone for fear of Lord Walter and his routiers.' She hitched her bosom and stalked away.

Guyon and Eric exchanged glances. The couple in the corner finished eating and went out into the deluge, the man's arm curved around the girl's narrow shoulders.

One of Guyon's men gave an appreciative whistle. 'Pretty lass,' he said.

'Her father's one of the grooms at the keep,' the landlord volunteered, helping himself to a mug of cider, one eye cocked for the reappearance of his wife. 'The lad's a huntsman there, or he was. Had an argument with the new lord and didn't see fit to stay beyond packing his belongings. He's a proud 'un, young Brand, and his wife's a rare beauty as you all saw. Sir Ralph was never one for the women. Too old and not enough steel in his sword to bother getting it out of the scabbard, but Lord Walter ...' He paused for effect and a gulp of cider and wiped his hand across his mouth. 'Nothing in skirts is safe from his pursuit.

Best game-keeper he'd got, that young man. New lord's an idiot if you ask me to throw away talent like that for lust. Mind you, I can see why he was tempted. I'd ...' He stopped, hastily put down his mug beside Eric's arm and stepped away from the trestle, pretending bustle as his wife returned, her mouth puckered, although not for a kiss.

Eric chuckled into his moustache. Guyon pushed his bowl aside and finished his ale, hiding his own smile behind his mug. 'I'm away to the smithy,' he announced, biting his lip to keep a straight face as their host grimaced like a goblin behind his wife's back. 'The farrier should have finished with Arian by now.'

'I'll come with you,' said Eric. 'There's safety in numbers in this neck of the woods.'

Guyon threw him an amused look, saw that his shield-bearer was grimly serious, and stopped smiling.

'We're in need of a huntsman at Ravenstow,' Guyon said thoughtfully as they crossed the street, which was deserted in the rainy evening. 'I

haven't properly replaced Rannulf yet. Perhaps I should go after the lad and offer him employment.' He flicked a mischievous glance at Eric and was not disappointed.

'You are courting danger if you do, my lord,' Eric warned. 'You heard what the landlord said. Sir Walter won't let them go, you know that. Don't you think you've chanced enough just lately?'

'And not so much as a boar in sight,' Guyon teased as they reached the smithy.

Eric inhaled to remonstrate, but stopped before the damage was done. Having been Guyon's marshal for fifteen years, he was all too aware that his lord could be a devil incarnate when the mood was upon him: witness that escapade with the sheep and the silver. Arguing with him only made him the more determined to follow his course. Hold to silence, and sense might just prevail.

Guyon glanced along his shoulder at Eric, almost laughing to see the poor man choking on

words he was longing to utter. 'Surely I am not so unamenable to reason,' he jested and picked up Arian's forehoof to examine the new shoe.

'My lord, you know you are not,' Eric said, not in the least mollified.

The stallion's coat steamed gently as it dried in the heat from the forge, the dapple reddened to a flickering roan. Guyon put down the hoof and, with a nod to the farrier, paid him the halfpenny fee. In the act of putting the coin in his pouch, the man stopped, his gaze darting into the gathering twilight.

Eric swung round, right hand going to his hilt. Hand on the bridle, Guyon stiffened. Hooves thudded on the dirt road and harnesses jingled. A man swore bawdily in Flemish and a woman cried out. Guyon spoke quickly to the farrier and, taking the reins, led Arian out of the enclosure and into the village street. At the crossroads twenty yards away a group of mounted, mailed Flemings had surrounded the young couple from the alehouse and were refusing to let them pass.

'I'm a free man,' Guyon heard the young huntsman say hotly in accented French. 'You've no right to bar my path.'

'Go on then, you're free!' laughed one of the men, teeth flashing. 'We've no quarrel with you that your little wife won't be able to mend. Lord Walter wants her back.'

'On her back!' corrected someone with a snigger.

'He has no right,' the young man replied, guarding his wife with his body. 'We are free to leave as we choose.'

'You're free to die,' replied the spokesman. Suddenly a blade sparkled. The girl screamed as a Fleming groped for her bridle. Her husband felt for the dagger at his belt, but subsided in mid-motion to duck beneath the murderous sweep of the drawn sword.

'Let them pass,' commanded Guyon, his own sword free and confidently held, his knees commanding Arian to thrust forward between the

couple and their tormentors.

The Fleming measured Guyon and the older man behind. Two of them to their nine and only the foremost mounted, but the grey was solidly boned, the man astride exuded the confidence of ability and they were probably not alone. 'Don't meddle in what's not your business,' he growled.

'Sound advice,' Guyon retorted. 'Apply it to yourselves and let them pass.' A swift glance revealed that the mercenaries were spreading out to encircle himself and Eric. Strained ears caught the sound of a shout from the alehouse end of the street.

The Fleming wasted no more time on words, but lunged at Guyon, whose arm was jarred to the shoulder as he warded the vicious blow, not with the safety of his shield but the blade of his own sword. Bluish-white the sparks glanced off, and he realised grimly that his assailant was left-handed. A man was taught from the cradle to crouch behind the shield worn on his left arm, to let it take the blows and to counter-strike with his

sword in his right. Sword to sword was a nightmare. You parried and risked snapping the blade, or you missed the parry and you died.

Behind him, Eric gasped as a blow caught him beneath his guard, splitting his mail but not cutting through the thick quilting of his gambeson. The girl was crying. Someone snatched the dagger from her husband's hand and pinioned his struggling arms like a coney prepared for the table.

Guyon thrust his shield against a sword blow on his left and felt the blade score and slide off the toughened lime-wood. With his knees he commanded the stallion to pivot and lunge against the mount of the left-handed Fleming, their leader, and brought his sword across, unexpectedly hard and low. It almost worked, but the mercenary was too experienced and at the last moment intercepted the move with a slicing sidelong slash. Guyon twisted and parried. Pain seared his thigh as the Fleming's blade bit flesh. He locked his wrist against the pommel,

sweeping the other sword sideways, changed his grip, and slashed. The Fleming grunted, lost his grip on the reins, and hunched over his saddle.

Guyon swung Arian. The end of a flail grazed his hair. He slammed his shield into the backswing, kned Arian forward, and was rewarded by the shriek of someone unexpectedly unhorsed.

'Ledworth!'

Guyon heard with relief the rallying cry of his own men.

'A moi!' he bellowed, hacking about him. Arian lashed out, and another horse neighed high and shrill with pain. The leader of the Flemings toppled from his saddle, hit the churned mud, shuddered and was still. His second in command looked around, saw that they were now outnumbered and, with panic in his voice, yelled the order to retreat.

A rearguard attempt to bring the huntsman and his wife away with them was aborted as Guyon

spurred Arian between their horse and that of the Fleming tugging on its bridle. The sword chopped downwards, cleaving leather, flesh and bone. The mercenary shrieked as he was parted from three of his fingers. Guyon grasped the gelding's broken reins and pulled the horse hard about. One of his men took the bridle from him and passed the couple through to safety.

Guyon turned Arian around. The horse was bleeding freely from several slashes on his neck and forequarters and was jittery, still spoiling for battle, so that Guyon was forced to stay in the saddle. There was blood running down his leg. It would have to wait. Undoubtedly reinforcements would be summoned from Thornford and set on their trail.

The young huntsman had taken control of their mount and was busily knotting the reins to make them whole again. 'There is no way we can thank you enough, my lord,' he said to Guyon. 'We owe you our lives.'

Guyon smiled bleakly. 'Walter de Lacey is no

friend of mine. You owe me nothing. It was a pleasure. I'd advise you to be on your way as soon as you can, though. He tends to nurture grudges.'

'You do not need to tell me that, sire!' the young man snorted. 'I'm a free man and I'll not work for the likes of him. Lord Ralph was mean and sour, but he'd not lay about him with a whip for the pure pleasure of it, nor take a girl to his bed if she were not willing!'

Guyon shifted his gaze to the delicate blonde young woman watching them anxiously. Probably she was about Judith's age but she looked no more than twelve, just the kind that de Lacey enjoyed. 'Where are you and your wife bound?'

'I have relatives in Chester, my lord. They will take us in while I find work. I thought I would seek employment with Earl Hugh.'

'There is work nearer to hand at Ravenstow if you desire it. I've been a huntsman short since last winter. Make up your mind as we ride,' Guyon offered. 'Ravenstow is on your road anyway and

you would do well to take advantage of an armed escort off Serigny lands. If you decide against staying, I'll recommend you to Earl Hugh. He's a personal friend.'

The young man considered him from beneath a tumble of wet brown curls. Guyon FitzMiles was a huntsman short because Sir Walter had almost beheaded the man in a fit of fury during a hunt to honour the marriage of Ravenstow's heiress, or so the rumour went. Something about the theft of a horse and a broken boar spear. 'Thank you, my lord,' he replied, turning to his horse. 'We are grateful.'

C HAPTER 14

Judith ceased combing her hair and regarded her mother across the space that separated them. 'I thought you might,' she said without surprise.

It was not quite the response Alicia had expected to her announcement that she was going to her dower lands as soon as Guyon's father returned from his business with Hugh of Chester to escort her there. She had come to her daughter's room prepared for tears and pleading and was completely thrown by Judith's aplomb.

'I do not want you to think that I am discontented here with you and Guyon, but you have your own life to live ... and I have mine.' She wondered if she should test that aplomb by telling her daughter what else she intended besides.

Judith put down the comb, went to her mother and wordlessly hugged her. They were much of a height now, almost eye to eye, for Judith had grown since the early spring and had put flesh on

her bones.

Alicia returned the embrace. 'Of course, I will visit you often and you will know where to find me should the need arise,' she said, feeling guilty, but then guilt was nothing new and was about to be consolidated.

'You will always be welcome, you know that!' Judith answered, kissing her. 'But why do you speak as if you intend your stay to be permanent?'

'Because I do.'

Judith lifted her head from Alicia's shoulder, her eyes filled with shock and anxiety. 'Is there something wrong? Something that I or Guyon can do?'

Alicia stroked Judith's shining tawny hair. 'Understand when the time comes,' she said pensively, 'and do not judge me too harshly.'

'Mama?' Judith looked up at her, beginning to feel worried. Her mother would not meet her gaze and her lids were red-rimmed as they so often

were these days.

Beside the fire, Melyn gave a leisurely stretch, then stalked past the two women to the door. Alicia sniffed and gained control of her precarious emotions. Mother and child. She could sense the reversal.

Judith was staring at the cat and the entrance, her tension palpable.

'What's the matter?' Alicia said.

The curtain parted and Guyon entered the room.

'Mother of God!' exclaimed Alicia because water was dripping from every portion of him and puddling in the rushes. Leaving her daughter to deal with him, she hastened from the room to see that the fire was built up in the hall and dry blankets provided for the men.

Guyon squelched to the fire. His gait was far from its customary lithe prow, Judith noticed. Indeed, he was limping badly.

'What's wrong with your leg?' Judith hurried to his side.

He unfastened his sodden cloak and handed it to her. 'A sword arm that was too slow,' he answered wearily.

'You were attacked?' she said, her eyes flicking over his soaked chausses and the rain-washed streaks of blood channelling down them.

'Clever girl.' His tone was sarcastic. 'Have you any wine?'

Judith fetched the flagon, a small vial of aqua vitae and two cups. 'Do you want a bath?' she asked cautiously.

'Does it look like it? God's death, we nearly drowned at Elmford. Our mounts were in the river belly-deep and the current was like a wild horse.' He took the wine from her and swallowed it down, coughing a little at the strength of the aqua vitae. His face was grey.

She put her own cup down, fetched a linen towel and knelt to unbuckle his swordbelt. 'What

happened?'

The weight of the belt slid from his hips into her hands and he sighed with relief. Flatly he told her of their encounter with the Flemings, its reasons and its likely consequences.

'It is true then. I thought it was just rumour that de Lacey was going to marry Mabel.' Judith disposed of the belt and returned to help him off with the hauberk. 'Mama says that she's not really mad. Her mouth's deformed and what she says comes out as gibberish unless you know her well.'

'I doubt it will trouble her new husband for long.' Guyon put down his cup so that she could draw the hauberk over his head.

Judith frowned, for he was shivering violently. Her knuckles touched his throat as she drew the garment over his head. His skin was cold and clammy to the touch. 'I'd better look at your leg,' she said and began to unlace his gambeson.

'One of the men bound it for me,' he said with a shrug. 'Let be, Judith. I'm so tired I could fall

asleep on my feet. The last thing I need is you poking at me with your tortures and nostrums.'

'Nevertheless you will drink what I give you.' She threw him a stern look from beneath her brows.

The faintest twist of humour curled his mouth. 'Oh God,' he said. 'What have I ever done to deserve this?'

'You married me,' she retorted, her own lips curving for an instant from their severity before she took the wet gambeson from him and the clinging damp linen shirt he wore beneath it.

Guyon eyed Judith, his vision throbbing to the lead weight pressing down on top of his head, sensing a change in her but unable to fathom what or where. She returned with a sheepskin bed covering and flung it around his shoulders then turned away to mix a brew composed of poppy and feverfew in wine.

'So I did,' he said softly and bent to remove his boots. The room swam before his eyes. He reached to brace himself against the clothing

chest and missed.

Judith spun round and, with a cry of consternation, ran to him. She saw a brighter red stain spreading on his chausses and his breath was coming in harsh, effortful gasps. He was on his knees. She knelt down and unlaced his chausses.

'Lie down,' she commanded.

'I don't--'

'Lie down!' she snarled and pushed him. Guyon subsided as though she had struck him with a mace and not the flat of her hand.

Efficiently she stripped him, her lips tightening at sight of the ineptly bound linen strip, newly wet and red. 'How long have you been riding with this?'

'Five ... six hours,' he muttered from between clenched teeth.

'You fool!' She left him to fetch a wad of clean linen which she folded into a pad and pressed

hard to the leaking edges of the wound.

'No choice, not with Walter de Lacey and his cohorts howling for my blood.'

'It looks as if they got it!' she snapped, 'and perhaps your life with it.'

'I've taken worse.' He tried to smile and failed.

'I doubt it.' She leaned on the pad. 'You've lost more blood than a stuck pig, to look at you.'

'I knew it would come back to boars in the end,' he said and lapsed into semi-consciousness.

Judith was almost panicked into running for her mother.

Almost, but not quite. There was nothing Alicia could do that she could not and he was her charge. 'So much for subtlety,' she said shakily, looking down at her wet, bloodied bedrobe and smeared hands. Seeing that the bleeding had eased she left him in order to fetch the powdered comfrey root and fresh bandages, and sent her maid Helgund for a bowl of mouldy bread.

Returning to him, she shook the comfrey root into the wound, wondering with grim laughter how the fair Alais de Clare would have coped with such a situation. And the humour died as she wondered what Rhosyn ferch Madoc, mother of his child, would have done.

The maid returned with the bread and was told to fetch sheets and blankets. Judith braided her hair, pinned it out of the way and set to work with needle and thread. The Fleming's sword had caught Guyon's inner thigh where the hauberk was slit to allow for riding and there was no mail to protect his flesh. It was not a long wound, but it had pierced deep and, had it been two inches higher, she would not have needed to worry about the matter of subtlety, and neither would he. Indeed, as she worked, the hysterical urge to giggle almost overcame her again, for kneeling between his legs she had a very intimate eyeful of what had previously so terrified her. Not so daunting now for the simple reason that she had control. If she wanted, she could leave him to bleed to death. It was a sobering thought. She

swallowed her sense of the ridiculous and attended single-mindedly to her purpose.

Having dressed the main wound as best she could, for it was in a difficult position to bind properly, she examined him for signs of other injury.

Surprisingly, for a man so dark, Guyon was not hirsute; there was just a ridge of hair running from the centre of his breastbone down into the thick bush at his groin and she was able to scrutinise his flesh closely. It was something she had never done before, preferring to dwell in deliberate ignorance and he, sensing her fear and awkwardness, had seldom stripped naked in front of her.

It had never occurred to her to think of a man's body being attractive. A source of pain and brutalisation, so her previous experience said. Now, almost in wonder, she traced with light fingers a thin white line scoring one muscular pectoral and one higher up, just grazing his jawbone.

Guyon groaned and opened his eyes. Judith sucked a sharp breath between her teeth and quickly withdrew her hand.

'*Cath fach*,' he said weakly and found a smile from somewhere; this time his tone was not patronising. 'How bad is it?'

She could see his pulse racing in his throat and the sweat sheening its hollow. 'Bad enough. You've lost so much blood that there's scarcely a drop left in your body and you're quite likely to develop wound fever. There were flakes of rust in the cut. I've packed it with mouldy bread, but it's hard to bind. I can't move you for fear that you'll open it again. You are going to be uncomfortable for no small time ... if you live ... and no, I am not japing with you. You had best prepare your soul.'

'What kind of comfort is that?' he said, tried to laugh and desisted, eyes squeezing closed.

Judith used the moment to scrub her face with her sleeve, refusing to be seen in tears. 'The only kind you'll get from me!' she snapped. 'And don't

go to sleep. You've to drink this first.'

He lifted his lids, then with an effort widened them at the sight of the stone pitcher full to the brim and the cup she was filling from its bounty.

'All of it,' she said with a certain satisfaction.

'God's death, you evil wench. Robert de Belleme does not have sole monopoly on torture after all. What is it?'

'Boiled water, a sprinkling of salt and three spoonfuls of honey. It is to make up for the blood you've lost.'

'I'll be sick,' he said faintly.

Judith propped him up on the bolster and pillows fetched by the maid and rammed the cup under his nose. 'Drink it!' she commanded in a voice of steel that gave no indication that her knees had turned to jelly.

Something like surprise flickered across his pallor as he looked at her. 'I'm not worth it, *Cathfach*,' he said huskily.

'You are when I think of the alternative,' she answered, and lowered her lids over betraying tears.

As Judith had predicted, the wound fever struck and sent Guyon's temperature soaring out of bounds and with it his grip on reality. Steadfastly she did what she could to bring the fever down, Alicia giving her aid and relief between times.

During one of his lucid periods they moved him to the bed and Judith forced him to drink ox-blood broth in an effort to give his body the strength to fight back. He was promptly sick and she went away and wept in a corner, then returned and gave him more of the salt and honey water.

Once, his eyes glittering like black glass, he looked through her and spoke in Welsh as if holding a conversation. 'It would still be rape. Not that much of a woman.' And another time, 'She's developing a sense of possession and it's becoming uncomfortable.'

Bouts of raving showed her facets of his life that he had previously hidden from her. His

relationship with Rhosyn, twisting like the current of the Wye, bitter-sweet as gall and honey. Once he laughed and called her Alais and made a suggestion that both flustered her and filled her with curiosity. She had not known that such a position was possible. During an occasional lucid spell, he would recognise her for her own self. *Cath fach*, he would say and smile ruefully at his own febrile weakness. If she had ever desired revenge for his treating her like a child, she had it now and the taste of it was sour as vinegar.

After the second night, his condition worsened. Miles rode in at dawn to find his eldest granddaughter gulping tears and clinging to her mother for comfort and the priest bending over Guyon's fever-ravaged body, administering the last rites. Judith, her face waxen, stood opposite Father Jerome, her hands clenched upon the cloth with which she had been wiping Guyon down in a vain attempt to lower the raging of his blood.

Miles came to the bed and gazed down upon

his son's fight for life as he had gazed down on his wife's. Guyon's hair was lank with sweat, his cheekbones like blades with blue hollows beneath.

Miles looked at Judith. She returned his gaze evenly with eyes that were full of fear. It had gone beyond what she could do for him. In God's hands his life now lay and the odds against his recovery were not favourable. Beyond the moment she dared not think. Life went on; she knew it all too well.

Miles stood a moment longer and then, unable to bear the room, turned and strode out. Judith hastened after him and found him leaning against the rope-patterned pillar of the cross-wall's arch, his fist clenched upon the stonework, staring blankly at nothing. She set her hand on his arm.

Miles closed his eyes, opened them again and faced her. 'How did it happen?'

She told him. 'Eric won't be using his arm for some little time. I have scarcely spoken to the girl or her husband, but he told me they owed Guyon

their lives and their gratitude. I need not tell you that at the moment it is no consolation.'

'No,' Miles agreed bleakly.

Judith bowed her head and returned to her vigil.

Two hours later, de Bec came grim-faced to tell her that Walter de Lacey was waiting in the outer ward.

She put down the mortar in which she had been grinding herbs. 'And what could he possibly want?' she said sarcastically as she made sure that Guyon was as comfortable as his condition allowed, and bade her maid Helgund stay close by him.

De Bec lifted his craggy brows at her. 'Mistress, when he saw our new huntsman, he didn't know whether to leap for glee or fall into apoplexy.'

'What a pity he couldn't decide,' Judith said viciously.

De Bec cleared his throat. In this kind of mood his young mistress was lethal and the man to best

deal with her was in a raving fever at the gates of death. He took a deep breath. 'From what I have heard, you had best bring the lass up here out of sight until Sir Walter's gone.'

Judith considered, nodded and sharply bade one of the maids fetch Elflin of Thornford to her chamber.

The girl arrived from her duties in the kitchens. There was a smut of flour on her cheek and her hyssop-blue eyes were filled with terror.

'Oh my lady, please don't send me back to him, for the love of God, I beg you. I'll kill myself, I swear I will!'

Judith looked at the bent flaxen head, the clenched small hands that were as delicate as a child's. 'Get up,' she said neutrally. 'Do you think that I would give you up to that scum when my lord has perhaps sacrificed his life that you should go free?'

The girl stood up and wobbled a curtsy.

'You say you would kill yourself?' Judith said

coldly. 'You would do better to take a knife to the tryst and put it through his black heart.' Her voice seethed on the last words. She eyed the girl with contempt. 'Elflin, is it not?'

'Yes, my lady.' Her voice quavered, thin and reedy with fear.

'Well then, Elflin, stiffen your spine and stop snivelling. There is no room for a wet fish in my household. He won't have you, I promise. Now, do you take up that distaff over there and that basket of carded wool and work awhile. Ask Helgund if there is anything you need to know.'

Elflin squeaked assent and bobbed another curtsy.

Milk and water, thought Judith impatiently, then checked herself, recalling her own fear of the unknown in the early days of her marriage to Guyon and remembering too, with a guilty pang, his patience and good humour during that time. If she was not afraid now, it was because of him.

In the hall, Walter de Lacey was standing before

the hearth. The chamberlain had furnished him with a cup of wine and she saw with a sinking heart that he was deep in conversation with Father Jerome, who had about as much guile as a newborn lamb. From the smirk on de Lacey's face as he watched her come forward, it was obvious that he knew and delighted in the news of Guyon's grave illness.

Stifling the urge to be rude until given grounds, Judith made a stilted, traditional speech of welcome.

De Lacey's smile was supercilious. He looked at his nails. 'I am sorry to hear that your husband is so grievously wounded, but the fault is his own. He should not have meddled in my affairs on my lands.'

Father Jerome frowned at him. 'My lord, as I understand matters, he came to the aid of innocent travellers being wrongly molested.'

'A jumped-up gamekeeper and my groom's wayward daughter?' De Lacey's laugh was caustic. 'Guyon FitzMiles prevented my men from

carrying out their lawful duty. Indeed, I am sorely tempted to seek compensation from him for the death of my captain.'

'Your former gamekeeper is a free man to sell his services where he desires and his wife is a free woman,' Judith said, looking at him with repugnance. 'You have no right.'

'So you refuse to turn them over to me?'

'It gives me the greatest satisfaction to deny you both them and your compensation,' she said, her chin high. 'Drink your wine and go. There is nothing for you here.'

His lids narrowed. 'I do not think that with your husband on his deathbed you can afford to annoy me. After all, who knows where these lands will be bestowed next and my wife is growing old and not in the best of health. I expect soon to be bereaved.'

'Rot in hell!' Judith hissed.

He smiled at her. 'There'll be more pleasure in taming you than that bag of bones I've got at the

moment. My compensation is already assured.'

Father Jerome made a shocked exclamation.

'If you want to be a gelding, that's your own choice,' Judith retorted, her fingers itching to draw her eating knife from her belt and do the deed there and then. 'I think we have nothing to trade but threats and insults. Excuse me if I do not see you on your road. My husband needs me.'

He raised his cup to her in a mocking salute and looked her insolently up and down as if she was already a piece of his property.

In the bedchamber, Judith collapsed beside the hearth, her teeth chattering and her hands icy. Helgund fetched a sheepskin from the foot of the bed, wrapped it around her mistress's shaking shoulders and hunted out the flask of aqua vitae.

Judith choked on the strong liquor. 'I'm all right,' she reassured the maid, finding a wan smile from somewhere. 'Lord Miles will need to know. Have you seen him?'

'Not recently, my lady. He did not come here

while you were gone.'

'My lady, he was talking to your mother in the hall before Lord Walter came,' Elflin offered timidly from her corner where she sat deftly spinning the wool, her manual dexterity far in advance of her mental. 'But they had gone when you summoned me to your chamber.'

'I'll try his chamber in a moment,' Judith said and, finishing the aqua vitae, cast off the sheepskin and went to look at Guyon.

He was sleeping deeply and his temperature, although still raised was, she fancied, not as high as it had been, or perhaps it was just wishful thinking. She turned round and saw the dainty English girl watching her with a wide-eyed mingling of expectancy and fear.

'Our visitor has gone,' Judith said. 'I think it will be safe for you to seek your husband now.'

'Thank you, my lady!' Elflin dropped her work and, blushing, bobbed a deep curtsy before departing the room at a near run.

'What it is to be young and eager,' smiled Helgund, addressing Judith as if she were a staid matron beyond love's first sweet violence.

'Yes,' Judith agreed flatly and smoothed the coverlet. 'What it is.' Her chin quivered. She mastered the urge to weep and straightened up. 'I must find Lord Miles and tell him what has happened. Let me know if there is any change.'

'Yes, my lady.'

Judith left the room almost as swiftly as Elflin had done, got halfway down the stairs, stifled the familiar panicky instinct to run and continued at a more sedate pace across the great hall and up the stairs to the small chamber that was her father-in-law's when he visited.

She could hear the murmur of voices as she approached, one deep and hesitant, the other her mother's and breathless. Then the voices ceased. At the curtain, Judith paused, warned by some sixth sense that to clear her throat and just walk into the room would not be wise.

Cautiously she drew aside the merest fold of material and peered within to assess whether she should go or stay. Set into the thickness of the wall, the room was tiny with space only for a bed, a small clothing pole and a brazier for use against the cold. Before the brazier, blocking it from view, her mother stood locked in Miles's embrace, her blue gown melding into the dark green of his tunic and chausses, his hands lean and brown against the snowiness of her wimple. Her mother's arms were locked around his neck and they were kissing as, only yesterday in the hall, she had seen Elflin and her husband kissing.

Judith dropped the curtain, stepped away and wondered why she had not realised it long ago. There had been enough beads to make a necklace if one had the eyesight to pick them up. The swings of her mother's moods, the looks and counter-looks cast across the hall, met and avoided. What had her mother said? Understand when the time comes and do not judge me too harshly. No more harshly than Alicia had judged herself, she thought and wondered if Guyon, less

naive than herself, had known.

At the foot of the stairs, she encountered the lady Emma about to ascend and quickly blocked her way.

Emma's gaze sharpened.

'I should not bother him until later,' Judith said, her voice slightly constricted. 'He is otherwise occupied.'

Emma searched Judith's face for meaning. 'With a woman, you mean?' Judith hesitated and Emma grimaced. 'That always was his source of oblivion.' She sighed, turning with Judith to go back down to the hall. 'He's not much use at getting drunk and he's too slightly built to go out and pick a fight. I've known him ride a horse half to death, but a woman by preference is his usual form of solace. At first after my stepmother died there was scarcely a night when he slept alone ... God knows some of the sluts Guy and I had to tolerate in the early days!'

Judith coloured. 'He is with my mother,' she

said quietly, 'and they still have all their clothes on.'

Emma's eyes rounded. She stopped and turned. 'Your mother?' The thought seemed to have blocked her brain.

Judith stared her out. Emma drew a long breath between her teeth and let it out again slowly. 'Well then, I am sorry if my words gave offence but in the past it has been true.'

'The past is not now,' Judith said, not quite keeping the coldness from her tone. For all that Emma was Guyon's sister and he maintained that she had a heart of gold, Judith was hard pressed to find it beneath the layers of iron and ice.

Emma bit her lip. She and Judith were never going to be more than tepidly cordial. Their natures had too many similarities, subtle shades apart and, within this keep, like two stones in close proximity on a riverbed, they had begun to grate against each other. Emma began to think with new longing of her dower estates and how, when Guyon's crisis was resolved one way or the

other, she would go there with her daughters.

Christen seemed to be cured of her affliction to flirt. No more was 'Alais says' the bane of their lives. In part she knew it was due to the seriousness of Guyon's condition. That, in itself, was sufficient to put meaningless frivolity in its true perspective, but part was also due to Judith's steadying influence. Guyon's wife might laugh and play childish games with her nieces, might have a puckish sense of humour and an impudent tongue, but attracting men appeared scarcely to interest her. Nor did she wish to gossip about them to the detriment of all else and her domestic skills were more than competent, as was her knowledge of healing and sickbed nursing. Christen, receiving an indifferent or bored response to most of her tattle, had steadied her own giddy attitude and begun to think a little for herself. What profit there was in that had yet to be seen. 'No,' she agreed, 'you are right. The past is not now.'

C HAPTER 15

A week came and went. So did the priest. Twice. Guyon wavered on the narrow brink between life and death, teetered and stepped back from the edge. Another week passed. There was a terrific thunderstorm. Three sheep in the bailey were struck by lightning and one of the store sheds caught fire. Guyon's temperature descended to normal. He recognised those who stood at his bedside and spoke to them, but he was as weak and dependent as a newborn kitten and even the effort of speech left him exhausted.

In August they received the news that Jerusalem had fallen to the crusaders. The people of the town held a great bonfire and rejoiced for two days. Guyon got out of bed for the first time, walked three paces and collapsed. Judith made him swallow iron filings in wine and more of the disgusting ox-blood broth and gave him a stick to help him walk.

Emma and her daughters left to go first to

Emma's dower lands and then return. At the end of the month too, Alicia departed for her own dower lands with Miles for escort, her leave-taking of Judith somewhat tearful, but there was a new peace behind the emotion and Judith did not begrudge the cause of it, only hoped it would last.

By late September the wound in Guyon's thigh had healed to a livid pink scar that he would bear for the rest of his life, but, precluding the success of any schemes that her Montgomery uncles and Walter de Lacey might have in store, his life was not now measured in terms of hours and minutes.

Currently, Robert de Belleme was in Normandy conducting a private war against a neighbour who had offended him and was not expected back in England this side of spring. Walter de Lacey had been occupied in a localised but savage war against the Welsh, persuading them to stay on their own side of the border and leave his herds alone. The patrols went out from Ravenstow, but their own borders, due to the vigilance of Eric and de Bec, remained secure.

Outside, the wind was gusting a carnival of brown and yellow dead leaves against the keep walls. Pigs rooted in the woods for acorns, or snuffled among the windfall apples in the garths and orchards attached to the cottages. In the fields, men ploughed over the stubble and prepared the land for its winter lying while women and children were out gathering the blown-down dead twigs and branches for kindling in the long dark months ahead.

In the main bedchamber, Guyon closed his eyes and buried his head on his forearms, lulled by the soothing motion of Judith's strong fingers on his back, massaging stiff muscles with aromatic oil of bay. It had been his first time on a horse since his illness. He had discovered that although his recently healed tissue protested, he was not overly uncomfortable and had thus spent longer in the saddle than he should. 'Learning to ride before you can walk,' Judith had said with exasperation.

Peevish with exhaustion, he had snapped at her

that he knew his own limits.

'Then why overstep them?' she had smartly retorted with a toss of her head and left him to struggle upstairs on his own.

She had been right of course - as usual. He stirred beneath her touch as she found a strain and thought that he owed her his life. Without her knowledge of simples and her care in the early days, he would have died. In between, she had faced down and seen off Walter de Lacey and, with the aid of his father and the keep's official machinery, had run the demesne with commendable efficiency.

One of the maids murmured something and Judith replied softly. A slight shift of his head and a lazily lifted lid showed him the huntsman's wife Elflin for whose sake he had almost got himself killed. She was striking in a strange, ethereal way, her bones bearing the fragile delicacy of frost on glass. Brand, her husband, had been holding Guyon's courser's bridle this morning, a smile of welcome on his taciturn features. They

had decided to remain awhile, he said. Judith had confirmed that Brand was indeed a skilled huntsman, quick, willing and conscientious. Judith had brought the girl upstairs to train. Kitchen work was too heavy for her and her beauty was the kind to cause trouble among the general melee of servants who visited the kitchens, or had recently been finding cause to do so. Here, within Judith's immediate governance, she was safe.

Guyon's thoughts drifted drowsily. Judith's hands worked lower over the small of his back. She paused for a moment, and then there was the cold touch of the herbal oil and the slow, undulating motion of her fingers.

Long abstinence, the slow pressure of her hands above and the mattress below, made his reaction inevitable. Heat flooded his loins and burgeoned.

Judith felt the change in him. Quite suddenly, beneath her kneading palms, the fluid muscles were rigid with tension.

'Are you all right, my lord? Did I hurt you?'

Anxiously she leaned over him. The ends of her braids tickled his back. Her movement released a waft of gillyflower from her garments, spicy and warm.

'No,' Guyon muttered, voice choked. 'No, you did not hurt me, but I think it would be best if you made an end.'

'I was nearly finished anyway,' she said with a shrug, thinking that he wished to be left to sleep. 'Do you turn over and I will anoint your leg.'

There was a strained silence. Judith began to worry. 'Guy, what's wrong?'

He closed his eyes and willed the offending member to subside. It did nothing so charitable. The feel of her breasts, warm and round against his back as she leaned over him, was only making matters worse.

After a moment, he raised his head from his buried arms and said with agonised amusement: 'What's wrong, *Cath fach*, is that the condition I'm in won't do either of us the least bit of good if I

give it free rein now.'

'What condition?' She looked blank.

'Oh God, Judith, just give me the ointment and get out!'

'But your thigh, it needs ...' Her voice trailed off and her eyes grew as wide as goblet rims as belatedly she made the connection and with a gasp sprang away from him, her face flaming. Picking up the jar of oil, she thrust it down beside him and fled the room in panic.

Guyon looked at the little pot by his head and, with a groan, buried his face again in his forearms.

It was impossible to run down the sharply twisting narrow stone steps when hampered by an undergown and thick woollen tunic. As Judith slowed her pace, the racing of her mind began to subside as well. Chagrin swept through her. She had been a fool to panic. More than ever now he would think of her as a child. Wherein lay the point of washing her hair in herb-scented water and

perfuming the points of her body, tempting fate, only to flee in terror the moment that fate appeared briefly on the horizon?

And if I had stayed, she wondered and gave a small shudder, half fear, half something else. It was like snatching hot chestnuts from the fire and hoping not to get burned. Was the prize worth the pain? *And if I go back ...*

Poised at the foot of the stairs, her dilemma was resolved for her by FitzWarren stooping to inform her that the lord of Chester was here and asking hospitality overnight for himself and his retinue.

'I have found accommodation for most of his men, but the cook says we have not enough bread and no oven space to bake more with all the new preparations he will have to make.'

'There's an oven in the village, use that,' she said, her present problem abandoned for one of literally far greater dimensions. Where in the name of Holy Mary were they going to lodge Earl

Hugh? The great bedchamber it would have to be, and Guyon could have his father's tiny wall chamber. She would make do with the maids in her mother's chamber on a straw pallet. Mentally clucking with irritation, she sent one of the girls scurrying aloft with the news and went forward wreathed in smiles to greet the lord of Chester.

He was even more huge and solid than she remembered and the kiss of peace he stooped to bestow on her cheek was as warm and gluey as melted pig's trotters. 'Well well!' he chuckled in his husky voice, looking her up and down and quite misconstruing the breathless pink flush on her cheeks for something less innocent, 'I see that marriage is suiting you!'

Judith's colour darkened and the Earl gave a phlegmy chuckle of delight, and then proceeded to view with approval the way she mastered her embarrassment and with commendable efficiency set about making him comfortable. 'I remember when you were a tiny maid at your mother's knee,' he grinned, as she drew him to

the fire and bade a servant take his cloak. 'Mind you, it also reminds me that I was still slim enough then to chase women for the fun of it!' He patted his enormous paunch ruefully.

'Don't believe a word,' Guyon said behind her, setting his hand lightly on her shoulder and giving it a gentle squeeze. 'He's still frighteningly fast when he chooses.'

'Faster than you, so I hear,' said Earl Hugh, the blue eyes disconcertingly shrewd.

'I was rash and I paid for it.'

Chester grunted. 'Not for the first time. Watch him, wench. He'll run rings round you both and you'll end up tangled in knots.'

Judith's laugh was more than wry. 'Do you think I do not know it!'

Guyon tugged her braid. She risked a glance at him. His face was a little fine-drawn with tiredness, but his expression was light enough and there seemed no change in his usual manner. Involuntarily her eyes went lower and

colour flamed her face anew.

His mouth twitched. 'Do not be too sure of the outcome, Hugh,' he grinned. 'She's an awesome gaoler.' He led the Earl towards the small solar behind the dais. Judith excused herself to consult with the cook and see if she could get the carpenter to strengthen the guest's chair so that it would not collapse beneath the strain of so great a weight, as it had almost done during his last visit at their wedding.

'You have been very busy making yourself enemies,' Chester remarked, hunching his powerful shoulders.

'Have I?' Guyon eased himself down on to a padded stool.

The Earl considered him. He had come to know Guyon well during last summer's difficult Welsh campaign: a competent leader of men and an excellent scout with an innate knowledge of the workings of the Welsh mind. If he had failings, they were composed of an unpredictable wild streak - probably due to the Welsh blood - that

resulted in a disturbing inclination to go his own way if not minutely scrutinised and checked. 'You know damned well you have!' he growled. 'Hardly Robert de Belleme's favourite nephew, are you? He has some very nasty suspicions concerning your involvement in a raid on the Shrewsbury road back in the spring.'

'Nothing he can prove.'

Earl Hugh lifted a flagon from the cupboard against which he leaned and examined the intricate Byzantine workmanship.

'When has lack of proof ever stopped Bellteme from pursuing his intended victim?'

'I might as well be impaled for a sheep as a lamb,' Guyon said and smiled with private amusement remembering the incredulity on the Earl of Shrewsbury's handsome, narrow face.

'It is no game, Guy,' Chester warned.

'Did I say that it was?'

The Earl's eyebrows lifted towards his thinning

hair. 'Don't be obtuse with me!' he warned. 'I'm not a woman to be deceived by the twists of your tongue.'

Guyon propped his leg on a footstool. 'I admit it was foolhardy to risk de Belleme's rage, but at the time I was raging myself. Since then I've been a model of propriety.'

'Excluding this recent escapade?' The Earl pointed the flagon at Guyon's leg. 'Antagonising the new lord of Thornford by fighting in his village and stealing his servants?'

Guyon snorted. 'Yes, look at me. Do you think I fight odds of nine to two because I enjoy flirting with death and rousing a wasps' nest of trouble? Bad fortune, nothing more. If Arian had not cast a shoe, I'd have been nowhere near his territory - and I didn't steal his servants. They were leaving him anyway.'

Chester put the flagon down on the cupboard. Guyon's lids were heavy, but it was not all the aftermath of fever. Part of it was concealment. 'Walter de Lacey wants Ravenstow, Guy ... and

he wants Judith.'

Guyon snorted. 'Tell me something I do not know. He's had a dagger at my back ever since my wedding.'

'I won't share my boundaries with such a one as him if I can help it. No control over himself, for a start. Half a brain and too much cunning, and he's in de Belleme's pay.' He gave a breathy laugh. 'The Welsh nibbling me one side and him the other. It behoves me to keep you alive and in a state of grace!'

'Is that why you're here?' Guyon raised his lids to reveal a glint of humour. 'To protect me from the worst of my own nature?'

Chester shook his head. 'To make sure you know how close to the fire your fingers are!'

'You sound like my father!' Guyon laughed.

'Is he not wise?'

'Oh, very.'

Chester's restless fingers toyed with his heavy

circular cloak brooch. He had heard several rumours in Shrewsbury concerning Miles and Maurice de Montgomery's widow. Well, and why not? She was well preserved and her dower lands, although not vast, were pleasant and fertile. A man could find it in him to plough both with ease. Perhaps it would be entertaining to pay Miles a visit in the near future and see about the purchase of another horse ...

'I know how close to the fire I am,' Guyon said into the Earl's ruminative silence. 'But "uncle" Robert will have his eyes on a broader arena than mine now that Jerusalem has fallen into Christian hands. I hazard that for the moment he'll leave my demise to fate and expendable tools such as Walter de Lacey.'

Chester pursed his lips. The King's older brother, Robert Curthose, had pawned the Duchy of Normandy to Rufus in exchange for the necessary silver to go on crusade and had departed forthwith. The Christian force had been successful and, barring mishap to Robert's ox-

like frame, a few more months would likely see his return and an ensuing broil of trouble. Rufus was not going to smile sweetly and hand over Normandy like meat on a trencher.

'De Belleme will thrust his sword where it will cause the most mischief,' Guyon continued. 'I'll wager you five marks to a single penny that the moment Robert sets foot on Norman soil, the Earl of Shrewsbury will hare to his side and offer him all assistance. You know what he thinks of Rufus.'

'You think that too,' Chester pointed out drily.

'But I have held my oath to him, have I not? Therein lies the difference. De Belleme doesn't give a pot of piss for his own fealty. I can see it coming as clearly as a thunderstorm over Ledworth ridge. Brother Robert returns from the Holy Wars mantled in glory and demands the return of his earldom. Rufus refuses. De Belleme joins the side that is most advantageous to himself and merry havoc holds sway. All we need then is for the Welsh to come hotfoot over the border aflame with raiding fever and it'll be worse

than a drunken brawl at Smithfield fair! It won't matter about me because everyone's fingers will be in the fire then.'

The white bitch at Guyon's feet raised her head and nuzzled his hand. Chester absently admired her narrow-loined conformation and considered Guyon's words. Most of what he had said had already occurred to Chester and doubtless half the other barons in the country. Stormy weather lay ahead and those with sense were making preparations to endure it, or else seeking a new shelter, as in the case of the powerful de Clare family who were quietly cultivating the third brother.

'And Prince Henry?' he said. 'What about Prince Henry?'

'What about him?' Guyon rubbed his thigh. 'He'll watch us all burn for a while, toss the occasional twig on the fire and, when he's had enough, he'll either douse it or walk away, whichever suits his purpose best. Probably he'll side with Rufus. He wants him to obtain Edith of Scotland for his bride

and he wants Rufus to name him the heir.'

'You know a great deal for a man who's been on his sickbed since before harvest time,' Chester remarked drily.

Guyon shrugged. 'My brother-in-law writes letters to his wife, my sister, and she shows them to me to relieve the boredom.'

'Your brother-in ... Ah yes,' said the Earl. 'He assists the chamberlain, doesn't he?'

'Along those lines. We all have our ways and means.'

Speaking of which, is there a purpose behind your visit, or is it truly just to comfort my convalescence?'

'That depends upon how sick you still are,' Chester said and cocked a glance at the propped leg.

Guyon shook his head and laughed. 'Sick only of being wrapped in swaddling. If I so much as sneeze, Judith appears at my side with some

noxious potion or other.'

'She's a young wife, eager to show off her skills,' Chester said, momentarily diverted. 'Considering the life she led before her marriage, you ought to be grateful she's not spiked your wine with monkshood.'

Guyon's laughter deepened and seamed the corner of his eyes. 'You don't know the half of it, Hugh. Monkshood is far too swift a revenge!'

Chester looked a question.

Guyon sobered. 'I owe her my life,' he admitted. 'And more than twice over.'

'She's a fine-looking girl with a sound head on her shoulders. You are luckier than most.'

Guyon clasped his hands behind his head. Fine-looking? Well, yes, perhaps she was growing that way as her body filled into womanhood and he would not deny her intelligence; but as to his being luckier than most? He thought back to her reaction in the bedchamber, the fear in her eyes, the way she

had run as if from rape.

For close on a year now he had held himself in check. The first months it had been easy for she was still so obviously a child, but time had blurred the division between girl and woman. He was aware of his hunger and the fact that unless he resorted to force, it could not be appeased. Whatever the change in her body, it was obvious that she was not mentally prepared to accept his flesh. Monkshood was indeed too swift for revenge.

'What did you want to talk about?' he asked abruptly and brought his hands down.

Chester darted his brows at the sharpness of Guyon's tone which was quite at odds with the amusement of a moment since. 'Where your land borders mine, up on Llyn Moel ridge, there is a blind spot between the hills, and the Welsh ride down the valley to raid. A keep is needed and the best site is within your bounds. When you see it, I think you will agree.'

'Within my expense as well?' Guyon asked. 'I

know the place you mean. Lord Gruffydd's men came through the gap this spring and carried off some of our herds.'

'I am sure we can come to an amicable agreement,' Chester said with a benign smile.

'It might be possible,' Guyon fenced, knowing that look of old. Hugh d'Avrenches was no man's fool when it came to arguing prices and what he did not know the canny officials he kept around him did.

Chester's smile became a rich chuckle and his eyebrows flashed swiftly up and down. 'I thought we could ride out tomorrow, your health and your wife permitting. There are some fine hunting grounds up there on my side, too. I've recently built a lodge.'

'I may be able to escape for a few days,' Guyon answered cautiously. 'Providing your quarry is not boar.' His eyes went to the door. 'I don't hunt them for pleasure.'

'Does anyone?' Chester said, taking his

meaning immediately, and changed his expression to one of beaming welcome as Judith entered the room followed by a maid bearing a flagon and cups.

C_{HAPTER} 16

LONDON

WHITSUNTIDE 1100

The cry of a boatman floated up from the river. Judith set her sewing aside and went to the casement. Blossom was drifting down from the apple trees in the garth, as green-tinted through the glass as the bright feathers of the popinjay regarding her beadily from its perch. Being momentarily high in the King's favour, Emma's husband could afford to waste silver on such rare frivolities as green glass windows and exotic foreign birds.

She and Guyon were in London to attend the Whitsuntide gathering of the court, held this year at the newly completed Palace of Westminster designed by Rannulf Flambard, who took men's money and spent it in the name of the crown. The city was crowded, as packed to bursting as a thrifty housewife's jar of dried beans, and only the highest magnates in the land were granted sleeping space within Westminster and its

immediate environs. The rest had to manage as best they could. Conveniently for them, Richard, Guyon's brother-in-law, owned a house on the Strand but a few minutes' walk from the new palace and was able, with a bit of a squeeze and a great deal of organising from Emma, to house Judith and Guyon and their immediate servants for the length of their sojourn. They were uncomfortable and cramped, but more fortunate than most ... fortunate being a relative term, Judith thought and scowled over her shoulder at the bed in the corner of the curtain-partitioned room.

It was Richard and Emma's and they had insisted on giving it up to herself and Guyon during their stay. A kindness that was a cruelty in disguise. Last night Guyon had sat up until the early hours talking to Richard and used the excuse of not disturbing Judith and the other sleepers across whose pallets he must step in order to reach his own bed as a reason to roll himself in his cloak among the other men in the hall.

Judith leaned her head against the wall and folded her arms, her eyes troubled. Ever since that incident in the bedchamber at Ravenstow, when his body had reacted to her touch and she had run from him in terror, he had taken pains to avoid the physical contacts of their relationship.

The morning after Earl Hugh's arrival, he had ridden out with him to inspect the proposed site of the new keep. Judith, her mind and emotions in turmoil, had not been so foolish as to try and stop him. Indeed, when he told her of his intentions, after one brief, involuntary denial she had listened quietly to his reasoning and to Earl Hugh's jovial bluster and agreed with them that they must go; she had even found a smile from somewhere and the will to be interested in what they intended.

In the morning she had served them both the stirrup cup and wished them good fortune with a smile on her lips, and when Guyon had leaned over Arian's neck to tug her braid she had suffered it with humour and forced a smile. It was only for a week at most that they would be gone,

only a week she told herself, but it might as well have been a lifetime. She had sobbed furiously into her pillow. The mastery was no longer hers. She had lost it the moment she ran from him in panic, her hands slick with aromatic oil and the feel of his skin still imprinted on hers.

In the event, it had been a full ten days before he returned, looking positively refreshed by his freedom. His skin had worn an outdoor glow and his manner had been ebullient as he discussed the plans for the intended new keep. It was literally a stone's throw from the Welsh border. There were merlins nesting on the lichened rock face and wolf pugs in the mud of the river crossing at its sheer, boulder-tumbled face. To the west, the hills of Gwynedd were a purple dragon-back in the distance. To the east lay the fertile Chester plain.

A price had yet to be haggled and the costings worked out, but both men professed themselves content that the project should commence by the early spring. So much Judith had heard from

Guyon, his manner enthusiastic, nothing concealed. In a roundabout way, as it went from guardroom to hall servants to her personal maids, she also heard that Earl Hugh not only kept an excellent table at his hunting lodge, but also provided a comprehensive list of other creature comforts for the benefit of his guests. Apparently the girl had been well endowed and willing and Guyon's enthusiasm as boundless as that which he displayed when discussing the proposed new keep.

At first Judith had been hurt and jealous, but these emotions had been replaced by irritation with herself and a certain wry acceptance. At least he had not sought his relief with Rhosyn. She did not think she could have borne that. And, the remedy she knew lay in her own hands could she but bear to reach out and grasp it, thorns and all. He still called her *Cath fach* and pulled her braid, but he was more wary of touching her now. Fewer hugs and kisses. Sometimes he would look at her in a way that made her insides melt with fear and on those occasions his eyes were

not on her face.

He lingered more with his men. Some nights he did not come to bed at all. He spent much of his time away, some of it genuine, concerned with the new keep and maintenance of those he already held, some of it an excuse to avoid her. The easy camaraderie of the early days was gone. The thread that bound them was taut, vibrating with tension and stretching a little further each day. And if it snapped ...

Stifled by her thoughts, Judith opened the casement and looked out. The apple blossom, prematurely detached by a frisky breeze, drifted in pink-tinted snow across her vision. The sound of laughter silvered her ears and she saw that a boat was being manoeuvred into the steps at the foot of the garden, a private riverboat with protective bright canopy and furs piled within against the nip of the spring breeze.

The source of the laughter was an exceptionally pretty young woman wearing a cloak lined with vair. She sat on the nearside of the canopy and

was leaning intimately into Guyon's shoulder. Her braids, exposed beneath her veil, were the colour of new butter against his dark cloak. He was laughing too and the woman leaned further to kiss him playfully on the lips as he rose to leave the boat. Richard, his brother-in-law, followed him, chuckling a remark and receiving a jesting slap from the woman in punishment. The last to leave was a slender young man who bent with polished courtesy to kiss the beringed white hand offered to him.

'That's Prince Henry's private craft,' Christen said, nudging her way in to lean beside Judith and watch the boat steer out into the swift, grey current of the river. 'He still sees Alais on occasion.'

'That is Alais de Clare?' Judith narrowed her eyes, but the blonde figure was too far away now to be freshly appraised.

'There's no cause for concern,' Christen said blithely. 'She flirts from habit and Guy was never really that interested.'

'I'm not concerned,' Judith said with far more nonchalance than she actually felt. 'Who else was there with Guyon and Richard?'

Christen turned pink and smoothed her already immaculate gown. 'That was Simon de Vere, one of Papa's assistants. He's heir to an estate just outside the city, but Papa thinks he will rise to much higher things in the King's service.'

So much higher that Richard was hoping for a match between Simon and his eldest daughter. Christen was amenable to the idea, for Simon was nineteen years old, likely to be rich and already an accomplished courtier.

The women heard masculine voices raised in jovial conversation and Christen hastened to open the door, almost tripping over Cadi who was determined to be first.

Richard strode into the room laughing and wiping his eyes at some joke and tossed his cloak casually on to a chest, Emma being absent among the stalls of Cheapside with her maid and

not there to take him to task.

The popinjay screeched at the men and bobbed on its perch. 'You ought to get one, Guy, they're good company when your wife's not around.' Richard grinned, as Guyon paused beside the perch to eye the bird dubiously. 'Mind you, so is Alais de Clare, eh?'

'Not much to choose between the two,' Guyon answered neutrally as he walked around the bird. 'But I rather fancy that Alais bears more resemblance to a coney than a popinjay.'

Richard snorted and turned to take the wine that his daughter brought for him.

Guyon looked round at Judith, who still stood at the open window, her expression censorious. 'Where's your cloak, *Cath fach*?'

'*Cath fach*?' Richard looked round, still laughing. Familiar with Latin, French and Flemish and even a smattering of English, he was totally nonplussed by the Welsh that his wife's marcher relatives used so freely.

'Kitten,' Guyon translated in the same, neutral tone. 'She might look sweet, but don't try picking her up unless you want to be scratched.'

'A coney, a popinjay or a kitten,' Richard mused. 'Which would you rather?'

'A kitten any day,' Guyon smiled across at his wife. 'They know how to fend for themselves.'

She looked at him and then away, crossly aware that she was blushing. 'Why do I need my cloak?'

'Simon's grandfather has a house this end of the Holborn road and he's renting breathing space if we want it.'

Judith glanced around the room. Christen and Simon had drawn aside and were talking in stilted formal fashion, painfully aware of Richard's approving but amused paternal scrutiny. Tonight there would be straw pallets laid out over every portion of floor space and not even the privacy to piss in the chamber-pot without alerting half the household to the event. Besides, the crowded

proximity in which they were forced to dwell was straining the lukewarm tolerance between herself and Emma to the limit. She nodded to Guyon and went to pick up her cloak from the foot of the bed.

'Get your cloak, Christen,' Guyon said across the room to his niece. 'You might as well come too. Simon's grandfather won't object. He enjoys company.'

'He'd be delighted,' Simon confirmed, his face alight with that particular emotion before he turned a pensive look in Richard's direction. 'With your permission, sire?'

'Dare I trust you for a chaperon, Guy?' Richard enquired, lifting a sardonic brow. 'Emma will have me chopped into gobbets and fed to that damned bird if anything untoward happens.'

'Papa!' cried Christen indignantly, as if his concern had not, at one time, been warranted.

'I will have every respect for Christen, sir,' said Simon with earnest, stilted courtesy.

Guyon considered the bright ludicrous bird

upon its perch. 'Does it eat meat, anyway?' he asked.

Christen hit him.

Simon's grandfather was a garrulous old man, in his seventieth year but still hale and hearty, delighted to greet company. He teased Simon unmercifully about Christen, pumped him and Guyon for court scandal, sucking his gums with relish over the juicier bits and making acid remarks about the brains and breeding of the people involved. He gave them wine and honey cakes. The tables board came out and a set of dice and counters. He invited Christen to play and swivelled a jaundiced eye towards Guyon.

'I heard about you from the Prince last time he was here. "Never play tables with anyone from Flambard's household, or with Guyon FitzMiles," he said. "They'll strip you naked in less time than it took you to dress in the first place!"'

'That's untrue!' Guyon protested, laughing. 'I'd leave you your braies for decency at least!'

The old man dismissed him with a disgusted wave. 'Nay, but you're not as pretty to look at across a trestle as your niece here and I've a close interest in her, since she's likely to be future family. Take your wife above and show her the rooms awhile.'

Simon, not about to miss the opportunity to study Christen's dainty profile, drew up a stool so that he could watch her as she played.

Judith and Guyon went outside and climbed the wooden outer staircase to the rooms above.

'What did he mean about the Prince?' Judith asked as Guyon opened the door and drew aside a heavy curtain.

'Oh, Henry occasionally stays here, or he used to before the new palace was finished. Sometimes he games with old Walter to humour him.'

Judith examined the room with renewed interest. The walls were plastered and illuminated with seasonal scenes - hunting, ploughing,

reaping, women dancing at a feast, a man catching fish. The colours were rich and vibrant. There was a brazier in the room and in a niche in the wall stood a small alabaster statue of the Virgin. There was a bench, an oak chest and a long trestle table.

'He would hold meetings here sometimes,' Guyon said, glancing round at the familiar surroundings. 'That mark on the table is where he propped his feet with his spurs still on.'

'Dicing, wenching and carousing?' she said archly.

'Not often. There are places on the Southwark side for that kind of sin.' He followed her through the second curtain into the slightly smaller bedchamber, which was empty of its main item of furniture. 'I expect Henry's had the bed transferred to Westminster, but I dare say we can find one from somewhere.'

'One?' Judith looked over her shoulder at him.

'As the need arises,' he answered with a shrug,

as if the matter was of no consequence.

Judith examined the rest of the room. The windows, like Richard's, were glazed and the walls as in the first room were plastered and illuminated. Rushes strewed the floor, scattered with lavender, and on a coffer was a folded blanket that was obviously a bed covering. She looked down at a second tableboard set upon a cloth-covered trestle and uneasily moved one of the polished jet counters.

'We can remain with Richard and Emma if you'd prefer,' Guyon said, picking up one of the other counters, tossing it in the air and catching it on the back of his hand as if playing knucklebones.

She shook her head, eyes stubbornly lowered, fingers toying desperately with the smooth, cold lump of jet whose twin was lodged in her stomach. 'You have seen how cramped we are. Emma will not thank us if we refuse and it would be a discourtesy to Simon and his grandfather.'

Guyon studied her for a moment, then set his

counter down and tilted her face on his fingertips. Judith raised her eyes, feeling hot and weak and frightened, and wished that they had stayed downstairs.

'That is their preference, not yours,' he said gently.

'It is mine too,' Judith stood her ground as he traced the line of her jaw until he reached her ear, skirted it and feathered his fingertip down her throat. Her scalp prickled.

'There is nothing to fear,' he said softly. 'I won't hurt you. You know that, or you should by now.'

A chill ran down her spine. The finger became a hand that slipped slowly down to her waist, curved there and drew her lightly against him. He brushed her temple with his lips, her cheekbone and jaw, slanting to seek her earlobe beneath her braid and nibble it gently. Judith gasped and arched at the sensation.

He nuzzled the sensitive hollow behind her ear, kissed her throat, returned to her face, his lips

light as a butterfly travelling the same path again to return to her earlobe. He held her loosely, not compelling her to the embrace, stroking her as he might stroke Cadi or Melyn, soothing her while enticing her to want more. At length, he moved his other hand from her back and slowly took it up the side of her ribcage to the small, neat outer swell of her breast. Softly he touched her lips with his own, applying no demand, then moved on, kissing her chin, trailing the tip of his tongue over her throat.

Judith began to respond. One hand came up tentatively to rest on his belt, the other, palm flat, smoothed the dark wool tunic on his back. She moved closer. Guyon forced himself to a patience he was far from feeling. His body, responding to instinct and abstention, was eager for release. It had been a long time since Earl Hugh's hunting lodge, but Judith was so edgy and afraid that one step too soon or too clumsy and he would lose all the ground he had thus far gained. Besides, a hasty coupling on the floor with one ear cocked for a tread on the stairs was hardly the best

method of initiating a frightened virgin and, while it might satisfy his current appetite, it would do nothing for his abiding need.

Judith's lips parted beneath the gentle insistence of his own. She felt as if she was drowning beneath flowing warm waves of sensation. Her breasts tingled. Her loins were moist and aching, her whole body a boneless supple mass.

Downstairs there was a shout of laughter from the old man and loud exclamations from his two young companions. The spell shattered. Judith leaped like a doe and Guyon's arms involuntarily tightened to hold her. Judith struggled and tore free, her eyes wide, a gasp catching in her throat.

Guyon slowly let his hands fall to his sides. He was breathing hard, as if he had just run up a tower in full mail. 'You see what happens when you stir a banked fire,' he said ruefully. 'I've been wanting to do that for a long time.'

Judith swallowed. He was melting her with that burning brown stare. Their relationship was

paused on the brink of another plane and it terrified her. Snatching hot chestnuts from the fire indeed!

Guyon paced to the window, braced his forearms on the thick wooden ledge and looked down at his hands gripping the dusty edge while his blood cooled. He had seen the fear in her eyes and did not know how to deal with it aside from schooling himself to further patience. There were remedies of course, none of them satisfactory. There was no pleasure in drinking water when it was wine you wanted.

Judith hastily sleeved her eyes as Simon walked into the room, grinning broadly, a half-eaten apple in his hand. Christen had just defeated his grandfather in a move that was as much a surprise to herself as it had been to the old man. 'Is it all right?' he asked, nodding around the room and taking another bite of the fruit. 'Don't worry about the bed. Grandfather says he knows where he can get hold of one.'

His back turned. Guyon muttered something at

his spread hands and then laughed without humour.

'It belongs to the Abbess of St Anne's,' Simon added, brow cocking curiously. 'It's got a feather mattress and silk hangings and everything else. It was part of her dowry, but the Bishop says she has to give it up ... What's wrong, Guy, have I said something funny?'

'No,' Guyon said, turning round. 'It's not funny at all. Do I have to say grace before I get in?'

'Depends on what you have in mind,' Simon said. 'For what we are about to receive and all that.' He smiled round at Judith. She turned pink and, choking an excuse, she gathered her skirts and hurried from the room.

'I didn't think that she would take offence. I'm sorry,' Simon said, staring at the still moving curtain with a perplexed frown on his face.

'How many Hail Marys does it take to work a miracle?' Guyon asked wearily.

C HAPTER 17

Judith lifted the goblet. It was made of the finest silver gilt delicately incised with a scrollwork pattern of vine leaves. The wine within was sweet-sharp and cold from the well in which it had been chilled prior to being brought to table.

The King's new hall of Westminster blazed with rich colour, the walls painted in a bold, angular design that glowed red and blue, gold and shadowed matt black. Banners sparred the walls in vivid primary colours. Candles flamed and dripped, cream and gold, reflecting the napery on the long trestles. The high barony of England glowed like a mobile, flowing tapestry.

Judith sipped her wine and watched the weaving men and women - her uncle Arnulf de Montgomery, as objectionable as ever; her maternal uncle William Breteuil was with him and they were talking amiably enough, although the frequent flicker of their eyes betrayed their mistrust. Her most notorious relative, Robert de

Belleme, was not here at this gathering, preferring to hold his own court in Arundel prior to taking ship for Normandy, but Arnulf, among others, was his informant as to the happenings at court during his absence.

Further down the room Gilbert de Clare, lord of Tunbridge, was deep in conversation with his brother Roger and with Robert FitzHamon of Gloucester who had been at her wedding. Guyon himself stood on the edge of the group that included them, having just arrived from the direction of the latrine. He was resplendent in a gown of garnet-red wool embroidered with thread of gold. The tunic, unlike the ones worn at knee length for the rigours of everyday life in the marches, swept the tops of his ankles. He was a lord of some importance and at court, if nowhere else, had perforce to dress as one, even down to the heavy rings encumbering his fingers.

A man on his way from the hall paused in the act of pinning his cloak to speak with the group of men. Prince Henry. She had seen him sitting on

the high dais beside the King, his brother. He was of middling height and girth with a shock of soot-black hair and narrow features. Guyon replied to something the Prince said and Henry laughed aloud. The plain features lit up, became attractively mischievous and he thumped Guyon's shoulder and walked on. Guyon bowed, then straightened to glance across at her. Caught in the act of her own scrutiny, Judith blushed and quickly attended to her wine. A youth refilled her cup to the brim and passed on down the board with the flagon.

She drank in deep gulps until her panic had subsided. She could not forget the delightful, unsettling sensations aroused in her by the skilful play of his hands upon her. The body as a weapon. It was a two-edged sword and she had yet to learn how to handle it. What was it the Welsh said? *Arfer yw mam pob meistrolaeth*. Practice is the mother of mastery. Guyon had a vastly unfair advantage and he knew it. It was there in every look he had given her since that afternoon. He had not touched her again. He did

not need to. The tension between them was a palpable entity crackling the air. The eye sufficed, speaking all that the tongue avoided and the body suppressed.

Some tumblers leaped before the trestle, their costumes parti-coloured and sewn with bells. One of them between gyrations juggled with six flashing knives, catching them expertly by the hilt.

'Enjoying the experience?' Hugh of Chester said in her ear.

Judith jumped and turned round. The Earl was opulent in blue silk, loose cut for comfort over his great belly. Roped gold winked across the width of his breast and there was a huge round Welsh brooch pinned to one shoulder.

'I am glad to have come, my lord,' she said with a smile, 'but I think I prefer the clean air of the marches to that of the city.'

An elderly man at the Earl's shoulder was staring at her with frank, almost startled curiosity. Chester introduced him as Sir Hubert de Caen, a

veteran of Hastings and aide of the late King William. Judith smiled and responded politely.

'Ravenstow's wife?' Sir Hubert murmured, taking Guyon's place at the trestle. 'Forgive me for asking, but surely you are related to the Conqueror?'

'Well yes,' said Judith, looking doubtful, wondering at his intention. 'My grandfather and King William were cousins.'

He looked disappointed. 'The tie is no closer than that?'

'I'm afraid not.' She glanced up at Earl Hugh, who shrugged his flesh-padded shoulders and surreptitiously tapped his head.

'It is curious,' pursued Sir Hubert. 'You are the living image of Arlette of Falaise, the old King's mother. She had freckles too, you know, and hair of your colour in her youth and that same way of looking.'

'I am sorry to disappoint you, but the lady Arlette is no part of my bloodline. My grandfather was

related through the male line.'

'Remarkable,' Sir Hubert murmured, shaking his head as he rose stiffly to his feet.

The juggler nearly missed one of the knives but swooped and recovered. On the dais, Rufus roared with laughter at a joke. Hugh of Chester moved on with his companion. Judith drank her wine, looked for Guyon and choked on it when she noticed that Alais de Clare had accosted him by one of the stone arches supporting the roof of the hall. A blue and gold banner drifted in the haze above their heads. Alais had her arm linked proprietorially through his, her face upturned and dazzling. He dipped his head to listen to what she was saying. She giggled and flashed a glance around and then stood on tiptoe to whisper in his ear, her hand going boldly down between them.

Judith sat in stupefied amazement, watching her, and then the wine in her blood exploded into rage. She jerked to her feet, shivering the surface of the remaining drink in her cup, walked around the startled juggler and stalked over to her

husband and the courtesan.

Taking hold of Guyon's free arm, she stood on tiptoe in mimicry of Alais, but instead of whispering, she bit him. Guyon jerked with a stifled yelp. 'Just thank Christ I chose your ear,' Judith said and looked at the startled older woman. 'You must be Alais,' she said. 'I have heard much about you, so I won't waste any more of my time, yours, or my husband's,' and, in guardroom English, purloined from childhood escapades, she told Alais de Clare precisely what she could do.

Guyon spluttered. Alais gaped at Judith in horrified astonishment. Judith, taking her rival's rooted shock for defiance, raised her arm to strike her, but Guyon seized her wrist and bore it down in a grip of steel.

'It is best if I go, Guy,' Alais cooed in a pillow-soft voice and patted his arm. 'You can give me your reply later.' Ignoring Judith's dagger-bright stare, indeed ignoring Judith altogether, she left him and moved on to intercept, with a ready

smile, a young baron attached to Chester's household.

'What in God's name do you think you are doing?' Guyon hissed at her. 'You're a marcher baroness, not a fishwife and the sooner you remember that the better!'

'And she's a high-bred gutter whore!' Judith spat in return. 'I suppose you have arranged to bed with her!'

'You've hardly grounds for complaint, have you?'

For a moment they glared at each other, the air between them charged with tension. And then Guyon released his breath on a hard sigh. 'I wasn't making a liaison behind your back,' he said and tugged her silk-twined braid. 'Jesu God, don't you think I have enough trouble controlling the woman I've got without noosing myself to a featherbrain like Alais de Clare?' He grimaced and rubbed his bitten ear.

Judith lowered her lids and looked down at her soft gilded shoes. The impetus of the wine was

beginning to wear off. She felt foolish and a little sick. 'But I thought ... Christen said that you and she used to ...'

Guyon snorted. 'Once, twice, no more. I was too drunk the first time and too desperate the second to make better provision and Alais was so pleased with herself that she made the whole court a party to her conquest until her husband clapped his hand over her mouth and pushed her at Henry. He's very partial to brainless blondes.'

'And you are not?'

'I have a marked preference for tawny-haired vixens.' He slipped his arm around her narrow waist, drawing her close to his side.

On the dais, William Rufus laughed again and clapped a brawny arm across the shoulder of the slender young man seated next to him. He was dark-haired and dark-eyed with a mouth like a freshly bitten strawberry.

'His latest toy,' Guyon said. 'He's called Ernoul and comes from Toulouse. It's fortunate that

Anselm of Canterbury isn't here, he'd have a seizure.'

'Who's the priest on the dais with him, then?' Judith asked and shifted her hip from the intimate sidelong pressure of his thigh.

Guyon pretended not to notice. 'Rannulf Flambard, Bishop of Durham. He wouldn't flinch if Rufus led a goat in here and held a black mass before his very eyes, providing there was money in it of course.' He cast his gaze around.

'Flambard designed this hall. Rufus says it's too big for a room and too small for a great hall, but that's just his nature.'

'As is Ernoul?'

'As is Ernoul,' he said and tried not to think of how it felt to have the King's arm draped heavily across the back of your neck, or to feel his breath hot on your cheek and know that any moment you were going to be sick. Probably Ernoul didn't mind. Probably Ernoul was being paid a lot of money.

Judith shuddered. The royal court was twice as dangerous and barbaric as life in the marches. As in nature, the bright colours were a warning not to touch. She too knew how to stalk and snarl in all that jungle of colour, but inwardly it worried her. When everyone was a predator, someone was bound to get eaten.

The evening continued. Yet another course of the interminable feast arrived. Things disguised as other things, stuffed and gilded and caparisoned in mimicry of the great gathering they were intended to feed. The wine changed from cold, sharp Anjou to a cloying French red. The dishes ran the gamut of the head cook's heat-sweated imagination. Decorated roast meats served with spicy perfumed sauces, pies filled with fruit and chopped meat and one full of tiny live birds that flew amok and twittered around the hall, soiling the new hangings in their panic. The King sent to the mews for his sparrowhawks.

Musicians played with varying degrees of skill. A jester told some bawdy jokes. A sword

swallower amazed the gullible. The knife juggler attempted a refinement that did not quite work and was carried off bleeding like a stuck pig. Rufus did the rounds of his vassals, full of a bluff, jovial bonhomie, the force of it hinting at the choleric temper that lay close to the surface.

The King was a squat, compact barrel of a man with a round, sanguine face and short, powerful limbs. None of the Conqueror's sons were able to boast their sire's inches, although all of them possessed his breadth and inclination towards middle-aged corpulence. Florid and strutting like a barnyard cockerel, Rufus chucked Judith beneath the chin as though she were a kitchen maid. 'So,' he grinned, 'this is Maurice FitzRoger's wench, eh?'

'Sire.' Judith lowered her lids. His fingers were as thick and clammy as raw sausages, but instead of being limp they gripped powerfully, pinching her flesh.

'Skinny little thing, isn't she?' Rufus mused to Guyon as if Judith was deaf. 'No sign of a belly on

her yet either?'

'I'm in no hurry, sire,' Guyon responded with a lazy smile. 'A flat furrow's easier to plough than one with a slope.'

Rufus let out a great guffaw and his variegated grey-brown eyes squeezed into puffy slits. His sense of humour was crude and boisterous and it was the kind of remark that he wholeheartedly appreciated.

Judith lifted her taut jaw off his fingers, feeling like a market beast on a block. Rufus opened his eyes and she glared back at him.

'God's blood!' He chuckled softly. 'I remember my grandam Arlette giving me that look when she was wrath.'

It was the second time that evening that she had been compared to the dead Countess of Conteville and it disturbed her not a little. 'Probably you deserved it,' she said.

There was a momentary silence. The bonhomie slipped a little. 'You've a saucy tongue,' the King

remarked sharply.

'It's the teeth you have to watch.' Guyon grinned, touching his bitten ear, and kicked her hard beneath the trestle.

Rufus chose suddenly to laugh. 'I can see that! Speaking of which, Hugh d'Avrenches told me a good one just now: "If you were a knight, you'd not have done that." "If you were a lady, you'd not speak with your mouth full!"'

Guyon snorted and laughed. Judith looked blank.

'I thought that knowing Alais de Clare, you'd appreciate it,' Rufus chuckled. 'Meet us tomorrow at Clerkenwell if you desire to hunt. I've a new Norway hawk I want to fly.'

Slapping Guyon's shoulder, Rufus moved on to accost another victim.

'Christ, are you trying to get me exiled?' Guyon demanded with exasperation.

Judith drained her goblet. 'I am not a lump of

meat on a trencher to be poked and prodded and discussed intimately as if I have neither ears nor feelings!'

Guyon shrugged. 'Rufus cares little about such niceties where women are concerned.'

'I did not understand his joke.'

Guyon crumbled a piece of bread and watched the action of his ring-bedecked fingers. 'It is probably best you did not. It was very crude, and no, I am not going to give details.'

Judith narrowed her eyes at him. Her thinking processes were by now badly impaired by the wine and it was a struggle to remember how to control her limbs let alone set about cajoling Guyon into explaining what he did not wish to explain, or solve it for herself. She smiled hazily at the servant who refilled her goblet and raised it to her lips. 'Rufus still fancies you, doesn't he?' she said instead.

'Fancies is as far as he will get.' Guyon quirked his brow at her. If she had been less than sober

before, she was now well and truly on her way to being gilded. It was seldom that she took more than two cups of wine at the evening meal and frequently they were more than half water. Tonight, he had lost count of the quantity she had swallowed.

He wondered if Judith was anxious in the midst of such an important gathering, although it was not in her nature to soothe herself with drink. He had a strong suspicion that the opulent bed manoeuvred that evening into the bedchamber of the house they had rented was the main reason for her attitude now. Terrified of what the night held in store, she was taking the advice of many a mother to her daughter on a wedding eve and drinking herself insensible.

'Judith, no more,' he said compassionately, staying her hand as she reached to her cup.

'Why not?' she protested. 'I'm enjoying it now. It was hob ... hobbir ... horrible at first, but you get used to it, don't you ... like a lot of things?'

'When you're drunk,' he agreed wryly.

'Who's drunk?' she demanded in a loud voice. Heads turned. Fortunately, at that juncture the King chose to leave the hall and amid the etiquette of rising and reseating, Guyon succeeded in calming his belligerent wife to a muttering simmer. That mood did not last long. The wine had reacted upon her blood to produce aggression. Now it reacted against the contents of her stomach and she began to feel very sick indeed. When Guyon drew her to her feet she lurched against him, her balance awry, her hand to her mouth.

Guyon took one look at her green face and propelled her out of the hall and into the cool, blossom-scented night where she was violently sick, shuddering against his support.

'Sorry,' she gulped weakly.

'I can see that,' he said with exasperation.

After it was over, he swung her up in his arms and took her lolling and semi-conscious to where Eric waited with their horses.

'She won't want her head in the morning, my lord.'

'She doesn't want it now,' Guyon replied. 'And certainly not her stomach.'

'Poor lass,' said Eric with sympathy, recalling many a night of his own misspent youth. 'You'll not be needing the mare then.'

'No.' Guyon gave Judith to his captain while he mounted his horse, then reached to take her up before him. 'God's bones,' he muttered, trying to settle her so that she would not give him a dead arm on the ride home. 'You'd think to look at her that she weighed less than a feather.'

Judith merely groaned and flopped against him like a dead doe.

Helgund unbarred the door to him and exclaimed in horror at the sight of Judith's wan face.

'Too much wine,' Guyon said, sweeping past the servant to the capacious scarlet-bedecked bed, where he deposited Judith.

Clucking like a mother hen, Helgund leaned over her mistress. Judith's eyelids fluttered but did not open. Another maid goggled around the curtain, received a sharp command from Helgund and disappeared again.

'I'll sleep below with Sir Walter,' Guyon said, aware that he was now redundant, but oddly reluctant to leave. Judith looked so vulnerable, her hands pale and long-fingered against the cover of stitched beaver skins, her profile flushed and delicate. He knew how her nose would wrinkle when she laughed and that one of her teeth was chipped where she had fallen down the dais steps as a child. He knew that her waist was slender and her breasts as round and resiliently soft as the breasts of the white doves in the cote at Ravenstow. She had also quite deliberately drunk herself into a stupor rather than share the intimacy of this bed with him.

Helgund arranged the cover and looked around at him, her broad features creased with concern. 'My lady has been very unsettled of late,' she

ventured.

'I know, Helgund.' The same could be said of himself, he thought and for parallel reasons. He looked thoughtfully at the maid. She owned a position of considerable trust and as a result knew most of what did, or rather did not, transpire between himself and Judith, and must also be aware of the undercurrents and tensions that existed as a result.

Helgund returned his scrutiny beneath the deference of half-lowered lids. 'She is like a vixen confronting food in a trap, sire. She wants the meat, but dare not attempt to snatch it for fear of paying the price.'

His brows twitched together. 'Am I the meat or the price?' he enquired.

'Both, sire. She fears lest she become reduced to the status of bitch or brood mare, or cast-off wife. It is rumoured at court that you prefer the chase to the kill.'

Guyon's frown deepened. Helgund swallowed,

but continued doggedly. 'It is not her fault, sire. If you had seen what Lord Maurice did to her lady mother in front of us all, and mistress Judith no more than a mite of three years old. Said he would fill her belly with enough seed to plant a dozen children and dragged her to the bed there and then before us all and used her like a whore ... Happened more than once too and sometimes he was in too much of a hurry to draw the hangings. We protected the child as best we could but ...' Helgund drew a shaken breath and fell silent beneath the onslaught of his stare.

'Thank you, Helgund.' His voice was frighteningly quiet, belying the anger she saw in his eyes. 'Thank you for telling me. I can see the kind of obstacles across my path now. Before, I just kept treading on them. Go back to your bed now. I'll seek mine in a moment.'

Relieved, Helgund curtsied and made herself absent.

Guyon drew a deep breath and controlled his ire. Maurice de Montgomery was already dead;

the Welsh had got there first.

'Well, *Cath fach*,' he said softly, brushing a stray wisp of tawny hair away from her eyelids and the thick, downswept bronze lashes, 'how do I avoid these obstacles of yours?'

He knew she was not indifferent and that the times when her guard was down, he would have sold his soul to keep her that way. The times when her guard was up, she was impossible to reach.

Never once of her own accord had she offered him a sign of affection or endearment. Jealousy, yes, but that was an emotion born of insecurity and mistrust. The moves were all his, and they were straining the bounds of her acceptance. Today he had stepped beyond the limit. Tonight she was blind drunk. So what else was left? He shied from the thought.

'*Nos da, Cath fach*,' he murmured softly, tugged her braid and quietly left the room.

C HAPTER 18

On the crest of the hill, Guyon reined his courser to a halt and shielded his eyes to watch the goshawk assault the air on dark, swift pinions, gaining height against the hot blue sky before stooping like a wind-ruffled stone upon the desperate flight of a round-bodied partridge.

Prince Henry, triumphant owner, fisted the morning air as the partridge tumbled over in a puff of feathers and was borne to earth beneath the goshawk's talons. The falconer and a huntsman ran towards the two birds, one to be retrieved in proud prowess to Henry's wrist, the other to be added to the mound of soft bodies already culled that morning. The King's Norway hawk was a skilled killer too.

Henry stroked the breast of his own bird where she perched, dark wings folded, and deftly replaced the leather hood over the fierce golden eyes. Then he looked at Guyon.

'I hear your wife made quite an impression last night,' he remarked with a laconic grin.

'She is not accustomed to quite so much wine, my lord,' Guyon excused and eased himself in the saddle. He had backache as a result of sleeping on a lumpy, makeshift pallet within range of a sly draught.

Henry's grin deepened. 'I didn't mean that business with Alais, although I wish I had been there. I meant her resemblance to my grandmother, Arlette. Old Hubert couldn't believe his eyes, thought he'd seen a ghost and Rufus remarked on it this morning at mass ... and he told me an appalling joke.'

Guyon lifted his stiff shoulders. 'As far as I know, the only blood she shares with your family is that of her maternal grandsire, and, even then, the Countess of Conteville is not of that line.'

'Maurice FitzRoger's girl, isn't she?' Henry looked thoughtful. 'How old is she now, Guy?'

'She was born in the November of 'eighty-three,

my lord.' Guyon squinted against the sun at the Prince whose look had suddenly grown secretive, the way it sometimes did after he had been closeted with Gilbert and Roger de Clare. Still waters ran deeper than anyone could fathom.

'Any girl of seventeen who looks like my grandmother deserves closer examination,' Henry said, still stroking his hawk, his gaze intent upon the action of his fingers.

'Angling for an invitation sire?' Guyon jested with the familiarity of long acquaintance and the occasional deeper friendship.

'How did you guess? Anyway, I used to rent the house. You cannot refuse. Is tonight all right? After the hunt?'

Guyon's gaze flickered and sharpened, for Henry's interest was perhaps a little too keen for comfort.

'I did wonder,' Henry said softly to the bird, 'but she never sent word. Perhaps it was just as well.'

'Sire?'

Guyon's tone must have given him away, for Henry uttered a forced laugh. 'God's blood, Guy, stop thinking wild thoughts! With a face like yours, is it likely that I'd be able to seduce your wife before your eyes, or even behind your back! I want to meet her, no more than that. Look, Rufus has started a hare!' He turned to the falconer, gave him care of the goshawk and clapped spurs to his courser's sides.

Guyon followed more slowly, aware of a niggling doubt at the back of his mind. Henry could lie the hindleg off an ass if expediency demanded. Guyon did not believe that he was lying now, but he was sure the Prince was concealing something. The problem with such a devious man was knowing what.

Judith would need to know that they had guests. He had looked in on her this dawn before departing to hunt and found her huddled beneath the pelts in a heavy sleep. He knew the symptoms and how dreadful she would feel on awakening. Renewed nausea, a tight, swollen drum where her

head should be and a raging thirst. Hardly the best equipment with which to organise food and entertainment for a prince of the realm who was coming to visit her because she resembled his grandmother. In her present state Judith would doubtless give a commendable imitation of the said lady risen untimely from her crypt.

He muttered an oath beneath his breath, bent a scowl upon Henry's fast-disappearing back and, calling Eric to him, sent him off with a message.

Judith woke late in the morning with all the vile after-effects Guyon had predicted and more besides. Half an hour voiding in the latrine made her swear a miserable oath that she would never again drink the seemingly innocuous wines of Anjou, whose potency was so wickedly concealed. She had meant to drink enough to dull the edge of her fear and instead she had swallowed her way into hell. Of the night before she remembered little except being ill.

Green-faced, she directed Helgund to mix a valerian posset to ease her rolling gut and skull. It

tasted disgusting and, fighting the urge to retch because by now her stomach was so sore, she retired again to bed to let the herb do its work. She had been there perhaps an hour when Eric rode in with his message, half a dozen limp partridges over his saddlebow.

Panic ensued. Judith, her headache aggravated to a megrim of titanic proportions, presided over a household that resembled a disorganised corner of hell. However, gradually, her tenacious common sense reasserted itself. This had once been Prince Henry's house. Well and good, let the Prince's machinery do what had to be done. Mustering her wits and drinking another cup of the valerian brew, she tidied her hair, put on a clean overgown and went below to visit Sir Walter and explain her predicament.

By noontide, the kitchen shed was bustling, the cook in receipt of the recipes for Henry's favourite dishes and two servants sent off to the markets to fetch whatever was not available on the premises. A minstrel had been engaged, Helgund and Elflin

were busy with brooms and beeswax polish and Judith had retired to the sinful luxury of a hot bathtub, the water scented with attar of roses, in order to compose herself for the coming ordeal.

Her gaze on the bed as she soaked, ignoring Helgund's dire warning that all the goodness would come out of her body, she wondered how she had been brought home last night and where Guyon had elected to sleep, for there had been no imprint in the bed beside her. Probably below with Sir Walter. A memory came to her, hazy and thick as wine dregs. Alais de Clare had been whispering in Guyon's ear and pressing herself against him. Perhaps he had shared a feather mattress last night, and not for the purposes of sleep.

Alais de Clare would give Guyon what he wanted without baulking or complaint, as would many other of the women who frequented the court. She had seen the way they looked at him ... and at her, the amused patronising hostility, their thoughts naked in their eyes as they wondered

how long she would hold him faithful.

She looked down at her body and then at the sinewy freckled forearm and wrist resting on the edge of the tub. She did not have Alais's natural advantages of a lovely face and ripe, lascivious curves, nor her amoral aptitude for coupling, but she probably had at least as much imagination if shown the right direction and she had always been quick to learn. The only problem was overcoming the fear of pain and subjugation, of being held down and used as no more than an object on which to breed sons. She knew Guyon would not treat her thus, but knowing did not prevent the thought from occurring. It was no light thing to step off the edge of a precipice with only a tenuous, recent trust for support.

Her mind plodded a fruitless circle. She cursed with soft vehemence and called for Helgund to bring her a towel.

Henry sniffed appreciatively as they passed the bakehouse door. Rich, savoury scents wafted to his nostrils. The sound of the cook paddling the

spit boy's behind for failing to turn the spit at the crucial moment made him smile.

Simon's grandfather hobbled out to greet the hunting party, wrinkled face bright with pleasure. Henry stopped to speak with him. Guyon cast a suspicious look over his shoulder at the industry within the bakehouse, then back at Sir Walter, who winked at him.

'Resourceful lass you've got there,' he chuckled as Guyon followed Henry up the stairs.

Helgund and Elflin stood to one side, their working gowns covered by fresh, snowy aprons, their hair tidied beneath pristine wimples. Henry turned from their anxious obeisance before their bobbing up and down made him seasick and was welcomed within by Judith.

She was very slender; he could have spanned her waist with his mount's noseband. Her breasts were high and small, her flanks long and lithe and her voice clear and low. The years fell away and for a moment it was a different woman who welcomed him into a different room, a woman

with raven-black braids and twilight-coloured eyes. Judith of Ravenstow had the same eye shape, but more variety of hues, and her hair was a warm sandy-bronze, bordering on red.

'I hope I have not put you to any trouble, Lady Judith,' he said with a smile as he raised her to her feet. It was a meaningless civility. Henry had long ceased to care about putting people out in order to have his own way.

Judith made a sincere-sounding disclaimer and, taking his cloak, gave it to Helgund. Guyon handed his own directly to the maid while looking his wife up and down. 'I'm glad to see you are better,' he said. She was wearing a plain cream undertunic and a long-sleeved gown of copper-coloured silk. A girdle of gold links and shaved, amber oblongs hugged her waist. Her expression was calm, bearing no trace of the previous evening's excesses.

'Patched up and surviving on valerian.' She sent him a rueful smile. 'I've still got a raging headache for my sins, but thank you for the warning. At least

I have had the time to prepare.'

'More than time,' he murmured, tugging one of her braids and glancing round at the white linen cloth upon the trestle, the fine cups and flagon, the wax candles surrounded by fresh flowers and greenery.

Judith gave him a secretive smile and Guyon's fingers left her braid as though one of her gold fillets had scorched him. His gaze flickered between herself and Henry.

'Dear God,' he said softly.

'What's the matter?'

Guyon shook his head and mutely went past her into the room. Henry paid Judith a compliment concerning her domestic abilities. Guyon snapped his fingers at one of Sir Walter's servants, drafted in for the evening. The man hastened to pour wine. Guyon watched him without noticing his actions, absorbing the shock of what he had just seen and deciding that it was patently impossible. Henry was only thirty-two

now.

He thought of himself at fourteen. Sexual congress had been an undiscovered mystery then. Fumblings in dark corners, snatched kisses and giggles, pleading persuasion, his mother's sharp eye upon the younger maids. The dry throat, the anticipation, the blinding flash finished too quickly to be savoured until familiarity lent refinement and control. And Henry at fourteen? Henry at fourteen had already possessed the assurance and technique that came of long acquaintance with the act.

'Penny for your thoughts, Guy?' Hugh of Chester nudged him.

'You'd need more than that,' he said with smile that was not a smile and, taking his wine, went to join Henry.

Hugh d'Avrenches frowned, but after a moment shrugged and followed him.

The evening progressed and so did Guyon's doubts. The similarities were infinitesimal, mainly

in the smile and the tilt of the head, and fleetingly seen, but the Prince's attitude gave them credence. He was acting on two levels. Superficially, he was the charming, genial guest, fluent of phrase and gesture; underneath, though, he was studying Judith, drawing her out, examining her piece by little piece, using both his eyes and his expert sleight of mouth. Warmed by his subtle attention, Judith responded as all women responded to Henry, opening like a rose to the warmth of the sun.

Towards the end of the evening when the men were relaxed with food and wine, the conversation was pleasantly upon the merits of Irish hounds for coursing deer and the minstrel was softly plucking out the notes of Stella Maris on his harp, one of Henry's messengers arrived and was shown upstairs.

Henry, drawn from indolent comfort, listened to the kneeling man, his features impassive, but the wine in his hand rippled and a flush darkened the stubble edging his jaw.

His older brother Robert, sauntering glory-clad home from his crusade, had paused in Sicily to take to his bosom a wealthy young bride, one Sybil of Conversano, daughter of an Apulian count with strong Norman ties. The name did not really matter, nor the rank, but the girl's considerable wealth would enable him to buy back his pawned duchy from Rufus and the marriage itself made the prospect of Robert's heir an imminent possibility. Henry's proximity to the crown was suddenly seen distantly across a smoky hall instead of glittering above his cupped hands.

Silence descended in the wake of the messenger's news. No one looked at anyone else. And then Gilbert de Clare muttered something at his boots and Henry flicked him a sharp glance and warningly shook his head. 'A toast,' he said in a brittle voice and raised his cup. 'To my brother and his bride, may they find safe harbour.'

Cups clinked. The toast was mumblingly

repeated.

'What will you do now?' Earl Hugh folded his hands comfortably over his paunch, body slack, eyes as sharp as shards of blue glass.

Henry pursed his lips. A look flashed between himself and Gilbert de Clare. 'Rufus won't make me his heir,' he said softly, 'and Robert's got the anvils and hammers to beget his own brood now. I suppose I needs must follow the example of my father.'

Chester waved a gnat away from his face. 'If it's civil war you're suggesting, count me out,' he said, tone still comfortable. 'Got enough problems with the Welsh warring over who inherits what without looking down this end for trouble.'

'Civil war?' Henry's eyes widened innocently. 'No, who would back me?'

'You have friends, sire,' said Roger de Clare, voice low but full of fierce meaning.

'It's not friends I need, but opportunity and the right kind of backing ... Would you give it to me,

Guy?' There was bitter mischief in his eyes.

'A feudal oath is sacred unto death, my lord,' Guyon said quietly after a moment. 'It might cause me pain, but I'd shut my keeps to you.'

'Precisely.' Henry twisted a smile. 'Excellent building material were it but mine. Can I offer you no inducements?'

Their eyes met and held. 'Not even if you were related, my lord,' Guyon said deliberately.

Henry stretched like a cat and his smile deepened.

'I thought not. But supposing it came to a choice between myself and Robert? What then?'

'Then I hope I would make the right choice,' Guyon said, refusing to be drawn.

'Where does your father fit into all this?' enquired Earl Hugh politely.

'No one handed him his meat on a platter, so he went out and shot his own deer.'

Judith decided that this conversation had sailed quite far enough into murky waters and deliberately let her cup slip from her fingers. Exclaiming in distress, she set about collecting the fragments and accidentally caught the finger-bowl with the trailing end of her sleeve, tipping it into Henry's lap.

The Prince dragged a shocked breath over his larynx. Earl Hugh gave a great bellow of laughter, slapped his hand down on the table and drove a dagger of glass straight into his palm. Blood spurted. The bellow became a howl of pain. Judith grabbed a napkin from the table and sought to staunch the wound but, in her flustered haste, knocked over a candlestick and set fire to Gilbert de Clare's sleeve.

Guyon, his eyes filled with hilarity, snatched the flagon and doused their guest with a great deal of enthusiasm and a very poor aim for a man who was so skilled a warrior. Gilbert's hound snarled and tried to bite Guyon's ankle and was kicked across the room to fetch up yelping against the

wall. Pandemonium reigned. Stella Maris faltered, twanged and stopped. The minstrel sidled out of the room, de Clare's abused dog snarling at his heels. Judith flapped around like a headless chicken, creating more chaos than she was clearing up, but at last, Chester's wound was thoroughly, if clumsily, staunched with the napkin, she looked around at the wreckage with brimming eyes, then covered her face with her hands, muffling little sounds into them, her shoulders shaking.

Guyon flicked a look at his wife, spluttered and quickly bent to retrieve a dish from the floor while he mustered his control. 'I suggest, madam, that you go and find some fresh garments for my lord Prince,' he said in a choked voice.

Judith squeaked and fled. Gilbert de Clare saw an embarrassed husband struggling manfully to control his rage at the shortcomings of his foolish wife. Hugh of Chester in contrast saw a man striving to contain his mirth and banishing its giggling catalyst from his presence until he should

be capable of controlling himself. He also saw why it had been done and, looking down at the wad of embroidered linen screwed ineptly round his cut and, knowing how her competent medical skill had saved Guyon's life, concluded that Judith of Ravenstow would take some holding if she ever decided to take the bit between her teeth.

Judith re-emerged, biting her lower lip, her shoulders still displaying a disturbing tendency to tremble as she handed Henry tunic and chausses. Henry quirked his brows, not quite as befooled as his bland expression suggested.

'Do not fret yourself, Lady Judith,' he said magnanimously. 'Accidents will happen.'

Gilbert de Clare coughed and, after a quick glance at Henry, pretended great interest in the rushes strewn the floor. Henry ignored him and changed into the garments. He and Guyon were of a similar breadth, but whereas Guyon measured around two yards in height, Henry fell a full six inches short of that mark and the chausses had to be extensively bound with cross-garters to

take up the surplus material. Consequently, the evening ended in laughter and a deal of good-humoured jesting.

Henry swung to horse in the torchlit courtyard, his face open and smiling, black hair tumbling in an unruly shock over his broad forehead, grey eyes shining with the remnants of a good joke. 'You are most fortunate in your wife, Guy.' He glanced over his shoulder to where she stood outlined in the doorway. His tunic reached almost to his fingertips in the new style of the court women and the chausses, even with the bindings, were appallingly wrinkled.

'I know, my lord,' Guyon answered, smiling. 'Although, as you have seen, most of her ploys have a sting in their tail.'

Henry chuckled. 'To be expected when she is under the sign of the scorpion,' he said.

Guyon looked up sharply.

Henry leaned down over his saddlebow and said impishly, 'Remember me to Alicia when you

next see her. Tell her I approve.'

The horse lunged forward. Guyon stepped back and watched the glossy bay stallion trot out of the yard. Gilbert de Clare followed on his patchy, raw-boned roan, his brother in tow, and then came Earl Hugh and the bodyguard.

'What was all that double talk about being related?' the Earl asked.

'Nothing,' said Guyon, uncomfortably aware that Hugh d'Avrenches missed precious little. 'A private joke. I am not sure that I understand it myself. What's more to the point, my lord, is Henry's closeness to the de Clares. There was a deal of double talk there, too.'

'Keep your nose out, Guy. Judith was right to drop that cup when she did. What the eye does not see and the ear does not hear cannot be a source of grief in time to come.'

'Oh yes,' Guyon said a trifle bitterly. 'I am an expert in the art of diplomacy.'

'Well then, don't fall foul of the de Clares. They

bid fair to be as powerful as the Montgomery line one day, and one day soon at that. Hunting tomorrow? I'll see you there.'

Guyon watched him leave, then, frowning, went to the stables to check his courser which had suffered a leg sprain during the day's hunt.

Upstairs, Helgund bustled around the bedchamber, lighting the night candle, folding and tidying, setting matters to rights. Judith slowly removed the gold fillets that clasped the ends of her braids and unwound her hair. Helgund helped her unlace the tight-fitting overgown and, after Judith had drawn it off, hung it tidily on the clothing pole and fetched her mistress an ivory comb.

Judith was thoughtful. The evening had not passed without incident, but at least a potential disaster had been avoided. A pity that the Prince possessed a sharper vision than Gilbert and Roger de Clare, who both obviously saw her as a muddle-headed juvenile. She had the impression that Henry had been amused because he was already several steps ahead of her and could

afford to laugh. It was not a comfortable thought, but then neither were the other ones that jostled for space and recognition.

Slowly she combed the kinks from her hair until it hung in a glowing, fiery fan to her thighs and tried to coax her tense muscles to relax. In a quiet voice she thanked Helgund and bade her go to bed. The maid curtsied and left. A soft silence descended and was infiltrated by the sounds of the spring night. Judith sat in the stillness and fiddled with the drawstring of her shift.

When Guyon finally came up to the room, he found Judith sitting on the bed buffing her nails, the candlelight making a golden halo behind her head. She looked up and gave him a strained smile and, rising, padded barefoot across the room to pour him wine.

He took it from her, his expression blankly preoccupied, drank, looked at the delicate glass and seemed to come to his senses, for suddenly his eyes refocused and he concentrated upon her face.

'What's the matter?' she asked. 'Why are you looking at me like that?'

It was there. You could see it when you knew. The expressions, the occasional mannerisms, the way her hair sprang from her brow. 'Nothing,' he said, wondering if his father knew. Perhaps. If it became common scandal the results would be disastrous. She was not Maurice of Ravenstow's daughter, therefore the barony was not hers by right of birth but belonged instead to her Montgomery uncles - Robert de Belleme, Arnulf and Roger. He suddenly felt very cold.

'Guy?' Feeling frightened, Judith touched his arm and, when he did not move, his brow also. He started at her touch and looked at her, but as if she was a complete stranger he had never seen before.

'What's wrong? Has Prince Henry taken offence at me? Did he realise that I ... ?'

'Prince Henry?' He gave a humourless laugh. 'Prince Henry will take no offence. How could he?'

Oh no, it was very much to his advantage. The halter, yoke and hobble of blood. He stared at the cup in his hand, set it down and paced over to the shutters. The catch was loose and he pushed them open. The scent of hawthorn was thick and sweet. He could see the blossom gleaming softly white in the garth. A breeze ruffled his hair and eddied one of the wall hangings.

'Is it something so terrible that you cannot tell me?' Judith asked at his elbow. 'Do we face ruin?'

Guyon gathered his reeling wits and turned to face her. 'I cannot tell you, love. Call it a political secret if you will, or just plain discretion. It is a confidence I think I would rather die than break.' He kissed her freckled forehead and tugged a burnished strand of her hair.

Judith frowned. Henry had told him something in the courtyard, of that she was sure, and she could only hope it was not along the lines that she had earlier curtailed by her deliberate clumsiness. 'It is not a wise hold to have over a man of power,'

she said doubtfully.

He stepped away from her proximity where the scent of the hawthorn had been replaced by the more dangerous beguilement of gilly and roses. 'Henry intended me to know. He deliberately turned a vague suspicion into a certainty.'

'Is it very important that you say nothing to anyone, even to me?'

He picked up his wine, drank it and glanced over the cup's rim to where she stood, her breasts outlined by the yellow gilding of the night candle. 'Especially not to you, *Cath fach*.' Putting down the goblet, he moved towards the curtain.

'Where are you going?'

'Below to Walter. There's a pallet made up in an alcove for me and it's getting late.' He picked up his cloak.

'But the bed ...' She gestured around, her heart thumping. 'It's big enough.'

'Not for us both,' he said with certainty.

'Yes it is ...' She drew a deep breath, her eyes enormous.

Guyon looked at her frightened bravery and his heart turned over. 'When I made contract, my love, I did not want you. Now I do. If it were lust, it would not matter, I'd either slake it elsewhere, or take you without thought. Being as it isn't, I'll sleep downstairs.'

Judith swallowed, but the lump in her throat did not go away.

'Good-night, my love,' he said to her with a tight smile and, cloak over his shoulder, snapped his fingers at Cadi.

She waited until he had almost reached the curtain, struggling and struggling until at last she forced her voice beyond the choking lump of fear.

'Guy!' she croaked, holding out her hand. He turned. She cleared her throat. 'Before you go, can you do this for me? I've dismissed Helgund and it seems a shame to waken her for a mere knotted lace.'

Guyon hesitated for a moment, then put the cloak down. She padded over to him and showed him the tangled draw-string on her shift.

'I'm not a lady's maid,' he growled, stooping over the knot. 'Perhaps you should rouse Helgund, or just sleep in it.'

'I would be too hot and I have run poor Helgund off her feet all day. Let her sleep.'

He turned her to the light the better to see what he was doing and began to realise that the task was impossible.

Even the maid's skill would have been unable to undo the knot, so tightly was it pulled. The fact that his fingers, usually so clever and deft, were serving him with as much dexterity as a platter of sausages, did not help matters either, nor the fact that the scent of gilly was drowning him in its spicy waves as it rose from the warmth between her breasts. Her hair kept tangling with his efforts.

Impatiently he reached to the sheath at his hip and drew his knife. 'I'll have to cut it. How in hell's

name did you snarl it up like this, Judith?'

The blade tugged against the material, jerking her against him. She did not resist the pull, but flowed towards him. The newly oiled and sharpened blade sliced cleanly through the knot and the shift dropped to cling precariously to her shoulder edges, held up by the merest whim of fate.

Guyon's throat was dry. He was aware that if he did not pick up his cloak and leave, he was going to do something very stupid. 'In God's name, Judith,' he said hoarsely, 'do you think I am made of stone?'

She raised her eyes to his. They were wide and afraid and full of stout determination. 'Show me.' She set her arms around his neck, craning on tiptoe. 'I want to know.'

The chemise fell from her body, leaving her slender and naked, pressed against him. Guyon closed his eyes, fighting the urge to throw her down flat beneath him and take her there and then. That was lust as he had said, not love.

Besides, if the best wine was served, you drank it slowly, savouring it on the palate, not swilling it down your gullet in one fast gulp. Very difficult when you were dying of thirst.

'Hadn't you better sheathe that blade?' she said against his jaw.

The wheel had come full circle. He remembered Rhosyn saying that to him, twined in his arms, only her voice had been ripe with amused experience and Judith's was innocent, devoid of innuendo. The message, however, was the same. He put up the knife. She buried her face in his neck. Gently he held her away so that he could look at her.

'Well, *Cath fach*,' he said quietly. 'I am not sure that this is the right moment, coming to it so intent of purpose.'

'Guyon I ...'

He put his finger to her lips, took her icy hand in his and led her to the bed. He sat her down upon it, then he sought around the room, found her

bedrobe and gave it to her. 'Put it on,' he said gently. 'You're too much of a temptation without it.'

Tears filled Judith's eyes, but she did as he bid in order to bring some control to her limbs. 'You say you are not sure,' she sniffed. 'But I am. I've had time enough to think and if I have any more, I will go mad, I swear I will. I feel like an ox on a treadmill and there's only one way to end it!'

Guyon shook his head, torn by doubt and desire, by reluctance and need. 'I do not even know if I can show you,' he said. 'I do not know the limit of my control.'

Judith blushed and smoothed a crease in the coverlet. 'We have all night,' she offered timidly.

He laughed and looked away. 'You have a blind faith in me, do you not?'

'What else is there?'

Folding his arms, he sat down on the bed and considered her.

Judith cast round for something to say that

would sway the balance or lighten the difficult weight of his stare. The silk coverlet was cool to her touch and as red as blood. She remembered that it had belonged to a bishop. 'You haven't said grace yet,' she reminded him, forcing her mouth to smile.

Guyon let out his breath on a heavy sigh. 'I haven't said any Hail Marys either,' he replied, but after a moment's hesitation unfolded his arms to curve one around her shoulders and draw her within the dim red shadows of the hangings.

* * *

At first, stricken by the enormity of what she had done, Judith did not respond except to shiver against him, her breathing swift and shallow with fear. He held her, stroked her gently as he might have stroked Melyn or Cadi, spoke to her of trivia, whatever came into his mind, making of his words a soothing flow.

Gradually, Judith calmed and started to relax, allowing languorous pleasure to filter through her. The rigidity left her body, and she stopped

shivering. She snuggled against him while he brushed his lips over her temple and cheek and the corner of her mouth, twisting his head slightly to trail small kisses along her jaw until he reached her earlobe. He paused there to play and then sucked the small, tender hollow behind it.

Judith gasped and pressed closer. Her loins felt as if they were dissolving. Hesitantly she nuzzled his throat where the tunic parted and moved her arm a little further so that her hand touched not cloth, but the hair at his nape. His hand stopped at her waist and tightened and the molten feelings tingled through her pelvis. She tasted his skin.

When he slipped his hand inside her bedrobe she stiffened, more with surprise than fear, but Guyon stopped immediately and made as if to withdraw. She dug her fingers fiercely into his nape, drawing him down, and lifted her face. 'Show me,' she said again, eyes bright with concentration.

He studied her doubtfully and she returned him a look that was at one and the same time wanton

and innocent and full of a strange, wild tension, and then she broke the gaze and leaned into his body. Her lips touched the hollow behind his collarbone and her tongue flickered out. Guyon drew a sharp breath and pulled her close, seeking her mouth with his own. Hesitant at first, Judith quickly mastered the skill and pushed herself forward with a soft, impatient sound, lips clinging and yielding sweetly.

He ran his hand up her side, lightly brushed the small curve of her breast, sought inwards with his thumb and feathered it over her areola and nipple. Judith broke the kiss to cry out at the intensity of the sensation and surged against him, craving, but as yet ignorant of precisely what. Applying gentle pressure to her waist with his free hand, he drew her down and over until she was lying on top of him. 'You have the advantage, *Cath fach*,' he said softly. 'Do with me what you will.'

Judith considered him, her swift breathing no longer a mark of panic, but of increasing arousal.

She gave a mischievous smile. 'Do you mean that?' Sitting up she reached to his belt buckle.

'Within reason,' he qualified dubiously as she began slowly unlatching it, her eyes never leaving his face.

He arched so that she could slide the belt from beneath him and drop it with a slithering clink on to the floor. Hearing his breath catch in his throat, watching the expression of pleasure-pain cross his face as she rubbed herself against him, her own sensations were heightened by the knowledge of her effect on him.

He drew her back down, lips replacing his fingers. Judith cried out at the sharper intensity of feeling and wriggled upon him, seeking to ease the core of sensitive pressure between her thighs.

'Wait,' Guyon said breathlessly and shifted her so that he could sit up and pull his tunic over his head and then his shirt. Judith flickered appreciative eyes over his chest and shoulders admiring the lean, toned musculature. They were face to face. Guyon circled her waist and drew

her against him, fingers lacing her hair and running over her skin. He kissed her throat, the white valley between her breasts, found the cord of her bedrobe and gently tugged it undone, pulled her down upon him again, his hands cupping her neat, round buttocks, squeezing her against him.

Judith purred and rubbed herself upon him like a cat. She kissed his throat and chest, twisted her head to follow the line of hair that ran from the centre of his breastbone and over the ridges of his flat belly, her breasts lightly grazing his flesh. He groaned softly and tightened his hold on her and Judith felt her excitement growing as the knowledge of power triumphantly redoubled. She sought the drawstring of his chausses, continuing to nibble the line of hair as it descended.

Suddenly he gasped, banded his arms around her and rolled her hard beneath him. 'Jesu!' he exclaimed hoarsely against her mouth. 'What need have I to show you anything?'

Judith had cried out at his lightning pounce.

Now she shuddered beneath him. The rippling twinges of desire radiating from her loins faltered, for there was the hint of savagery and lust in his voice, the threat of what he might do, and she did not know how to deal with it. 'You're hurting me!' she cried, going rigid in his arms.

Guyon stopped and braced his weight on his elbows to look down at her. He drew a deep, shuddering breath, then let it out again slowly while he mastered himself. 'Judith, I'm sorry,' he muttered, brushing a wisp of hair from her face. 'It is only that I did not expect you to learn quite so quickly. You outpaced me.'

She sniffed and swallowed, rubbed the back of her hand across her eyes and looked at him warily.

'I wouldn't hurt you for the world, you know that.' He bent his head to kiss her eyelids and then tenderly her mouth, playing with her, stroking and nuzzling until her tension subsided and her body once more began to undulate against his own. 'Trust me,' he murmured, pressing small kisses

over her throat, then delicately brushing lower, deliberately tickling. 'Trust me, Judith?' Laughter edged his muffled voice.

'No!' she cried, wriggling. 'Stop it, Guy ... don't.' Laughing herself, she struck out at him. He trapped her fingers, kissed them one by one until they unclenched, then turned them over, tongued her palm and nibbled his way up her arm, along her shoulder to her throat and back to reclaim her mouth. Slowly, lightly as a drifting feather, his fingertips trailed over her pubic hair.

'Trust me?' he repeated against her lips.

'Yes,' Judith whispered, twining her arms around his neck and arching her hips.

Guyon fondled her gently now, stroking her body, the sensitive zones in particular; the tips of her breasts, her inner thighs, then higher still. Judith writhed and cried out, striving towards his teasing, knowledgeable fingers. She pushed against his hand and arched.

With firm purpose and great care, Guyon

entered her, and held her there, his hips pressed down flat, unmoving while her parted flesh settled around him. 'Judith, look at me.'

She opened her eyes which had been squeezed closed against the moment. The feeling of him fully within her was strange. The dreaded intrusion was accomplished and, although not stricken, she was disturbed and uncomfortable.

'Have I changed?'

She searched his face. His eyes were open and shining in the dim candle glow, his expression tender. She could see the gleam and trickle of sweat on his chest and feel the trembling of hard-held restraint.

'No, my lord,' she said. Smiling, she touched his face and shifted her hips to ease the pressure. The movement pressed him deeper within and involuntarily her muscles tightened around him. A keener sensation arced across her loins and was gone. Seeking its source, she pushed against him in a movement older than time. Guyon's head

went back, his eyes closed and his breath emerged in a drawn-out groan. She moved again, her own pleasure sharpened by the knowledge of his and, conceding her the battle, he started to thrust in slow counterpoint.

It was like the first time she had galloped Euraid - wild and exhilarating and a terrifying, delightful risk. The pace increased by steady degrees and so did the imperative needs of her body. She gasped and dug her nails into his shoulders, sought his mouth, demanding with her own, clung to him dizzied, her only thought to hold on to something solid as the world began to tremble and dissolve. And then she did not think at all. She cried his name, unaware that she did so, as her body totally submerged her mind, shattering the barriers to storm-tossed flotsam.

Guyon seized her hips and held her still, panting at her to stop, his forehead pressed into the curve of her neck, but Judith did not heed him and struggled against the restraint, desperate to regain the friction where she needed it.

'Judith, I cannot ...'

Her nails clawed him with sudden urgency and she arched her spine and thrust down hard on him. He felt the small convulsions ripple through her, and, with a gasp of relief, surrendered his own control to the exquisite pulses of climax.

Slowly Judith became aware of his weight on her, no longer taken on his elbows, of his harsh breathing and of his body pressed hard against and within her own. The pleasure still flickered in dying twinges, promising renewal. She slid her hands over the sweat-damp ridges of his ribcage and moved a little beneath him, made uncomfortable by his weight.

Guyon sighed and rubbed his lips over her throat. Then he raised his head and looked her in the eyes.

'You are squashing me,' she complained breathlessly and stifled the urge to giggle as his face fell.

'Did I hurt you? I thought ...' He narrowed his

eyes, considering her. The clawing of her nails could be misconstrued, perhaps even the muffled cries, but not the tremors of her inner flesh. 'Wanton!' he pronounced, rolling over and drawing her with him. 'I shall not call you *Cathfach* again. *Cath wyllt*, perhaps!'

Judith moved sinuously upon him. 'It is better than getting drunk,' she admitted, giggling openly now. 'Just.'

'Remind me to ask you in the middle next time, not afterwards.'

'Next time! You mean we have to do all this again?' She widened her eyes in mock horror. 'Where's the nettle salve?'

'For my back you mean? You must have clawed it to shreds!'

'You should not be so clumsy,' she retorted swiftly, poking out her tongue and then using its tip to flick over his throat, her hips surging playfully.

Guyon laughed. 'Then I needs must practise,' he

said and caught her down to him.

Judith awoke to the noise of a flock of sheep being driven down the road on their way into the city and the sharp whistle of the shepherd commanding his dogs. They were sounds with which she had grown up and it brought to her now the image of the marches greening lushly into summer and filled her with longing to be out of the city and home.

There was a warm weight across her body - Guyon's arm, the fingers in relaxed possession of the curve of her breast. He was still sleeping deeply, sprawled upon his stomach, and had not moved since their last pre-dawn bout of love-making. Her mouth twitched. It was her fault, she knew. She had told him that it was better than getting drunk. Well, indeed it was but, just like wine, it could become addictive.

So great had been her fear of the sexual act as a result of witnessing her mother's degradation at the hands of her violent, contemptuous father, that her own survival of the deed, indeed her

enjoyment and satisfaction, had led her to prove to herself several times that it was no illusion. It was not. The last time, Guyon had asked her, groaning, if she was trying to kill him. Her gaze flickered over his lean, sleep-relaxed body. Coaxed and cajoled, he had become aroused, but it had taken him a long, long time and it had been wonderful. There was a low, dull ache in the small of her back and her body was languorous with content. It was certainly a better aftermath than a drink megrim.

She heard Sir Walter speak to the shepherd and make a fuss of one of the dogs. Secure, and reluctant to break her mood of drowsy contentment, she snuggled back down into Guyon's embrace and closed her eyes.

When Guyon finally roused sufficiently to lift his lids, the morning was high and hot, first mass a memory and the hunters long gone on their quest. Sunlight slanted dustily through a warped gap in the shutters and shot the red silk bed hangings to the colour of flame. The night candle was burned

to a puddle of congealed wax. He empathised. He flicked a wary glance at the sleeping innocence beside him ... Innocence! Good Christ, Rhosyn and even the inimitable Alais de Clare were mere novices compared to the supple, oblivious girl in his bed. Rape. She had feared rape. He stifled a chuckle at the irony.

Gently he touched a tendril of her hair and looked at her curled form, remembering when she had cowered from him, a half-grown starveling with terror-filled eyes. They had come a long way since then, not always along the same road, but converging here at a new crossroads. The Conqueror's granddaughter with the Viking blood of Duke Rollo and the common tanners of Falaise mingling in her veins.

In the light of what he had realised last night, he pondered her immediate parentage, wondering what had driven Alicia to mate with a boy of half her age and twice her experience. Probably he would never know and there were good reasons for keeping such knowledge private, not least the

needs of this vulnerable wanton at his side.

As if aware of his musing regard, Judith stretched and opened her eyes, and yawned at him.

'Good morning, my wild cat,' he greeted her with a kiss.

'You missed the hunt,' she said with a sleepy smile.

'No I didn't,' he contradicted with a grin. 'I just had no inkling that I was the quarry.' Judith blushed. 'No matter, I can think of better ways to spend the day than aiming a bow at a driven deer or whatever. Besides, I'd rather not straddle a horse today.'

Her blush deepened and extended to include her throat and shoulders. 'Are you angry with me about last night, Guy?'

'Which part?' he teased. 'Where you froze Henry's manhood in the fingerbowl, or when you drained mine to a husk?'

Judith bit her lip. Against her scarlet chagrin, her eyes were brilliant, almost topaz. 'It was like drinking that yellow wine, I did not want to stop,' she excused herself, hanging her head.

'Drunk two nights in a row!' he chaffed her. 'What am I to do with you? No, don't tell me, I haven't the strength. Just don't ask me to show you anything ever again, even if you are desperate to know! God's life, it nearly killed me!'

Judith fisted him in the ribs and he yelped. 'But if you were content, it was worth it.' He sobered, looking at her rosy, flustered face. 'I have no objection to dying like that, unless it be four times a night!'

She slanted a quick glance through her lashes. 'At least there will be naught left of you for Alais de Clare,' she said with a return of her accustomed tartness and, sitting up, shook back her hair. The sunlight lit her eyes with sparkling glints of mica.

'I don't want Alais de Clare,' Guyon answered, stretching. 'Why settle for dross when you can

have gold?'

Judith looked at him. 'I am dreaming,' she said pensively. 'One day I am going to wake up alone and cold and realise I have been the dupe of illusion.'

'What has happened to last night's blind faith?' He tugged a strand of her hair. 'Isn't it enough now?'

'It's not that, Guy,' she answered, frowning. 'It is the opposite. I have too much. It isn't true.'

'Never satisfied, are you?' He put his arm around her. 'What do you want me to do? Cut my other wrist for you as well and swear an undying oath?'

Judith shook her head, refusing to be cozened. 'It is I who have bled this time,' she said softly, turning back the covers to look down on the dried blood smearing the insides of her thighs and the sheet.

'Trust me?' He kissed her shoulder. 'Trust me, Judith?'

She could feel his lips smiling there in remembrance. 'Did Rhosyn trust you?'

He had not been expecting it. She felt his lips pause and then leave her skin. He sat up and pushed his hands through his hair and muttered beneath his breath. 'You know where to kick, don't you?'

Judith pleated the coverlet beneath her fingers. Guyon linked his hands around his upraised knees and studied her. 'Rhosyn was not prepared to trust me,' he said after a moment. 'We were never committed in that kind of way. It would have been too dangerous and she saw it, even if I did not.'

Judith regarded him sombrely. 'Guyon, I cannot give you my soul.'

'Nor would I want it,' he said. 'It is too private a thing to give into another's possession. Keep it whole, *Cath fach*. I understand more than you think.'

Judith impatiently scrubbed her forearm across

her eyes. Outside she heard Elflin speak to Helgund and the sound of milk being poured into a container. By the door Cadi whined. Judith put her arms around Guyon and kissed him as if the kiss itself was a talisman. 'I do believe that you could wheedle your way through a thorn thicket,' she sniffed.

He returned the embrace and then drew away to search for some garments in the scattered creased heaps on the floor. 'What do you think I'm doing now?' he said with a wry smile. 'You are the thorniest thicket I've ever encountered.' He paused in his dressing to lean over the bed and kiss her warmly on her lips. 'And the sweetest rose.'

'And you cannot grasp one without risking the other,' she agreed gravely, trying to put all dark qualms behind her while her own words rang like a prophecy in her head.

Guyon stood up, finished buckling his belt and headed towards the door. 'I'll send in Helgund,' he said and paused in fondling Cadi's thrusting head

to stoop and pick up her discarded shift with its knife-slashed lacing. 'You did this apurpose, didn't you?' He tossed the garment on to the bed.

Judith leaned back against the bolster and smiled exactly like her father.

C_{CHAPTER} 19

AUGUST 1100

Thunder rumbled in the distance where the sky hung in purple billows like mulched grapes. On the wall walk, Judith squinted into the distance. Lightning zigzagged. The trees were brilliantly green and the stone of the merlon against which she leaned was a rich, warm gold. Most of Caermoel's defences were still timber, but the keep wall was almost completed, as was the gatehouse containing the portcullis and winding gear.

The messenger had ridden in an hour ago while the sun still shone, bearing the news that Guyon would be here before nightfall and she had set herself to make all ready in the way of food, warmth and comfort and had then hastened up here to look out for his return.

It had been five days since the young men in their hot blood had ventured across the border to steal cattle and corn from the English side. Five days since the alarm had been raised, and Guyon

had gathered his immediate troops and ridden out in pursuit of a fine dairy herd, three Flemish mares with foals at foot belonging to him and the contents of one of Earl Hugh's grain barns.

She looked down as Melyn twined an erect tail around her skirts and mewed plaintively before clawing her way aloft on to her shoulder to settle there, oblivious to the storm that was blowing in from the south. A cry from the far side of the wall walk caused Judith to strain her eyes in that direction and then to smile and hasten towards the bailey steps.

The edge of the storm hit as the men dismounted. Lightning snarled across the sky. Several cows bellowed and baulked as they were penned in a corner of the ward. A groom was taking custody of the three mares and their foals and a belligerent Welsh pony stallion that was lashing out indiscriminately.

Guyon turned from speaking to his groom and saw Judith running towards him, her face alight with welcome. She moved unaffectedly, like a

man, but her gown moulded itself to her slender curves, marking her all woman. The time-wrought changes of her mind and body never ceased to amaze him. A year ago she would have greeted him gravely and stood just out of his reach as if anticipating a blow. Six months ago they would have avoided each other with eyes downcast to conceal hunger and tense fear. Now, laughing, she flung herself into his arms and drew his head down and kissed him. Melyn, jolted from her perch, gave a feline growl of displeasure, leaped vertically from Judith's back and stalked off in the direction of the living quarters.

'It is only five days!' Guyon chuckled, delighted at the warmth of the greeting. 'What will you do when it has to be forty?'

Judith relinquished her grip and blushed, aware of the amused glances of his men. 'I shall take a lover,' she riposted smartly. 'There's a tub prepared and food at the ready. How did you fare?'

Guyon followed her, ducking his head and

increasing his pace as the rain began to cut down. 'We took back what was ours and also a little of what was theirs. You know the rules of border warfare. They won't come raiding again ... not for a while at least.'

'Unless they come *en masse*,' Judith pointed out as they entered the wooden building in the bailey that was their private living quarters whilst the castle was being built.

'Could we withstand a full Welsh assault, not just the prickings of their hot-blooded young men?'

'Probably, but it's not a notion I want to test just yet. Has all been quiet here?'

'Mostly. Madoc came two days ago with Rhys and a distant relative from Bristol who's helping him with the business. They brought that new ram you asked Madoc to get. He says that Heulwen's walking now and chattering like a magpie, and that she's already strewing the road with broken hearts. I think he wanted to remind you of the bond.'

'I hardly need reminding of that,' he said, half under his breath. 'Did he mention Rhosyn?'

'Only that she was well and sent you her duty. If there was more, he probably thought it unwise to confide it to me.'

'How could there be more?' Guyon teased, squeezing her waist. 'You leave me neither the energy nor the inclination to play games with other women. What's this?' He moved the polished agate weight and picked up the letter from the trestle.

'From my mother,' Judith said, going to pour hot wine. 'She asks when we are going to leave our eyrie and make her a visit.'

Guyon took the wine and kissed her hand. 'Somewhere between Michaelmas and Martinmas,' he replied, expression thoughtful as he drank. 'I want a word with her anyway.'

'What about, Guy?'

He tossed the parchment down and finished the wine. 'Nothing. A minor detail concerned with your

inheritance.'

Judith's lips tightened in response to his casual tone and the blank innocence of his eyes. The reality was upon her, warm and secure as a duck down mantle, but now and again she pondered the difference between belief and blindfold. Guyon was dissembling. She knew that look by now and also the method. A smattering of sugared truth and eyes warmly guileless to conceal what he wished to conceal.

Dutifully she unbuckled his swordbelt but her hands were jerky. Guyon looked at her mulishly set lips. His own mouth curved and then straightened. It was not really funny, for he had no defence save to tell her the truth and the shock of that would probably do far greater harm than the withholding. If he had not been so road- and battle-weary, he would never have permitted his tongue the mistake of speaking an absent thought aloud.

'What kind of minor detail?' Judith challenged, stepping away from him, the belt in her hands,

sword and dagger still attached.

Guyon busied himself removing his garments. He was not wearing the customary Norman war gear of mail hauberk and gambeson, but hunting clothes topped by a sleeveless sheepskin jerkin. When in Wales it was wisest to do as the Welsh did. It was impossible to cross a swiftly flowing torrent and pursue winding, scant paths if weighed down by armour and slowed by supply trains which were vulnerable to attack.

'The kind that is your mother's private business. If she wants to tell you, then well and good,' he answered more evenly than he felt, wondering how to extricate himself before the thing got out of hand.

'I am surprised that your brain does not burst with all the little matters you cannot confide to me for fear of breaking your oath!' she snapped.

'So am I.' Guyon gave her a wry look. 'Judith, I don't want to quarrel.'

'That is up to you.' She tossed her head and

turned from him to lay his swordbelt aside. When she turned round again, she gasped aloud at sight of the clotted red diagonal line across his chest. 'Holy Mother!' she cried and ran to get her basket of medicines.

Guyon drew breath to say that it was only a scratch and the Welshman who had given it to him was in much worse case, but quickly thought the better of it. Closing his mouth, he contrived to look as wan and limp as rude health and a summer tan would permit. Unresisting, he let her lead him to the bed and push him down.

'How did you get this?'

He looked at her through his lashes and saw the terror in her eyes and felt a flicker of guilt for his deceit. Last time he had come to her wounded he had almost died and the memory had obviously left its taint of fear. 'The raid leader didn't want to relinquish his gains and he was faster than I thought. He's gone to Chester as a hostage - if he does not die of his own wounds on the way.'

'Why not bring him here?'

'I don't want to encourage Welsh hordes to come visiting, not even to parley, until the defences have grown a little, and I haven't the time to - ouch!'

'Lie still then. You are lucky it is so shallow. Some comfrey and marigold salve should suffice. Are you hurt anywhere else?'

'Yes.' He closed his eyes as though faint.

'Where?' Anxiously she leaned over him.

Fast as a closing trap, his hands circled her waist and pulled her down on top of him. 'Where only you can ease me,' he murmured, subduing her retort with his lips.

Judith struggled briefly in order to satisfy her conscience, but with no real enthusiasm; in a moment, with a soft sound of capitulation, she yielded herself up to the pleasure. Three months of intensive, inventive tuition had taught her the refinements of this new and delightful skill and how to use it to its best purpose. How to provoke

and tease and taunt him to the brink and then hold him there suffering, until she herself could bear it no longer and took them both over the edge.

Of course, she reminded herself hazily, it was a double-edged weapon and Guyon was an adept, as demonstrated by the dextrous manner in which he had just divested her of clothing. Frequently he gave her the control, knowing that it heightened her pleasure, but if he chose to take the initiative, as now, he was quite capable of submerging her in a welter of pure, fierce sensation that made everything else insignificant until well after the event. The acrid smell of horse and sweat sharpened her hunger, as did the nibbling play of his stubble-surrounded mouth on hers and the feel of his hands seeking down over her belly.

Lightning zigzagged and dazzled and the rain beat down, thudding the ground like the footsteps of an army running. In the bailey, Simon de Vere swung from the saddle of his trembling, near-spent horse. He had been in the saddle for such a long time that his legs at first refused to support

him and the groom had to help him up from the mud as he fell.

'Lord Guyon is, er ... busy,' said de Bec to the young man as he was helped, limping, into the hall. 'Best sit down and recover yourself awhile first. We've not long ridden in ourselves.'

'He won't be too busy to hear these tidings,' Simon said, pushing his fingers through his rain-sleek hair and wiping a drip from the end of his nose. 'The King is dead, slain in the New Forest and Prince Henry's claimed the crown. I've half killed my horse getting here.'

De Bec's bushy brows shot into his silver fringe. 'God have mercy,' he said, crossing himself. 'Here, sit down by the fire. You, wench, bring food and drink for Sir Simon and tell mistress Helgund to fetch my lord and lady.'

Judith looked at her husband as the sweat dried on their bodies and their breathing slowed. Outside the thunder rumbled and the lightning blinked against a gap in the shutters. For a time she had felt as if she was riding in the midst of the

storm and she could still feel small flickers on the periphery. 'When Madoc came, he told me something else too,' she said after a moment. 'Apparently, Mabel de Serigny is with child.'

Guyon had been sleepily nuzzling her shoulder, but now he lifted his head and gazed at her with widening eyes. 'Impossible! She's ninety if she's a day, Judith!'

She laughed at the incredulity on his face. 'Not quite. She's only a few years older than Mama. Eight and forty or some such. Oh, I know it's old to catch for a babe, but not impossible.'

'And I thought Walter de Lacey was a coward,' Guyon said facetiously, but a frown forked his brow. He wondered what would happen if the same God's grace was granted to Alicia. Even if she and his father did obtain a dispensation to marry, it would be the devil's own work to sort out the resulting blood ties.

'I suppose it is all in his favour,' Judith added, stretching sinuously, and rolled on to her stomach.

'If she carries the babe successfully then he gets an heir out of her; if she dies, then he's free to look elsewhere and because he is rich, he will be able to pick and choose. He cannot lose.'

There was a soft knock on the door and Helgund's voice came impassively from without. 'My lord, my lady, you are sought in the hall. There is important news from Winchester.'

Guyon groaned. Judith scrambled from the bed and hastily donned her bedrobe. 'Can't it wait?' she snapped, feeling like a serving wench caught coupling in the straw.

'It is Simon de Vere, my lady. He says that the King is dead.'

'What?' Judith stared over her shoulder at Guyon. He swore and reached for his discarded clothes.

'Messire de Bec sent me to fetch you both, my lady. I do not know any more.'

'All right, Helgund. Thank you.'

Judith abandoned both bath and bedrobe to find her shift. 'If Rufus is dead, who is King in his place?'

'Who do you think?' Guyon snapped because it was such an obvious question. 'I'd better have one of the lads scour my hauberk because I'm going to need it.' He stood still long enough for her to smear his wound with salve, then dragged on his shirt and tunic, tugged one of her combs through his hair and strode muttering from the room. Judith glared after him, then subdued her anger. She knew he had been tired when he rode in, and wounded, and the energy expended just now between the sheets would further have drained his resources. Small wonder if his mood was sour when instead of sleep and recuperation, he received a summons of this ilk. Heaving a sigh, she called for Helgund to help her dress.

'An accident,' said Simon, whom Richard had sent from Winchester on the morning of the funeral. 'A hunting accident last Thursday evening. Walter Tirel shot at a deer and missed and hit the

King in the chest. He died instantly. Prince Henry was with the hunting party, but not near the scene of the death. He rode straight to Winchester and secured the treasury. He claims the right of being born the son of a king over his brother.' Simon knuckled his bloodshot eyes. 'He expects your feudal oath as soon as you may.'

Guyon pressed his own eyes with the heels of his hands. It was too late to set out tonight, but arrangements would have to be made for the following dawn and riders sent on ahead to organise their nightly stops. From here to London was a good six to seven days' ride; more if the weather continued dire.

'Myself and Richard must have been the last to see him alive, except for the hunting party,' Simon added into the silence, compelled to speak by renewed ripples of shock. 'I still cannot believe it. If only he had stayed abed and not taken up de Clare's suggestion to hunt, he might yet be alive.'

'Gilbert of Tunbridge?' asked Judith.

'Yes, and his brother too. The King had been

plagued by a queasy gut, the reason he didn't want to hunt in the morning, but he was fully recovered by noon. After the dinner hour, de Clare said he would not mind clearing his head by riding out to see what he could bring down and it seems to me that he was not talking of deer and that his head had never been clearer in his life.' Simon attacked his trencher. Rufus had had his failings, but he had never found him a hard taskmaster and Richard had been moved openly to tears at the news of his untimely death.

'Are you saying he was murdered?' de Bec demanded.

'I'm not saying anything.' Simon avoided looking at his companions. 'Tirel has fled the country squawking his innocence like a dust trail. He says he was nowhere near the King, that it was not his arrow.'

'And the de Clares are his brothers-by-marriage.' Judith's voice was as colourless as her face.

'I suppose the inquest will decide the truth of the matter,' de Bec said, stretching out his legs until his heels pressed Cadi's white rump.

'What inquest?' Simon demanded sourly. 'Henry's not holding one.'

Guyon paused eating to stare at Simon, then continued to chew, but slowly, as if ruminating. 'Who else went out to hunt, Si?'

'Rannulf des Aix en Louvent, your lady's uncle William Breteuil, Gilbert de Laigle and William de Monfichet.' Simon shook his head. 'Rufus must have been mad. He might as well have ridden out with a pack of wolves. They didn't even stop to bring his body back to the lodge in decency, but rode straight for the treasury at Winchester. It was left to me and Richard to take charge of the body from the back of a charcoal burner's cart and compose it decently for the return to Winchester. It's wrong, I ...' He swallowed convulsively and clenched his fist on the trestle. 'Anyway, Henry's claimed the crown and you'd best be quick about swearing your allegiance. He hasn't stopped

since the arrow was loosed.'

Judith rose from the board, her eyes blank and, without excuse or explanation, drifted away from the men like a sleepwalker. No one took much notice. Guyon cast her a sidelong glance of surprise, but his mind was occupied with Simon's budget of news and its implications and what now had to be done. The Welsh situation was stable for the nonce and could be left to cook awhile unattended and Henry, whatever the blots on his soul, had the makings of a strong monarch. Besides, with the private connections of bloodline, Guyon knew that providing he did nothing wildly asinine or treacherous, he was guaranteed the royal favour ... for as long as Henry remained King.

'There'll be a flaming barrel of pitch when Robert Curthose gets to hear of this,' he said and rubbed his hands slowly together, feeling the calluses on his palms where he had recently grasped sword and shield.

'And de Belleme will be delighted to light

torches from it,' said de Bec.

'Oh yes. We will need to work very hard indeed to make sure Henry keeps his crown, no matter the manner of his obtaining it. Curthose has about as much control over Robert de Belleme as a wrung chicken has control of its limbs. You've seen what he's done in Normandy. God forbid he should get to wreak his worst on our lands too.'

'Want me to increase the patrol on our boundary with Thornford? It's been very quiet there of late.'

'It won't harm, but don't stretch the patrols too thinly elsewhere to compensate.' Guyon shoved his trencher aside and called for a scribe to be brought so that he could inform his vassals of the news.

Judith picked up Guyon's swordbelt and examined the strip of buckskin without really seeing its embossed golden leopards or the elaborate twists of gold wire decorating the buckle, or indeed the article itself. The sword lay sheathed on the bed. She had had one of the

boys clean and oil it, for it had seen recent hard use against the Welsh. The sharpening of the two edges she left to Guyon. She could have done it herself, she was perfectly capable, but the feel of it in her hands would have frightened her with suggestions of what she should do with it.

Sitting down on the bed she stared at the rumpled sheets, remembering a warm spring night and the laughter of high-born men carousing in a candlelit room, drinking out of green glass cups; feasting with murder on their minds. The Prince and the de Clare brothers had all been members of the fatal hunting party and Walter Tirel was married to Gilbert and Roger's sister.

Malwood, the royal hunting lodge, was only sixteen miles from Winchester, the seat of the treasury. Tirel had fled with all eyes on him, when folk should have been looking at those men left behind. And Guyon knew, and had known since that May evening. She remembered him coming to her in the bedchamber when their guests had gone, his expression preoccupied, and when she

had questioned him, he had avoided the answer. What had he said? A confidence he would rather die than break, especially to her. And if he knew, then he was implicated. He had long been a companion of Henry's and his apathy towards Rufus was no secret.

Judith frowned. The disarrayed sheets reminded her all too clearly of that first night, only now the memory was not tender, but obscene. He had come from plotting a man's death and lain with her. It was a violation. She felt sick and wished suddenly that the bathtub was still in the room so that she could scrub herself free of his touch, the very thought of his touch. His seed was deep within her body. She put her hand to her mouth, striving not to retch.

Guyon entered the room, stretching and yawning. 'I could sleep for a week,' he complained as he dropped the curtain, 'but I suppose a few hours will have to suffice. I never realised Richard was so fond of Rufus. Then again, it's probably his position at court he fears

to lose.' He picked up the scabbard, examined it absently and held out his hand for the swordbelt. She dropped it on the bed and, rubbing her arms as if frozen to the bone, turned her back on him.

Guyon eyed her from beneath his brows and busied himself with fastening the thongs. 'We're stopping at Ravenstow tomorrow noon. It's safer if we escort you there on our way south. I do not think the Welsh will attack Caermoel, but you never know how this news will affect them. I've already spoken to Elflin and Helgund about the packing.'

Judith did not speak because she could not trust herself to do so. Guyon put down the belt, his scrutiny sharpening, for neither of his remarks had been granted a reply and he had not seen her stand like that, clutching herself protectively, since the early days of their marriage.

'Judith?'

The night candle flung lumbering shadows at the walls. Melyn leaped at a moth, caught it deftly in a flashing paw and bore it triumphantly away to

a corner to devour.

'It can't be helped. I'll come home as soon as I can,' he added and then, aware that without saying anything she had put him on the guilty defensive, he tightened his mouth and began to remove his garments.

'Don't flatter yourself!' she snarled. 'Stay as long as you choose!'

Guyon pulled off his shirt, swearing as the linen caught the rough line of the dagger scratch on his chest. He wondered briefly if it was near her time of the month again. Her tongue was apt to be sharper then and her moods liable to swing without warning. After a moment when she remained aloof and contained, he relented and tried again, coming up behind her and setting his hand on her shoulder. 'Judith, love, what's wrong? Tell me.'

She shrugged away from him, fighting nausea, and flung round to face him. 'Rufus was murdered, wasn't he?' she challenged.

Guyon shrugged, feeling puzzled. 'Probably.'

'Do not play the innocent with me, my lord. You knew what was going to happen!'

'That's preposterous!' He reached for her. She avoided him. 'I haven't been near the King or the court for a full three months and Henry knows that whatever the de Clares would do for him, I certainly would not!'

'No? You had reason to dislike Rufus and you have long associations with Henry.'

'Christ, girl, what do you take me for? I might not have liked Rufus or wanted to be a party to his private habits, but that is hardly a reason to plot his death or barter my honour.'

'Then tell me what Prince Henry told you when he dined with us at Whitsuntide,' she challenged.

She saw it: the flicker of his lids, the bunching of muscle in his jaw before his face went blank. 'He told me nothing,' he said tonelessly.

'Liar!' she flung at him. 'It was less than three

months ago. Do you think I am so besotted by your charm that I cannot remember? You said there was something you could not tell me, a political secret, a confidence you would rather die than break, and you were shaken by it. There was cold sweat on your brow.'

'That was nothing to do with Rufus's death.'

'What was it then?' Her mouth twisted. 'After all, nothing can be much more damning than plotting a king's death.'

His face remained expressionless. 'I will not tell you, Judith. It is not my place and perhaps it would do more damage than it would resolve.'

She gave him a look compounded of triumph and defeat. 'I thought you would have an answer,' she said with contempt.

He gripped her arms. 'Judith, I swear to you on my soul

... on my mother's soul, that whatever was plotted against Rufus, I had no part in it. I have no defence except my word. The words that would

absolve me, I will not speak. It would only shift burdens and guilts to shoulders less able to bear them.'

'You're hurting me,' she said dully.

He swore and relaxed his grip, but only to soften it to an embrace and pull her against him. 'Judith, what do I do if you won't trust me?'

She stood quivering within his arms, torn between doubt and doubt. Shield or blindfold, she dreaded to make the decision. He was adept with words, fashioning them to his needs, could convince her black was white if only given the opportunity. 'What do I do if you betray that trust?' she responded and slid her hand over the fine black hairs of his braced forearm, denuded by the ridge of scar tissue where the boar had tushed him, and on up to the smooth curve of his bicep. 'Prove me wrong.'

'How?' he asked bleakly. 'If I fulfil your trust I break another.'

She refused to relent. 'And which is more

important?'

Leaving her, he sat down on the bed and rubbed his hands over his face. 'I don't know. Neither. The edge is so finely balanced I dare not tip the scale. All I can swear to you again is that I was not involved in any plot to murder Rufus.' He looked across at her where she stood braced as if waiting to receive a blow and let out his breath on a heavy sigh. 'It's late. Are you going to come to bed or stand there glaring at me all night?' He held out his hand.

She looked at his outstretched graceful fingers, knew how they would feel gliding over her body, trailing fever in their wake, knew how they looked holding reins or a sword, knew their tensile strength and of what they were capable.

'Neither,' she said, and walked out of the room.

C HAPTER 20

Rhosyn looked at the crocks of brawn on the trestle, product of a long morning's work. She sealed the last one with a thick layer of melted lard.

'All done?' queried Heulwen, beaming up at her. Rhosyn smiled and lifted her younger daughter to sit on the trestle. Heulwen was a chubby bundle of energy with a bright crop of red-gold curls and green-blue eyes, the legacy of her Norman great-grandfather, so Madoc, who had known him, had said. The legacy of her Norman father was her ability to cozen warm approval and adulation from smitten members of the opposite sex.

Rhosyn had not seen Guyon since immediately after Heulwen's birth. Messages passed with Madoc. The trading bond remained strong, but the gossamer ties that had bound herself and Guyon for four years had dissolved into the wind, saving this one living, finespun thread.

'All done,' she confirmed and, straddling the infant on her hip, left the kitchen quarters and set off across the small, withy-enclosed compound towards the hall. After ten strides she stopped short as if she had been poled with an ox-mallet.

Eluned was jumping up and down at Guyon's stirrup and his chestnut courser was sidling restlessly and rolling a white eye. Beyond, she saw Eric and the men of the guard. Guyon leaned over the pommel, one hand on his thigh, the other drawn tight on the reins as he spoke to Eluned. She tossed her head mutinously, but after a moment stepped aside from the horse. Rhosyn's heart began to thud. As if it did not matter, as if she had only seen him last week, she went forward with a cordial greeting on her lips.

Guyon dismounted and took hold of the chestnut's bridle. Rhosyn saw that his clothes were powdered with dust and that the points of his cheekbones and the bridge of his nose had caught the burn of the late summer sun. 'May we claim the hospitality of a drink?' he asked. 'And

water for the horses?'

'You know you are always welcome,' she responded and her face grew warm beneath his stare. The luminous brown gaze flickered to Heulwen, who struggled against her mother's confining arms.

'I did not know,' he said, giving the horse to one of his men. 'It has been a long time. Where's Madoc?'

'Away with Rhys and my second cousin Prys to Bristol, but we expect him home any day now. Did you especially want to see him?'

'I've a few commissions for him. How's his health?'

'He works too hard, but I might as well try butting down a stone wall with my head as try to stop him. He struggles to breathe sometimes and he gets a pain in his arm, but he won't give up.' She turned to lead him into the hafod. 'I hear he spoke to your wife recently.'

'Yes.'

Rhosyn did not miss the lack of inflection and looked at him curiously. Her father said that Lady Judith had been glowing with the contentment of being well loved and secure. Guyon had not come here in over a year. She had begun to assume he would not come again and that the contentment must be mutual.

'You are growing tall, *cariad*,' Guyon said to Eluned as he sat down. The amber bead he had given her gleamed against the dark wool of her gown. 'And pretty as your mother.'

'Am I prettier than your wife?' she challenged him.

'Is an apple prettier than a pear?' he countered and drew her down to him, lightly kissing her cheek, his eyes meeting Rhosyn's troubled stare over the child's narrow shoulder. 'No one can answer that.'

'Not even you?' Rhosyn mocked before calling one of the serving women. 'Do you want my father to visit?'

'No, I've instructions for him here.' Guyon produced a roll of parchment and took the cup of mead that was given to him. 'Payment in raw wool as usual, unless I hear otherwise.'

She nodded briskly. Their eyes met again, examining, searching. Heulwen, released from her mother's grasp, wobbled towards him, lost her balance and plonked down squarely on her bottom. Undeterred, she struggled up again, grasping Guyon's cross-garter for support.

'*Da*,' she said, and smiled disarmingly at him. It was the Welsh word for father.

'She says that to everyone,' Rhosyn muttered quickly, her colour high.

Guyon looked from the engaging fire-haired child to her mother who was obviously struggling to retain her equanimity in his presence. It had been a mistake to come, he thought, born of his own pain, and he stirred restlessly as if he would rise and leave.

Rhosyn was on her feet before he could make

the thought a fact. 'I want to show you something,' she said with forced brightness. 'Can you spare a moment?'

He looked slightly taken aback. 'Of course.'

'Eluned, look after Heulwen for me.'

Eluned made a face but was not so foolish as to refuse.

Guyon raised a brow as she led him into her private chamber, but forbore to utter the ambiguous remark that came first to mind. Matters had changed since then. Whether or not for the better, he no longer knew. Rhosyn selected a key from the bunch upon the ring at her waist and looked over her shoulder at him. 'We hear you are pushing into Wales now. A new keep, no less.'

'To protect the border against Lord Gruffyd's raiding. It's no use breeding good raw wool only to have it disappear into the mountains.'

'I sometimes think that you Normans would eat the world if you could.'

'A nibble here and there,' he answered, refusing to be drawn, for there was no heart in him to argue. 'What did you want to show me?'

She unlocked a stout oak coffer and withdrew from its depths a bolt of fabric. 'What do you think of this? My father bought it in Flanders on the last trip, from an Italian merchant who owed him a favour.'

The cloth flowed on to the bed. It held the rich amber and russet tones of autumn leaves and where the light was trapped by the pile, it shimmered like a sunlit pool. To the touch it was soft and thick and springy, like sun-warmed moss or cat's fur. Having never set eyes on the like before and being thoroughly curious, Guyon sat down on the bed and sought to discover everything that Rhosyn knew.

'So all this is done with shears,' he murmured, smoothing the pile.

She looked at his slender fingers on the nap of the cloth. Heulwen's were chubby little stars,

formless as yet. 'It is a detailed skill and not many have it. My father thought of selling it in Winchester at the next court gathering.'

'Next court gathering's in London in November,' Guyon said. 'What price for a Flemish ell of this stuff?'

Her hazel eyes met his and locked. His crinkled at the corners. She suggested a sum. He laughed and responded with an amount much lower.

'What's happening in November?'

'King Henry's marriage to Edith of Scotland. Judith suits autumn colours.'

'Your new King is to wed?'

'It's been under negotiation for a while, since before Rufus died. I think that they have only met once or twice. Still, that's more than Judith and I had.'

Rhosyn gave him a considering look. 'Is she still a child, Guy?'

'Neither child nor virgin, but as vulnerable as

blown glass.' His brow furrowed. 'God knows, Rhos, I think I have her and then she eludes me with a twist of her mind and we are back where we started.'

'I know what you mean,' she said with a pained smile and then named another sum a little lower.

His brow cleared. 'I can get two ells of silk damask for that price!'

'But then silk damask is not so rare.'

'And you are priceless.' He glinted her a look and made another bid. She snapped a response. He pretended to ponder before answering.

Rhosyn began folding the bolt back upon itself.

'I'm not even sure that I want it,' he added with a grimace. 'Judith will probably think I am offering it to her as a sweetener. We quarrelled before I left and I had no defence except my word and that, apparently, is not good enough.'

Rhosyn straightened and stared at him. 'And is it a sweetener? Are you buying because you

cannot have for the asking?'

'I don't think so.' He frowned. 'The King's marriage will throw her into the royal circle. Henry's new Queen will be feted by the wives and daughters of the English barons and Judith will need to dress according to her rank. It is a practical luxury, I suppose.' His expression lightened and his eyes sparkled with devilry. 'And since Judith will be wearing it at court among all those other envious rich men's wives who will nag their husbands to death for a gown of the same, it behoves you to be generous in your dealings with me!'

Despite herself, Rhosyn was forced to laugh. 'Guy, you wretch!'

He grinned at her. Her heart melted but she did not show it. 'Very well, I'll meet you halfway.'

'As ever,' he said gravely, his eyes alight, and stood up.

She had forgotten how tall he was and the mail he wore made him seem twice his actual breadth.

Her body craved him. Her mind, cold and clear, prevented her from making a fool of herself. Her time was past. Out in the hall she could hear his men and Heulwen's crow of laughter. She moved towards the sounds of sanity.

'Robert de Belleme is back in the marches,' he warned, catching her arm as he followed her out. 'Alert your father if he does not already know. De Belleme is in a savage humour. Henry's much harder to handle than Rufus was and he'll take it out on those least able to defend themselves. Have a care to yourself and the children and remember what I said about an escort if you should need to travel.'

'How could I forget when you keep ramming it down my throat?' She rolled her eyes heavenwards. 'Guy, I am not a half-wit.'

He squeezed her waist and gave a deprecatory smile. 'No, *cariad*, but I am.'

C_{HAPTER} 21

Alicia muttered an oath beneath her breath as she inadvertently stabbed herself with the embroidery needle for the third time in as many minutes. Sucking her finger, she bade Agnes light the candles. Then she looked across the brazier towards her daughter who sat with her shoulder pressed into the wall, unseeing eyes on the fading rain-spattered light through the open shutters.

It had not escaped Alicia's notice that her daughter and Guyon were barely on speaking terms these days. Judith behaved as if she loathed the sight of him, would not even let him near enough to lay a hand on her shoulder and refused if possible to make eye contact. Sometimes when he turned away, she would look at him, her eyes filled with bewilderment. Alicia's only conclusion thus far was that Guyon had consummated the marriage and that Judith had reacted badly, but it did not satisfactorily explain

all the other tensions she felt boiling around them. Judith seemed to feel she had a genuine grievance. Guyon defended himself like a man with his hands tied behind his back, desperately but without effectiveness. Occasionally she had seen temper flash in his eyes and then extinguish, doused by Judith's cold contempt and his own control.

Indeed, since Henry had granted Guyon more lands following his coronation and marriage to the Princess Edith last week, Judith's mood had been vicious and there had been no living with her. Guyon had chosen to remain absent, attending upon Henry in council at Westminster. Judith, who should have been with him visiting the Queen, had professed a headache and declined to come and now sat shivering on the window seat, staring blankly into the distance.

'Come away to the brazier, love,' entreated Alicia with a worried frown. 'If there's a draught, you'll catch a chill.'

Judith gave a wordless shake of her head.

Alicia carefully set the needle into the fabric, put her sewing down and crossed to the window. Close to, she saw why Judith had not answered. Her throat was jerking convulsively as she fought down the sobs that were struggling to tear their way to the surface and in the fading light, tears tracked glistening trails down her cheeks.

Alicia's own eyes prickled with pain at the sight of her daughter's suffering. Filled with worry, she folded Judith in a tender embrace.

The feel of her mother's arms around her, the secure, familiar smell of her, and the outpouring of love and sympathy were too much and Judith yielded to a turbulent storm of grief. Alicia held and rocked her, soothed her with murmured words and reassurances, stroked her hair and, when the first violence had passed, drew her away to a seat near the brazier. She dismissed the hovering, worried Agnes with a brief nod and a request for more charcoal.

'Now then,' she said as the curtain dropped behind the maid. 'What is wrong between you and

Guyon? Sweeting, can it not be mended? Is it a matter of pride? Another woman?

Judith shook her head and blew her nose on the square of linen that was handed to her. 'They would be easily overcome,' she said shakily. 'No, Mama, it is a matter of trust. He looks me in the face and lies. I cannot bear it!'

'Most men lie at one time or another,' Alicia said ruefully. 'Are you sure you are not making a mountain out of a molehill?'

Judith lowered the linen square to her lap and wrung it into a rope. Her chin wobbled. 'I am sure. There is something he will not tell me. I have asked and asked him, but he just backs away, walks out of the room if I persist and the stupid thing is, Mama, that if he did tell me, admitted to my face what I already know, I think I would die.'

'Daughter, what do you mean?' Alicia looked at her with increasing anxiety, sensing deeper water than a mere lovers' misunderstanding or jealous quarrel. Judith bent her head and began to cry again and shiver. Through the tears, muffled, a

little incoherent and punctuated by long hesitation, Alicia received the tale and her own stare became as desolate as her daughter's. She put her hand to her mouth, feeling not just queasy but dreadfully sick.

'Mama, what am I going to do?' Judith wept brokenly.

Alicia stood up and moved stiffly to the flagon. It was almost empty but she splashed dregs into a cup and, ignoring the sediment, gulped it down. 'Your husband is innocent,' she said abruptly. 'The guilt is all mine. Lay the blame at my door, child, not his.'

Judith turned her head and stared at her mother in bewilderment.

'Yes, you do have a right to know, but not from your husband's stumbled-upon knowledge.' Assailed by shock and dizziness, she reached for and grabbed the back of the bench chair. She had not believed in her wildest nightmare that it would come like this, so suddenly without time to

prepare. What was she going to say? Mary, mother of God.

'Judith ...' She swallowed hard, lifted her chin and forced out the words as if they were scalding her tongue. '... Judith, Maurice de Montgomery was not your father ... I should have told you long since, but it was never the time ... And now I fear it is too late.'

Judith stared at her struggling mother, as if she had suddenly grown two heads.

Alicia put her hand to her breast. 'I know it is difficult for you to understand, but if Maurice had ever found out--'

'Then who is?' Judith interrupted.

'Judith, I ...' Alicia extended her hand in a pleading gesture.

Judith leaped to her feet, ignoring it. 'Who, Mama?' she demanded again.

Alicia made a small, frightened gesture. 'Henry ... Prince Henry ... the King.'

'That's not possible. He is only Guy's age now!' Judith stared at her mother, appalled and disbelieving.

'Even at fourteen he was no novice to the game,' Alicia answered wearily. 'He knew more than a woman twelve years wed.' Of necessity, she held Judith's gaze, but the feelings of guilt were almost more than she could bear, and her daughter's anguished look seared her heart.

'Why, Mama, why?'

Alicia gripped the bench until her knuckles whitened.

'Why?' Judith repeated, and dashed her sleeve across her eyes.

'Maurice blamed me for being barren. Every month when I bled he would beat me and the times in between he used me as if we were dog and bitch ... and for nothing. Maurice had more sluts and casual whores than I can recall, but not one of them quickened. He was unable to beget children.' Her mouth twisted. 'Prince Henry came

visiting on a hunting trip. Maurice was away. I had the fading remains of a black eye and bruises on my arms and his latest whore was flouting my authority in the hall. It did not matter that Henry was so young. I was so sick of Maurice that I'd have lain down for a leprous beggar in order to get myself with child and shut his filthy mouth. We had a night and a morning and you were conceived. For a time things were better. He did not beat or abuse me lest I miscarried, but after you were born, a daughter, matters went from bad to worse. He expected me to conceive again and when I did not the beatings increased apace.'

Judith's voice cracked. 'Mama, why didn't you tell me before?'

'I meant to, truly I did, but the time was never right and I knew how much you hated Maurice. At least when he beat you, you thought he had the right. I was afraid what you would reveal to him if he drove you too far.'

'And Guyon knows the truth of my begetting?'

'Not all of it,' Alicia watched her daughter

anxiously. Judith's expression was now unreadable, but her hands were clenched at her sides and much as Alicia desired to cross the gulf and embrace her, the fear of rebuff was greater and held her rooted to the spot. 'Probably he has Henry's version of the event ... I was not even sure until you spoke that Henry knew of your existence.'

'There have been remarks passed in court concerning my likeness to Arlette of Falais,' Judith said flatly as the control to understand warred with the need to strike out. Her marriage had been ripped apart by this murky secret from the past - her mother's past. She remembered the accusations she had flung at Guyon in her pain, and how he had absorbed them, swearing his innocence, but unable to give her the facts. And now it might be too late to set matters to rights. The pain was physical. 'Mama ...' She stopped and looked round as Cadi trotted into the room and shook herself, spraying water from her close white coat. Guyon followed her, diamonds of rain winking on his fur-lined cloak.

His hair had begun to curl at the edges. He was clutching a roll of parchment in one hand and his expression was at first blank, then wary as he looked at the two women and sensed the tension.

Alicia gave a soft gasp and her knees buckled. Guyon did not quite reach her in time and her head struck the sharp side of the brazier as she fell. Judith was rooted to the spot, unable to move, all her being still caught up in shock. Guyon bent over Alicia and felt for the pulse in her throat. It beat there steadily enough - in rhythm with the blood welling through her dark hair. He swore and propped her senseless form against him and pressed the cuff of his tunic to the side of her head.

'Judith, for God's love, don't just stand there like a sheep, go and get your medicines - make haste, she's bleeding hard!'

The snarled urgency in his voice jerked her into movement. She snatched up the nearest thing available to help him staunch the flow - her mother's painstakingly worked embroidery - thrust

it at him, and sped to find her nostrums.

Grimly, quickly, she worked, ruining her beautiful gown, her commands to him terse and authoritative and he did as she bade him without complaint or demur. At last, finished, she sat back to regard her handiwork. The stitches were not as neat as they might have been, for the light was poor and she had been in a hurry, but it would not matter. Alicia's hair would cover the scar.

Her mother was dazed, but her colour was reasonable, her breathing and heartbeat steady and her pupils responded to the candle flame passed in front of them. Gently, they undressed her to her shift and Guyon carried her to the curtained bed and laid her in it. Together they looked down at her and then at each other, and slowly Judith walked into Guyon's embrace and laid her head against his chest.

'I can see why you kept it from me,' she said in a small voice. 'Guyon, I know it is not enough, but for what it is worth I'm sorry.'

'She told you, then? I was going to speak to her about it, but Henry has kept me too busy for leisure these last few days and, truth to tell, I could not bear the atmosphere in this house for longer than it took to change my clothes.'

'Guy ...'

He studied her capable blood-caked fingers gripping the dark stuff of his tunic. 'Hush, love, we've all made our mistakes, yes, and paid for them.' He grimaced. And perhaps still were paying.

She lifted her eyes to him. 'Do you think that Henry will openly acknowledge me?'

'Christ in heaven, I hope he has more sense! Mischief prompted him to tell me. He likes to call the tune and watch men dance, but if he officially recognises you as his child, what do you think Robert de Belleme will do? Aside from the insult your mother's adultery would cast on the Montgomery bloodline, there is the matter of your birthright. You hold lands that are not legally yours.

If your uncles ever discovered the truth, we'd have a war on our hands.'

'But they wouldn't ... not with Henry ...'

'De Belleme is backing Robert Curthose for the crown and so are more than half the other barons. I've letters with me, rough drafts as yet, commanding out the fyrd, the common men of the shires and my own feudal levies. Henry is preparing for war with the ordinary English people as his backbone because he does not know how many of the smiling faces at his table are also smiling at Curthose. If Curthose, with de Belleme at his right hand, carries the day, then God help us!'

Judith shuddered. 'Guy, stop frightening me!'

'Our lives have been a misery these last three months because you thought I had lied,' he said with wry humour.

'I know.' She shivered. 'I do not really mean it. I suppose I would rather be scared to death than so miserable I want to die.'

'So, I am innocent, *Cath fach*, but what of Henry? Rufus was his own brother.'

'I do not feel as though Henry is my father,' she said slowly after a moment. 'I only know it is so because I have been told and even now my wits are bemused. But I do not believe I care what Henry has plotted. My father ... Lord Maurice I mean, committed crimes equally foul, I am sure.'

'But you cared that I might have done so?'

'That was different.' In the light from the brazier and the candles her complexion deepened to a rosy gold. 'I don't ... love them as I love you.' She half turned away, still fighting it even though the words were spoken. Thorns and roses. You could not have one without risking the wound of the other.

Guyon drew her back against him, within the circle of his arms, raised his hand to smooth her hair and, seeing the blood caked under his fingernails, set it instead on her shoulder and angled his head to kiss her tenderly. 'Then we have everything, and the rest does not matter.'

Which was not entirely true, but appropriate to his thoughts at the time.

'My lady, I've brought some fresh char--' Agnes paused on the threshold, basket clutched to her ample bosom and stared goggle-eyed at Guyon and Judith as they turned to face her. Judith's gown was blotched and spoiled by blood, Guyon's cloak less obviously so, but nonetheless smirched, and, behind them, Alicia's form lay still on the bed, gleaming in the white shroud of her shift.

Guyon, more knowledgeable by now, moved with the necessary speed to catch her and after the staggering weakness of sudden shock Agnes rallied and sat down to mop her wide pink brow on her sleeve while Guyon explained what had happened.

'Shall I fill a tub, my lady?' Almost recovered, Agnes wallowed to her feet and went to fuss over her sleeping mistress.

Judith sighed with obvious regret. 'No, Agnes.

She needs rest and quiet and all the fuss of organising a bath would make too much noise. Tomorrow, perhaps. A good wash will suffice.'

'How long before your mother rouses, do you think?' Guyon asked.

'I don't know. Her colour is good, but she is deeply asleep and she will need watching.'

'Agnes is competent to do that? And Helgund?'

'Yes, but ...'

'Good. Then put on your cloak.'

'But Guy, I can't go out like this and - oh!' She broke off to catch the garment as he threw it at her.

'Find something else to wear and bring it with you.'

She stared at him, or rather at his back, for he had turned away to rummage in his own clothing chest for a decent tunic. 'Guy, where are we going?'

'Wait and see. I've told you before about looking gift horses in the mouth.' He swung around and pinning his own cloak, advanced upon her.

'Guy?'

'Trust me?' His expression was a mingling of laughter and tension. 'Trust me, Judith?' He put his arm around her waist and pulled her close, or as close as the bunched cloak trapped between them would allow, and kissed her in a fashion that sent Agnes bustling to a far corner of the room on the pretext of some overlooked task.

'I don't know if I should,' Judith said, tilting her head. 'What awaits me if I do?'

'A fate worse than death?' he suggested, draping the cloak around her shoulders and fastening the pin.

She felt a warm glow in the pit of her stomach. Her lips curved and then parted in a full smile; her eyes danced. She would think about everything later. This moment belonged to her and Guyon. 'Show me,' she said, a catch in her voice. 'I want

to know.'

Judith was sitting beside Alicia when she woke, her fingers nimbly weaving a needle in and out of a tunic she was stitching for Guyon, her manner one of demure domesticity. She had never been inside a Southwark bathhouse before, indeed had almost refused when she discovered their destination, but Guyon, grinning, had dragged her protesting through the doorway and the rest had been too interesting for her to want to leave.

Mention a Southwark bathhouse and most people would raise their eyebrows and utter knowing laughs, or purse their lips and shake their heads. Many of the stews warranted such censure, but Guyon's particular choice, which she suspected came of long acquaintance, appeared to cater for those with the wealth to buy privacy and discretion. She had seen several people she knew from the court, two of them alone, another in the company of a very pretty girl who was most certainly not his wife.

She and Guyon had soaked themselves clean

and warm in a spacious tub and had drunk effervescent wine - not in any great quantity. They had played floating tables - and other less intellectual games, the kind associated with the Southwark stews and knowing laughs and pursed lips, and lent an added spice because of that.

She stifled a giggle and bit off the thread, and became aware that Alicia was watching her.

'Mama?' For an instant Judith was startled, but she recovered quickly and leaned forward. 'How are you feeling?'

'As if my brains have been squashed,' Alicia said faintly and put up her hand to touch her bandage-swathed head. 'What happened?'

'You fainted and cut your head on the brazier as you fell.'

From the other room, muffled by the heavy curtain, came the reassuring sound of male voices in conversation. Alicia strove to sit up, then desisted with a gasp of pain.

Judith pressed her gently back down. 'I had to

stitch the wound and quickly,' she apologised. 'It is not my neatest piece of work.'

Frowning with pain and concentration, Alicia studied her daughter. Her rich gown had been replaced by a neat, serviceable homespun. The tawny hair was woven into a simple thick braid and looked almost as if it were damp.

'Judith, how long have I been asleep?'

She placed a cool hand upon her mother's forehead. 'Not long, do not fret yourself.'

'I seem to recall that I have cause to fret.'

Judith shook her head in wordless denial.

Alicia moistened her lips and groped towards what she wanted to say. 'I would have told you, truly I would. I believed in my innocence that Henry would want to do the same. I never thought that ... is he using it to leash Guyon to his cause?'

Judith looked over her shoulder at the curtain. 'Guy is no tame dog to trot to heel, unless it be his wish.' She smiled towards the sound of his voice,

while a conflict of pride and anxiety churned within her.

Her mother's voice was small and timid. 'You do not hate me, then?'

'Hate you?' Judith was astonished. 'Mama, of course not!'

Alicia's mouth trembled. Judith leaned over and hugged her mother. Shakily Alicia returned the embrace and then, drained, fell back against the pillow, nauseous with pain but feeling as if a great burden had been lifted from her soul. 'I thought you might. Or else be disgusted. Jesu knows, I have felt those things for myself many times over.'

Judith squeezed Alicia's hand. 'Mama, let it rest. It has caused enough grief. You had your reasons. I think when I have had the time, I will understand them.'

'Is all well between you and Guyon now?' Anxiety flooded back into Alicia's eyes.

The dim light masked Judith's blush. 'Yes, Mama,' she said, voice choked with laughter. Her

mother might have cuckolded her husband with a fourteen-year-old youth, but she would be horrified if she knew where her daughter had just been.

Alicia looked doubtful. 'Are you sure?'

'Very sure, Mama.' Judith gave her mother a dazzling smile in which there remained a hint of secret laughter. 'Miles has been twitching about outside like a cat with a severe dose of fleas. I'll send him in.' And without waiting for Alicia's yes-say, she went to the curtain.

C_{HAPTER} 22

AUGUST 1101

At his father's keep at Ashdyke, Guyon leaned his head against the cushioned high back of the chair, closed his eyes and within moments was asleep. It was an ability he had cultivated of a necessity since Whitsuntide. He could even doze in the saddle, although that was less than safe. Bred to ride from birth, he would not have fallen off, but there was always the danger of a Welsh attack or a surprise assault from one of de Belleme's vassals.

He was sorely beset. Henry was demanding men, money and supplies that Guyon was hard pressed to find or persuade out of others; Curthose was threatening across the Channel, perhaps even at sea by now; de Belleme and his wolfpack were poised to strike the moment it was politic and, to twist the coil, Earl Hugh of Chester had suffered a seizure and was lying paralysed and close to death in a Norman monastery. His heir was a child and the Welsh were

understandably gleeful. Already a few experimental raids had tested the earldom's somewhat fluid boundaries. The garrison at Caermoel had been involved in skirmishes twice that week.

Guyon was doing his best, but was fearful that it was not enough. Last night he had dreamed that he was tied hand and foot and drowning in a sticky lake of blood and had woken drenched, gasping and terrified to discover Cadi lying on his chest, licking his face, demanding to be let out of the room.

It had been a grim year thus far and very little light to hold at bay the yawning cavern of de Belleme's ambition. In January, Mabel de Lacey, former wife of Ralph de Serigny had given birth to a healthy son and, against all odds, mother and child had survived the ordeal. De Lacey had used the excuse of his son's christening to host a council of war, chaired by the Earl of Shrewsbury who was openly plotting treason. Henry, without the support of more than half his barons, was for

the moment constrained to swallow it.

In February, Rannulf Flambard had escaped from confinement in the Tower of London and had hastened to Normandy as fast as his sandals could carry him in order to promote the cause of Robert Curthose. Flambard was an able, persuasive prelate, capable of squeezing blood out of a stone and an excellent manager of that blood once squeezed. If Henry had been the kind of man to panic, he would have done so. As it was, he continued calmly to muster the resources and supporters he possessed into an efficient fighting unit, although Guyon had his doubts about how efficient some of them actually were. The fyrd was the backbone of Henry's army and it was composed of ordinary villagers and worthies who hadn't a hope in hell against the men who would come at them, men who made war their profession - the mercenaries of Normandy and Flanders, paid to rake the heat from hell and scatter it abroad.

He thought back to one hot midsummer

afternoon when King Henry had been personally overseeing the training of his peasant-bred troops. Guyon had suggested that he would do better to instruct them in the use of the quarterstaff and spear rather than seek to imbue them with the warrior skills that were attained only by instruction from birth.

Henry, his forelock wet, dark patches on his inner thighs where he had sweated against his saddle, had looked at Guyon and given that familiar, enigmatic smile. 'Robert's amenable to reason,' he said. 'He doesn't really want to spill my blood and he's usually swayed by whoever has the most persuasive tongue at the time ... particularly when they are in possession of a large, efficient army. Mutton dressed as wolf, you might say.' And he had laughed softly.

'You mean I'm sweating my guts out for a mummers' show?'

'I certainly hope so, Guy, although it is hard to tell how deeply the rot has set in.'

How deep, how far? And all they had was

Henry's guile and a terrible gamble on Curthose's nature.

The sound of wine splashing from flagon to goblet and the weight of Cadi's rump as she settled inconveniently across his toes, jolted his lids open.

'Go to bed,' his father advised, pouring a second cup and handing it to him. 'Alicia remarked to me how tired you look. I know she's apt to fuss, but this time I would say she is right.'

Guyon shook his head. 'I can't. I only stopped here because it was convenient to water the horses and eat a meal without being stabbed in the back. I've got to be in Stafford by tomorrow night.'

'You will burn yourself out,' Miles warned.

Guyon arched his free hand over his eyes. 'Do you think I do not know that?'

'At least roll yourself in your cloak for an hour.'

Guyon took his hand away and smiled at his

father. 'Now who is fussing? I was going to do that without your urging, providing of course that I can trust you to wake me up. I've to skirt Quatford and Shrewsbury. I'd rather not saddle-sleep in such inhospitable territory.'

Miles sat down in the chair opposite. 'Is there any more news from the south?'

Guyon shook his head and dragged his feet out from beneath Cadi's weight. 'Not news, only commands.'

'Surely there are more resources than yours to draw upon?'

'Yes, but not in the marches. De Belleme is for Curthose; Mortimer sits on the fence and smiles; Earl Hugh is dead, or as good as, and Arnulf of Pembroke is a Montgomery. FitzHamon, Warwick and Bigod are bearing the brunt of the work elsewhere. Who else is there except me?' He made an eloquent face. 'It cannot go on for much longer. Did you notice the direction of the wind from the battlements? It's been blowing to our disadvantage for the past three days. If

Curthose does not come now, he never will.'

'The Queen is due to be brought to bed any day now, isn't she?' Miles said.

'Next month. She's confined at Winchester with the treasury.' Guyon's words were bereft of inflection. 'His wife, his heir and his money. I know what I would do if I were Curthose.' He finished the wine and put the cup down. 'Henry expects him to land near Hastings. It is both expedient and symbolic.'

Miles grunted. 'Do you think they will really fight? I was always under the impression that Curthose treated Henry as his wayward baby brother - deserving of the occasional sharp slap, but never a complete crushing.'

Guyon shrugged. 'If Flambard and de Belleme have anything to do with it, then yes, they will fight, but as you say, they are up against Robert's nature. He has always nurtured a soft spot for Henry and he's so determined to be a perfect knight that they'll have an almighty struggle

persuading him to act otherwise. But then they can be very persuasive men ...'

'Yes,' Miles said, his expression revealing what the word did not. He grimaced. He was prepared for war because, living on the Welsh border, one was never not prepared for it, but sparring with the Welsh was not the same as resisting men such as Walter de Lacey and Roger Mortimer.

'Judith is coping?'

Guyon's mouth softened. 'Better than I,' he said with grim humour. 'She's a superb quartermaster and deputy. Every time I put an obstacle in her path, she floats effortlessly over it. Jesu, sometimes I am hard pressed to stay with her, she learns so quickly. When I think of her two years ago on the day of our marriage, a gawky, frightened waif and then I look at her now, holding the reins of our estates in her hands, not just holding but controlling, I sometimes wonder if I am dreaming. And then she looks at me and smiles and I know I am not.'

'Blood will out,' Miles said with a faint smile.

Guyon chuckled sourly. 'Oh yes, blood will out,' he agreed and, leaning back his head, closed his eyes.

'She shows no sign of breeding yet?' Miles asked hesitantly. 'Alicia worries ...'

Guyon's eyes remained closed. 'Judith's reasons can hardly be hers, can they? After all, I've already proved my worth at stud, even if the outcome has been a daughter.'

'That's not what I meant,' Miles reproved. 'But your lands and titles are far greater than mine and Judith has royal blood in her veins.'

'And it would be a pity if no crop was sown from it to benefit,' Guyon said expressionlessly.

'Well it would,' Miles defended and rubbed the back of his neck. 'It would please Alicia greatly to be blessed with grandchildren. She is afraid that the payment for her sins will be Judith's inability to conceive.'

'Then tell her I shall apply myself with diligence -

chance permitting. I can count on the fingers of one hand the occasions we have shared a bed since Easter and most of those I was unconscious the moment my head hit the bolster. Besides, these are not safe times to bring a child into the world. I'd not damn an offspring of mine to death in Shrewsbury's dungeon. God knows, I worry enough about Rhosyn and Heulwen.'

'I saw Madoc last week,' Miles said, memory jolted by Guyon's mention of his former lover and their child.

'Did you?' Guyon's words emerged as a sleepy mumble.

'Hurrying too much as usual and full of bluster, you know Madoc. I swear his lips were as blue as blackberry juice, the fool. He had a young man with him - distant kin from Bristol - Prys ap Adda.'

'Mmmm?'

Miles eyed his son thoughtfully. The name obviously meant nothing to him. 'A young man who talked a great deal about Rhosyn and her

children. I got the impression that he'd like to be closer to Madoc than a mere distant relative ... son-in-law, for example.'

Guyon's eyes opened. He turned his head.

'Madoc's amenable,' Miles said, exploring Guyon's slightly startled expression for hints of any deeper emotion. 'He knows his body is failing him and soon he won't be able to travel any more. Rhys is not old enough yet to take on the graver responsibilities, so it behoves him to find a willing, energetic younger man and bind him to the family.'

'Madoc always did have a need for ropes and grapnels,' Guyon said humorously, but then his smile slipped. 'Rhosyn has never seen herself as a rope.'

'Madoc thinks she will consent ... providing of course that Prys is not a complete idiot in the way he sets about convincing her. He did not seem an idiot to me.'

Guyon thought of Rhosyn and their warm, stolen

moments together - the brevity of those encounters, an hour here, a half-day there, scattered in disjointed fragments like pieces of a stained-glass window, shattered and strewn down a path four years long. Beautiful, jewel colours that even now, when he had Judith, possessed edges sharp enough to pierce the heart. 'He won't be if she accepts him,' he said quietly, 'if the children accept him.'

'Your Heulwen included?'

Guyon's lower lids tensed. He drew a deep, steadying breath and controlled himself before he spoke. 'She is still a babe in arms. Belike she will cleave to him and the better so.' He manoeuvred his shoulders until he was comfortable and shut his eyes again. 'Forgive me. I'm very tired.'

Miles said nothing, because there was nothing more to be said that would ease or comfort the situation. His footsteps soft, he walked away and left Guyon to sleep.

Guyon roused with a start to the feel of someone violently shaking his shoulder. He was so stiff that

for a moment he could not move and, when he did, it was to discover that his feet were completely numb where the dog's weight had pressed all feeling from them.

'What's the matter?' he demanded groggily. 'Is it time to go?' And then his gaze focused on his father. 'Why are you wearing your mail?'

'Henry's messenger has just ridden in on a half-dead horse. Curthose has landed, and not at Pevensey as we all expected.'

'What? Where then?' Guyon shoved Cadi off his feet, pushed himself out of the chair and began automatically to don the hauberk that Eric was holding out to him.

'Portsmouth,' Miles said grimly. 'Some English sailors were persuaded to pilot Curthose and his ships into the harbour.'

'Then the road to Winchester is open?'

'Yes.'

Guyon cursed as he picked up his swordbelt

and fumbled to attach the scabbard to its thongs. The Queen, the heir, the treasury.

Alicia hovered in the background, looking as if she might burst into tears. Guyon glanced round the room for his spurs and lifted them off the coffer. 'Look after Cadi for me,' he said to her, 'I cannot take her with me.'

Alicia nodded distantly, but her eyes were all for Miles, devouring him. Guyon flicked a look from one to the other. 'I'll meet you below,' he murmured to his father, kissed Alicia on the cheek, thought briefly of Judith and left the room, Eric stamping in his wake.

Alicia gave a small, despairing sob and cast herself into Miles's mail-clad arms. He smoothed her glossy black braids and buried his face in the pulse beating in her white neck. The sword pommel intruded between them, butting up beneath her ribs. It might as well have been through her heart, blade end on.

C HAPTER 23

If Robert de Belleme had been the kind of man to tear out his hair and swear and curse, he would have done so. Those who knew him well enough recognised the signs of agitation with sufficient clarity to take evasive action before it was too late. Those who did not, found they had a scorpion by the tail.

As the troops made ready to disperse, he sat in his tent and stared blank-eyed at the rough canvas wall. A muscle ticked in his cheek. His fists tightened. After a moment he glanced down at the dirty yellow colour of his clenched knuckles, then gently flexed them, placing his hands palm-flat upon his thighs.

He had picked his horse, he had nurtured it, fed it from his own hand, cajoled it, coaxed it sweetly down to the water trough. It had dipped its muzzle and at the last, impossible moment had refused to drink because the water was not as crystal clear as it had imagined. By rights he should have

taken his sword and hewn the beast into gobbets there and then.

Outside the tent, he heard Walter de Lacey and another of his vassals joking together, something about the young age of the whore currently appeasing de Lacey's lust. A red mist floated before de Belleme's eyes. They were laughing about a slut when months of careful planning and hard work were unravelling around them like a loom weaving backwards. But then what did he expect of fools? When he was sure of his temper, he rose and stalked purposefully out into the open.

'Aren't those other tents down yet?' he snarled.

'Nearly, m'lord,' a serjeant answered fearfully.

He shoved him aside and snapped his fingers at the soldier who held his stallion. De Lacey and the other man stopped laughing and exchanged wary glances. He did not even look at them, although they were part of his personal escort who were to ride with him to the signing of the peace treaty between the brothers. Peace treaty -

hah! For what it was worth to Robert Curthose, he might as well use it to wipe his backside.

De Belleme mounted his stallion and drew in the reins, pulling the horse's mouth against its chest. 'When you are ready,' he said icily.

De Lacey cleared his throat, muttered an apology and swung into his saddle.

The King and his brother sat side by side at a long, linen-spread trestle. Guyon, seated further down the board, watched the banners flutter in the warm breeze. Behind and before, two armies were amassed, one of English shire levies, commanded by the barons who had remained loyal to Henry and one of Normans and Flemings, bulked out by the vassals and retainers of such men as Robert de Belleme, Arnulf of Pembroke and Ivo Grantmesnil.

The smell of so many bodies was distinctly middenish, as was the language. The English were merely insulting the Normans because it was a traditional pastime. The Normans were

swearing because their leader had decided to make peace with his brother when it was crass stupidity to do so. Better by far to fight.

Guyon and Miles had reached Winchester with their troops close on dusk of the day following the messenger's arrival, had been momentarily mistaken for the enemy and almost set upon. Cursing, Guyon had roared his name at the men on the walls, his shield flung up and furred with arrows and, after the captain of the guard had been sent for and emerged hitching his chausses and complaining that he could not even go for a piss in peace, they were admitted to spend the night there.

Curthose's army had bypassed Winchester, so the captain had told them, his eyes cynical with disbelief. Guyon sent a glance along the board to the bearded, stocky form of Robert Curthose. The kind of man who forsook such a prize when it was his for the taking was the kind of fool who was unfit to govern.

Curthose lived in a world of chivalric unreality,

an illuminated page that had little to do with worldly practicalities. It was the reason he never had any money. He was constantly frittering it away in the interests of distributing largesse. His misplaced sense of knightly generosity had led him to declare he could not possibly be so much of a brute as to disturb the Queen when she was so near to her time.

Robert de Belleme, who could indeed have been so brutish without a qualm, was left gnashing his teeth at Curthose's inability to maintain both his sense of purpose and the anger at Henry that might have kept his fervour burning.

Those barons who had counted on being able to make Curthose fight for the English crown were now watching Henry, avoiding his eye if he watched them in return and anxiously counting the cost of misjudgement. Henry was not his easygoing brother to forgive and forget, unless it was politically expedient to do so.

They were all gathered here now, enemy and ally, on the London road at Alton, so that Henry

and Curthose could hammer out their differences and come to terms. De Belleme and Flambard and Grantmesnil had advised Curthose to fight. His position was good and would never be stronger. Henry had smiled into his brother's childishly innocent eyes and asked why resort to bloodshed when diplomacy was by far the better way?

Curthose had been only too willing to listen to Henry's sweet-talk, which was, of course, Henry's deadliest weapon. Curthose's intention to war with Henry had considerably cooled since its first indignant eruption and, besides, he was now embarrassed for funds. All he wanted was some money to cover his expenses and to go back to Normandy and let the dust settle. Henry was most amenable. All that remained to be discussed was the sum Curthose would be paid annually in return for his acknowledgement of Henry's right to the crown.

Guyon studied the assembly. Grantmesnil, de Belleme and Roger de Poitou had arrived looking

like a trio of warlocks, their minions swarming behind. The lord of Shrewsbury was wearing a blood-red gown. His eyes were as pale as shards of glass and stabbed everyone they encountered.

When the look slashed over Guyon, the latter answered it impassively. He shielded himself from the malevolence by recalling their last encounter and the gratifying sight of de Belleme and de Lacey parcelled up in the road among a herd of bleating, stinking sheep. His mouth twitched and he quickly lowered his eyes before he laughed. When he dared to look up again, the Earl's gaze was stalking FitzHamon with vicious intent and Walter de Lacey was watching him instead.

Without qualm this time, Guyon smiled at him.

De Lacey stiffened and his right hand twitched towards his sword; except of course that he wasn't wearing one. No man came armed to a parley. He transferred his fist to his empty belt and clamped it there instead.

The annual sum to be forfeited by Henry was

set at three thousand marks. Robert appeared delighted with the bargain. Henry's own smile was wry, but with a secretive under-current that Guyon well recognised. Judith looked like that when matters had not gone entirely her own way but she intended them to do so in the fullness of time. Curthose might get his payment this year and next, but as soon as Henry's hold on his kingdom was less precarious, he would set about seeking a way to extricate himself from the agreement.

Twelve barons from each faction ratified the treaty with their seals. Henry and Robert clasped each other. Curthose's hug was ebullient and affectionate, Henry's a pale imitation. Affection in Henry was reserved for those who did not threaten his crown and even that these days was sparingly given. He was in love with the task of ruling and it left precious little room for softer emotions.

Guyon was in the act of accepting a cup of wine and a heel of bread from his father's captain while around him the men made shrift to load the

packhorses, when Henry himself approached, picking his way carefully around the campfire and assorted heaps of baggage. FitzHamon was with him, the sun reflecting off his pink, freckled scalp.

Guyon bowed, his mouth full of bread. Miles appeared from the tent, breath drawn to speak and, startled, made his own obeisance.

Guyon swallowed hastily. 'Breakfast, sire?' he asked with a touch of humour. The bread was stale and the wine was warm and stuck to the palate. It was all they had left.

Henry made a gesture of refusal and came straight to the point. 'I have to put a curb bit on de Belleme, his brothers and their allies,' he said, 'and I need your help, Guy, and yours too, Miles.'

'If it be in my power, sire,' Miles answered gracefully, eyes full of suspicion.

Guyon glanced at FitzHamon whose face was unhelpfully blank. His heart sank. All he wanted to do was go home, bury his head beneath a pillow for six months, sleep and rediscover the pleasure

of a bathtub and Judith fragrantly soft in his arms. Judith, who was Henry's daughter. 'Sire?'

'I've had the exchequer gathering evidence against Surrey and Grantmesnil since the late autumn, but I need more information on de Belleme and his brothers. There is much groundwork to be done in the marches and until I am ready to cast the noose, I do not want my prey to know how tight I intend to draw it.'

'You want us to spy for you?' Miles demanded.

Henry pinched the end of his blunt nose. Miles, half Welsh by birth, had been one of his father's most valued scouts, a master in the arts of reconnaissance and stealth, one of the props of the Norman army during the notorious northern campaign of 'sixty-nine. 'Not personally,' he said with a tepid smile. 'I'd not lose either of you to one of Shrewsbury's little pastimes, but you must have contacts from the old days, Miles, men you can trust.'

'To have their entrails pierced in my stead?' Miles said with quiet contempt.

'Don't be so awkward, Miles,' said FitzHamon. 'Someone has to recruit the men and collate the information gleaned. Would you rather have de Belleme ravaging about the borders like a mad wolf for the next thirty years?'

Miles snorted. 'A knife in the dark would work just as well,' he said, 'and would probably be a lot simpler to accomplish.'

Henry shook his head. 'I had thought of that, but it wouldn't really serve. If Robert de Belleme dies, then the lands go to his son, or to one of his brothers. If, on the other hand, he is stripped of his fiefs for flouting the law of the land beyond all redemption, then the estates and revenues come directly to the crown.'

'But first he has to be found in official error of the law,' Guyon said, beginning to understand. His mouth twisted. 'And then it will come to war.'

FitzHamon shrugged. 'You cannot make wine without treading grapes and one way or another it will still come to war in the end.'

'Blood and wine, they're both red, aren't they?' Miles said, his expression blank.

'I'm sure you would rather be a treader than a grape.' Henry said with a glimmer of amusement. 'Think about it. If you decide in favour, send to me, or get a message to Beaumais in Shrewsbury. You do know him, don't you?'

'Beaumais? but he's ...' said Miles.

Henry's smile was feline. 'Yes, he's a justiciar in de Belleme's household and he's been in my pay for the past year. You'll be working closely with him if you choose to take on this task.'

Miles stared at Henry, the hairs prickling his scalp. Guyon, more accustomed to the devious workings of his sovereign's mind, quirked him a wry, 'should have known it' look. Henry conceded a genuine laugh and reached up to slap his shoulder. 'Think about it,' he repeated. 'I'll talk to you later.'

'Will you do as he asks?' FitzHamon said as he made to follow Henry across the camp.

'I do not think we have a choice,' Guyon replied. 'And there's no point in cutting off your nose to spite your face.'

'That doesn't stop him from being as much a bastard as his father was,' Miles grunted with considerably less charity. 'Only William's was a matter of birth. His is a matter of nature.'

'That's why he's King and Curthose isn't,' Guyon said.

C_{HAPTER} 24

SUMMER 1102

Rhosyn drew rein and let the leather hang slack in her capable fingers so that old Gwennol could graze the dusty roadside grass. Beyond them, pocked and rutted, the road cut through fields and forest and past formidable fortresses - the marcher eyries of Robert de Belleme - until it reached Shrewsbury, crouched within the protection of the Severn bend. Behind her on the drovers' road lay Wales and safety, as far as anything could be termed safe these days. Guyon had been right, Robert de Belleme and his vassals had turned the marches into hell for men who had to travel them for a living. The war in the south where King Henry sought to bring his most voracious earl to heel sent disturbing rumours scudding north. If Arundel fell to the royal forces, then the storm would burgeon here in the heart of de Belleme's honours and blight the land she rode.

She considered now the left fork and felt a

surge in her solar plexus. She always did when she thought of Guyon and not just because of what had been between them. He would be furious when he realised she had risked crossing the border with only a drover and his market-bound herd of sheep for protection.

Her father had been in Flanders when his heart had finally failed his driving will and he had died in a hostel on the Bruges road. Prys had sailed from Bristol to fetch his body home for burial. They would mourn him, and then, because time did not stand still, they would marry. Rhosyn bit her lip, beginning to regret the impulse that had driven her from the hafod towards the market at Ravenstow. There were items she needed, she told herself, items for her wedding. The item she most wanted, she could not have. Better to settle for the same thing in a serviceable day-to-day mould without the gilding, but knowing what was better and sensible did not ease the pain.

'Why have we stopped, Mam?'

Rhosyn looked round at her daughter and the

fine lines fanning from her eye corners deepened into a deprecatory smile. 'I am beginning to wonder if we should have come at all.'

'Too late now,' declared Twm sourly, riding up from behind, the pack ponies jingling behind him.

'Won't Guyon be pleased to see us then?' Eluned looked anxiously at her mother and then at Heulwen cradled sleeping in Twm's broad embrace.

'Probably not,' Rhosyn admitted ruefully. 'He may not even be there, not with the war down in the south.'

'What about his wife, will she?' asked Rhys, thinking of the young woman he had met on several occasions during trading visits with his grandfather. Despite himself he liked her. Beneath her wariness dwelt a sense of humour and a genuine interest in people whatever their station.

'Perhaps.' Rhosyn's fingers twitched on the reins and Gwennol raised her head and backed

restively. Guyon's wife. How would she react to their presence at Ravenstow and what in God's name was she going to say to her if they met? Neither child nor virgin, Guyon had said, but as vulnerable as blown glass, and there had been an expression in his eyes that she had never seen before.

'I don't want to meet her,' Eluned said with a mutinous pout. 'She's probably a haughty Norman bitch.'

Rhosyn turned to her daughter. 'Whoever we meet and whatever happens, you will remember your manners and not disgrace my name or your grandfather's. Is that understood?'

'Yes, Mam,' Eluned said with a scowl.

The market at Ravenstow was in full cry, the booths hectic despite, or perhaps because of, the unrest and warfare swirling around the county. Men had to make a living and even with their lord absent at the siege of Arundel, the Ravenstow lands were still safer than many.

There were stalls of pies, breads and sweetmeats to tempt the hungry. Spice vendors cried their wares. One of the Ravenstow guards was having a tooth drawn, the efforts of the sweating surgeon observed with grisly relish by a critical crowd. A performing bear lumbered in pawing, shaggy circles to the music of an off-key set of bagpipes played by a man with a paunch that could have supported a cauldron.

There was a cacophony of livestock. Women sat with baskets full of surplus home produce to barter or sell - cherries and root vegetables, butter and cheese. The potter was there with his green-glaze wares, as was the salt chandler, the shoe-smith, the basket-weaver, and the other tradesmen of the town.

Judith did her duty by the senior merchants and towns-people, pausing to speak and smile and discuss, setting their fears at rest before making her purchases. At the bronze-smith's booth, she bought a new chappe for one of Guyon's belts and a collar for Cadi, the bitch having deposited

the last one somewhere on a ten-mile stag hunt, and then she repaired to the haberdasher's stall to obtain needles and embroidery silks for the hanging she intended to warm the solar wall.

Another woman was already there, intently scrutinising a length of ribbon. A small child clutched her skirts and peeped up at Judith from a pair of round, kingfisher-blue eyes. An older, black-haired girl at the woman's other side shifted impatiently from foot to foot. Behind Judith, de Bec muttered a startled, stifled oath.

'What's wrong?' Judith asked, half turning. In that same moment, the boy Rhys stepped from the crowd and joined his mother and sisters at the stall. There was no mistaking the relationship. They all had variations of the same blunt nose and their hair grew to a similar pattern.

'*Heulwen, dewch yno,*' said the mother absently as her redhaired youngest one moved from the safety of her skirts towards Judith.

Judith's stomach turned over as the child smiled at her. She put her hand to her mouth and bit on

the fleshy side of her palm. Guyon's mistress, Guyon's daughter, here in the heart of their lands. Here, where she had thought she was inviolate. What did one do? Fight? Back away like one cat sighting another? Brazen it out? Judith lowered her hand and drew herself up. She was no longer a child beset by unfocused emotions, bereft of weapons or defence. She had the knowledge now and the confidence to use it. All that this woman had were the ties of the past ... and the child. Involuntarily, Judith's hand went to her own flat belly before she crouched to the infant's level. 'Heulwen,' she said with uncertainty and smiled.

Rhys turned his head, dark eyes widening. Rhosyn looked round, the ribbon twined in her neat, capable fingers, her expression first surprised, then anxious. It was a pleasant face with glossy arched brows and full-lidded autumnal eyes. Pretty, but not strikingly so and there were faint weather lines seaming her eye corners.

'I am Judith de Montgomery, Guyon's wife,' Judith introduced herself with an impassivity that

gave no inkling of the seething emotions beneath. 'If you have come to see him, I am afraid you will be disappointed. He's down at Arundel with the King.'

Heulwen smiled coyly at Judith before turning to her mother and pressing her face into her skirts.

Her heart thumping, Rhosyn stared at the woman who now rose to her feet and confronted her. Were it not for her cool statement of identity, she would never have connected the imagination to the reality. Here was a striking young woman, as slender and straight as a stalk of corn in her golden wool gown and not an inch of vulnerability in her attitude.

'I am pleased to meet you, my lady,' Rhosyn responded in excellent accented French marred by the crack in her voice. 'You are not as I thought.'

The gold-grey eyes fixed on her in cool appraisal. 'Neither are you.'

Rhosyn swallowed. 'I have not come to make of

Guyon a battleground,' she said, trying to defend herself against Judith's gaze which owned the properties of winter sunlight - bright but killingly cold.

'But nevertheless you are here, and I do not think that it is because you intend buying trinkets or watching the bear dance.'

'No, there is more to it than that,' Rhosyn admitted. 'Some of it is a matter of trade. I have those spices you asked my father to obtain for you last time and I needed some trimmings for a new gown ...' She drew a shaky breath. 'My father went to Flanders last month and died there. Prys has gone to bring him home. I was hoping to ask Guyon for an escort back into Wales - he did promise me one should I need it - and I thought he should know of my father's death ... and other things.' Her voice stalled into silence.

'Then you had best come up to the keep,' Judith said stiffly. 'There will be tallies to settle and you will need a place to sleep. I am sorry to hear about your father. We had become friends.' She

wondered what she would do if Guyon came unexpectedly home now and lavished all his attention on Rhosyn and their small, engaging daughter. It was an area they had left well alone. Judith had never enquired beyond the superficial and he had seldom volunteered insights, both of them avoiding what might cause them too much pain. She saw now, too late, that they had been wrong.

The tension between the two women remained palpable, although Judith relaxed her guard sufficiently to haggle prices with Rhosyn, who responded vigorously to the challenge as soon as she realised Judith's astuteness. Eluned was sulky and intractable and de Bec took her and Rhys off to the stables to show them Melyn's latest batch of kittens before the child's rudeness became inexcusable. The two women were left alone in each other's company, except for the infant.

'Eluned has lost her father and now her grandfather,' Rhosyn sighed, 'and this new babe

has not made matters any easier.' She looked tenderly down at the child curled sleepily in her lap. 'I did not mean to conceive, you know - a slip-up with the nostrums that would have prevented such a thing. She is a tie with Guyon I could well do without.' Gently she touched the feathery whorls of red-blond hair and smiled. 'She takes her colouring from Guyon's grand-sire, Renard de Rouen. He married a Welsh girl, old Lord Owain's daughter, Heulwen. My father was at their wedding, although of course he was no more than a child himself then.'

Judith was silent, not knowing what to say. Spoken in a different tone, Rhosyn's words might have been a challenge, yet crooned softly like a lullaby to a drowsing infant, there was no threat but, Jesu, they stung all the same. A vision of Guyon's lithe, muscular body filled Judith's inner eye. She knew exactly how his skin would feel beneath her fingertips; the gliding, sensual promise of joy. So did Rhosyn, the child in her arms a visible, living reminder of the pleasure Guyon had taken on her body. And as yet she had

no such reminder to comfort herself.

Glancing up from her sleepy daughter, Rhosyn glimpsed Judith's expression before it was masked to neutrality, and her stomach lurched. Behind that controlled facade there stalked a wild beast.

'Perhaps it would be better if you gave me my escort now,' she suggested with dignity.

Judith parted her lips to snarl an agreement, caught her voice in time and, hands clenched in her lap, looked away towards the space upon the solar wall where she intended to drape the hanging. The jealous anger she felt was corrosive and damaging. She had to face it and force her will through it. Turning back to the small, dark Welsh woman, she laid her hand on her sleeve.

'No, please stay. It is too late in the day to set out for Wales. You would not reach your home before dark. Besides, we have not concluded our business. Can you obtain some more of that rich cloth for me? The last gown was ruined in London.'

'I will try. We've been swamped by demands for it since last winter, but of course you and Guyon have priority. I'll speak to Prys.' She studied Judith warily. They were navigating a deep, narrow channel and where there were not jagged rocks to be avoided, there were currents and whirlpools.

Ignorant of adult strivings, Heulwen slept, a heavy warm weight in her mother's arms, and Rhosyn was only too glad to accept Judith's invitation to put her down in the upper chamber with Helgund and Elflin.

The room was well appointed and reasonably warm, for in addition to the braziers it boasted a hearth. The maids whispered delightedly over the sleeping child. Rhosyn laid her daughter in the huge bed which dwarfed the small form to the size of a doll and, after tenderly smoothing her curls, gazed around the room. The walls were bright with hangings that stayed the draughts and combated the seeping coldness of the stone walls. The narrow windows were covered by slats

of wafer-thin ox horn so that at least some daylight was permitted into the room, but rush dips still illuminated the corners and unseen things seemed to lurk there. She shivered and hugged her arms.

'Is there something wrong?' Judith enquired.

Rhosyn shook her head and smiled wanly. 'I hate these places.' She shuddered. 'No light, no air save that it be musty and tainted with damp. The walls hem me in. I never sleep well when I'm lodged in one of these keeps. I need to be free. Guy could see it, but he never understood. He loves the stones. Perhaps they grow warm under his touch as they do not under mine. It is one of the reasons I would not stay with him. In time the nightmare would have swamped the dream.' She looked round at Judith and dropped her arms to her sides. 'You are like him; content to dwell here. You do not feel the hostility. I could no more make my home in a keep than you could live rough in Wales.'

Judith took her coney-lined cloak from the

clothing pole and handed Rhosyn hers across the space separating them. 'Then you do not know me,' she responded with a glimmer of fierceness. 'Yes, I do enjoy the security of these walls and caring for those within their bounds, but it is not all my life and, if it was, I would go mad.'

She led her out of the room and on up the twisting stairway to the battlements, her tread making nothing of the steep, winding steps. Almost defiantly she added between breaths as they went, 'I know how to track and snare game. I can make a shelter from cloaks and branches. I speak a fair degree of Welsh and I can use a dagger as well as any man. When Guy goes on progress to his other holdings, I go with him and it is no hardship for me to sleep beneath a hedge or hayrick wrapped in my cloak. I need to feel the wind in my hair and the rain on my face. Sometimes I come up here for precisely that purpose.'

Rhosyn, her calves aching, put her hands on the stone and leaned between the merlons while she

rested to gain her breath. A guard saluted the two women. Judith greeted the man by name and stood beside Rhosyn, her tawny hair wisping loose of its braids.

'You have it in you to keep him,' Rhosyn said, seeing now the promise. Not just a strikingly attractive young woman, high-bred and Norman with all the domestic and social skills that a man of Guyon's status required, but one who beneath the cultured exterior was still only half tame, a thing of the woods, wild for to hold. Guyon was not about to grow bored with such a complex, complementary blending of traits.

A few late swallows swooped the sky, their cries poignantly sharp, like needles darting through blue cloth. Judith looked down at her hands. 'If we are granted a life together,' she said with a hint of bitterness and stared at a blemish on one of her nails until her eyes began to sting. 'Since last Martinmas, I have scarcely seen him. Either he is with the King, or about the King's business and the times he is home, he just eats

and sleeps and his temper is foul ... but then I suppose it has reason to be. There is no guarantee that Henry will win this war. If he fails it won't matter whether I have the ability to hold him or not ... in this life at least. De Belleme knows whose work was behind half the charges he was summoned to answer.'

Rhosyn leaned with her and watched the swooping birds. A trickle of foreboding shivered down her spine. 'Is he in serious danger?'

'I have never known my lord when he has not been in serious danger,' Judith said with a reluctant smile. 'From his own contrary nature, if nothing else. He sets out to court trouble sometimes and I have the devil's own job to persuade him that he should be courting me instead!'

It was spoken with humour, but it was in no wise amusing, as Rhosyn well knew. Leopards did not make good hearth animals. They were liable to tear out your heart.

The watch changed, spears scraping on stone,

jocularities bantered. Some sheep were driven into the bailey from the surrounding fields for slaughter the next day. Below them, the market was packing up as folk began wending their way home. Leaning over the battlements, Judith saw the guard who had been having his tooth pulled weaving this way and that over the drawbridge, clearly the worse for drink. She made a mental note to check with de Bec that he was not on duty that night.

'I was foolish to come,' said Rhosyn in a soft voice that Judith had to strain to hear. 'Only I wanted ... I wanted to see you for myself. If I am honest, that at least was the half of it.'

Taken aback, Judith stared at her. 'I would call it a very dangerous indulgence,' she said.

Rhosyn made a face. 'Do you think I have not said the same thing to myself a hundred times over?' She smiled sadly. 'But it has been like a sore tooth, nagging me and nagging me until it had to be drawn. I had to know. Well, now I do and I am glad it is over, but that is not the sole

reason I am here.' She drew a deep breath, her eyes on the horizon towards which the sun was now angling. 'My second cousin Prys, who lives in Bristol and with whom we have strong business ties, has asked me to marry him and I have agreed.'

'Congratulations,' Judith said courteously. 'When is the wedding to be?'

'We don't know yet. Before Christmastide, I suppose. We have my father to mourn first and the business to sort out.' She frowned and pressed the heel of her hand into the gritty stone. 'I've known Prys since we were children and Rhys and Eluned are fond of him ... but it is Heulwen, you see. After all, she is Guyon's daughter and for the sake of what was between us, he should know my decision. Prys has no heirs. Perhaps in the fullness of time I shall bear him children, but he is willing to take Rhys, Eluned and Heulwen for his own.'

'I do not think Guyon will stand in your way,' Judith said slowly after a pause for consideration.

'Neither do I.' Rhosyn blinked. 'It has run its course, for him at least. We never had enough in common to make of it more than a dry grass fire. I wish ...' Rhosyn shook her head and turned away, her chin wobbling.

Judith had imagined Guyon's mistress to be dark and mysterious and beautiful with all the wiles at her fingertips. Only the first was true. The reality was a straightforward practical woman with a generous, gentle spirit. She could see why Guyon had held on to the bond for more than four years and also why it must now be severed. And Rhosyn saw too, or else she would not be crying here beside her on the battlements.

Rhosyn sniffed and, wiping her eyes on her sleeve, gave Judith a watery smile. 'I am sorry, I was being foolish. Will you and Guyon come to the wedding?'

Judith looked doubtful. 'Will it not cause trouble?'

Rhosyn shook her head. 'Prys knows my past.

You will be most welcome.'

Judith inclined her head. 'Then gladly we will come, circumstances permitting.' She watched the drawbridge being drawn up for the night. One of the men on watch shouted a cheerful insult across to the guards at the winch and was answered in kind.

'I hope Guyon will still see her on occasion,' Rhosyn added. 'She is his daughter.'

'She will always be his firstborn,' Judith agreed with a judicious nod. 'It would be wrong to try and prevent him. That far I will permit you to tread on my territory because I cannot change it, but seek further at your peril.'

From the inner bailey, the dinner horn sounded and someone cheered with irony.

Rhosyn stared at Judith. The challenge was there in Judith's strange, stone-coloured eyes, but leavened by a twinkle of humour. 'I do not think you will see me at Ravenstow again,' she replied.

Rhosyn rode out the next morning on to a sun-polished road with an escort of eight serjeants and her manservant, Twm. The pony hooves echoed on the dusty drawbridge planks. She looked beyond the rise and fall of their loaded backs to where Judith stood between the bridge and portcullis, one arm shading her eyes, the other raised in farewell. Rhosyn returned the salute briefly and turned in the saddle so that, like her mount, she faced Wales.

At noon they stopped to water the horses and eat a cold repast of bread, cheese and roasted fowl. Heulwen, as usual, ate the cheese, spat out the bread and made a thorough mess. Eluned in contrast, nibbling as daintily as a deer, considered her mother, swallowed and said, 'He was forced to marry her, wasn't he, Mam?'

Rhosyn looked at her daughter in concern. Eluned had been very quiet since yestereve's rudeness, a brooding kind of quiet that would not yield to cozening. 'At the outset, yes,' she answered cautiously.

'He does not love her.' Eluned fingered her amber necklace.

Rhosyn bit her lip. The child's eyes were her own - hazel green-gold and full of pain. You grew up and learned to hide it, that was the only difference. 'You cannot say that, Eluned,' she said. 'It is what you would like to be true, not truth itself. You should wish them joy in each other, not strife.'

'She's ugly!' Eluned thrust out her lower lip.

'Eluned!'

Heulwen choked and Rhosyn unthinkingly rescued the half-chewed piece of chicken wing from the back of the infant's throat, her attention all focused on her elder daughter.

'I hate her, she's a Norman slut. Guyon belongs to us, not her!'

Rhosyn's hand shot out and cracked across Eluned's cheek. Eluned gasped. The men of the escort looked round from their oatcakes and ale. Eluned put her hand to her face, stared at her

mother with aghast, brimming eyes as the mark of the slap began to redden. Whirling round, she fled beyond the startled men into the thickness of the brambles and trees.

'No, Mam, let her go.' Rhys caught Rhosyn's arm as she made to pursue. 'She's leaving a trail a blind man could follow. I don't think she'll go very far.'

Rhosyn subsided with a sigh. 'It is my fault. I did not realise it ran so deeply. She used to say that she was going to marry Guyon. I thought it was a child's game.'

'So did she,' Rhys said with a wisdom beyond his years.

Rhosyn reseated herself upon the spread skins to finish her meal, but her eyes kept flickering towards the trees.

Rhys considered her for a moment and then gave an adolescent sigh, heavy with impatience, and hitched his belt.

'All right, Mam, I'll go and find her.'

Rhosyn gave him a grateful smile. She wondered how to go about dealing with Eluned when she returned. Diplomatic silence as if it had never happened? Detailed, careful explanations? A scolding? Sympathetic affection?

Heulwen was rubbing her eyes and whining. Rhosyn bent her mind away from the problem of her elder daughter to persuade her younger one to take a nap beneath one of the skins.

Two greenfinches dated across the clearing, their song a chitter of alarm. A horse snorted and, throwing up its head, nickered towards the trees, ears pricked. One of the men put down his drink and went to the restless beast.

Sounds of something crashing blindly through the under-growth came clearly to their ears, and then a cry. Rhosyn sprang to her feet, her heart thudding against her ribs. She stooped and covered Heulwen, by now asleep, with another of the skins, concealing her as best she could.

Her escort drew their swords. Shields were

reached for and slipped on to men's arms. One of the escort turned to give Rhosyn a command but she ignored him, transfixed by horror as she watched her son stagger towards them, hugging the trees for support, his tunic saturated with blood.

'Rhys!' she screamed. Lifting her skirts, she started to run towards him. A young serjeant, Eric's brother, caught her back.

The boy looked in the direction of her voice, but his eyes were blind, his mouth working, pouring blood. 'Mam!' he gasped frothily and then, choking, 'The *Cwmni Annwn*!'

'Rhys!' she screamed again and tore free of her captor to run stumbling to where he had fallen face down in the turning crisp leaves. He was dead. She could see the rents in his clothing where a blade had been plunged and his blood was hot and dark on her hands.

Bent over her son, she did not hear the horrified warning yelled by her escort, nor see the riders of the wild hunt advancing through the trees,

following the trail of lifeblood to their victim.

C HAPTER 25

Soon after Rhosyn had left, Judith fetched her cloak and departed Ravenstow with her own escort, her destination one of Ravenstow's fiefs. The lord of the small, beholden keep at Farnden had recently died and she had promised his son, the inheritor of the holding and its military obligations, that she would attend a mass in the church there for the soul of his father before he rode out to rejoin Guyon. Also, there were the customs and rights of the new tenancy to be confirmed and the oath of fealty to be sworn.

Thomas of Farnden was a pleasant, not particularly bright young man, but he knew his feudal duties and was capable of performing them stoically and well. He lacked imagination and ambition but that was no reason to neglect him. A horseshoe nail was just as important as the horse and Judith gave him her sincere attention for the duration of the visit.

The mass was performed in the tiny Saxon

church and attended by all members of the keep and the villagers of most senior authority. Alms were distributed, and bread. Dinner was eaten outside in the orchard, the trestles spread beneath the lush summer green of the trees. It was so pleasant and a poignant far cry from the war in the south that it brought tears to Judith's eyes, and she had to set about reassuring a worried Sir Thomas that she was really all right.

Shortly before mid-afternoon, her business completed, she made her farewells to Sir Thomas and set out for home.

With his eye on the dwindling height of the sun, de Bec took the short cut across the drovers' road and through the forest to reach the main track.

The day had been hot and the green forest air was humid, catching earthily in the throat and nostrils as it was breathed. Judith's chemise clung to her body. Beneath her veil her head itched as if it harboured a thicket of fleas. Now and then a rivulet of sweat trickled down between

her breasts or tickled her spine, and her thighs were chafed by the constant rubbing of the saddle. She thought with longing of a refreshing, tepid tub, of a clean light robe and a goblet of wine, chill from the keep well.

Such thoughts set her to bitter-sweet remembering of a raw November night, of drinking wine in a bathtub, of Guyon's eyes luminous with laughter and desire. Her longing abruptly changed direction. Heat moistened her loins. She shifted in the saddle and tears returned to prickle her eyes. It had been so long since there had been the time or opportunity for that kind of dalliance. The inclination had been swamped - or so she thought - by a combination of worry and sheer physical exhaustion. There had been odd occasions together, but snatched and unsatisfactory because there was no real enjoyment in assuaging a need that intruded inconveniently upon other needs and was tainted with fear.

Two pigeons clapped past them and a

blackbird scolded. When a spotted woodpecker followed, crying alarm, de Bec ceased lounging at ease to reach for his shield. These were not birds immediately startled by their approach, but already alarmed and winging from some earlier disturbance. This band of woodland was within Guyon's jurisdiction but at the north-western edge lay a boggy ditch marking the Welsh border and the standing stones on the south-western side were the boundary between Ravenstow and Thornford. It was for the latter reason in particular that de Bec muttered soft imprecations as he drew his sword and ordered his men to surround Judith.

A horse flashed through the trees in front of them. Both Judith and de Bec recognised the striking red sorrel immediately, for it was one of Guyon's own crossbreeds, belonging to Eric's younger brother Godric who had been in command of Rhosyn's escort. A cold hand squeezed Judith's heart, for although Godric was in the saddle, he was hunched over, clutching the pommel and did not answer their hail. The horse,

however, threw up its white-blazed head and, nickering at sight of its own kind, picked its way towards them.

De Bec leaned across to grasp the reins. 'Godric, Christ man, what's happened?' His voice was hoarse with shock.

The young man raised his eyes but remained hunched over. 'De Lacey,' he croaked. 'Hit us out of nowhere ... Too many of them. We never stood a chance ... I managed to save the little lass.' He swayed, his face grey. Against his body, tied within his cloak for security, Heulwen began to cry and push against her confines, her little face as flushed as her tangled fiery crown of curls.

A knight unfastened the child and lifted her out of Godric's cloak, then uttered an oath of consternation for she was smeared in blood from head to toe.

'Not hers, mine,' said Godric huskily and tumbled out of the saddle to sprawl unconscious at their feet. Judith dismounted in a flurry of skirts and bent down beside the young soldier to

examine his injuries. He had taken a nasty slash to the midriff. Fortunately, as far as she could see, it had not pierced the gut, but it was still deep and it had bled a great deal. She unfastened one of his leg bindings to use as a temporary bandage until they could reach the safety of the keep and she could tend him properly. Two of her escort set about constructing a crude stretcher out of branches and horse blankets.

Heulwen sobbed and screamed for her mother in broken Welsh. Fortunately the serjeant who held her had five children of his own and was used to dealing with infant tantrums. A borderman, he also spoke fluent Welsh and soothed Heulwen in that language until she calmed into hiccuped sobs and then poked her thumb into her mouth.

Godric's eyelids fluttered. Judith put her hand on his brow. 'Rest easy now,' she soothed, 'help is here.'

'Mistress, we could do nothing,' he fretted. She held a wine costrel to his lips and he took a

convulsive swallow. 'De Lacey outnumbered us at least four to one. The child was asleep beneath some skins. They missed her and they left me for dead ... Dancer bolted in the fray but he came back when I called him.' He clenched his teeth and groaned.

De Bec's eyebrows drew together in a worried scowl. 'How far back, son?'

'No more than a mile ... just off the road. We had stopped to eat and they came out of the trees at us.' He closed his eyes and swallowed. 'I lay for dead and they thought me so. I heard de Lacey say that there was less gain than he had hoped and they had best be on their way ... Thornford they were headed for ... Myself and the child are the only survivors ... The other little maid ... Oh Christ, they took her with them!' He gasped and strove not to retch. Judith fought her own gorge and set a steadying hand to his brow.

'Lie quiet, Godric,' she said gently and raised her head to meet de Bec's granite stare. There was no way their own troop could pursue, and the

attack was more than three hours old. De Lacey would be safe within his keep by now.

'The bodies will need to be brought back to Ravenstow,' she said. The coldness of shock and fear, the knowledge of what had yet to be done, made her feel queasy and tearful, but she controlled herself. 'We had best bring them away with us now before the wolves and foxes have their chance at them.'

De Bec shook his head. 'My lady, it will not be a sight to be viewed save by necessity, and Godric and the child should be got to Ravenstow as soon as possible.'

Judith considered for a moment, then nodded curtly. There was nothing to be gained by going to the scene of the slaughter herself. De Bec could note the details for Guyon and the sheriff. There would be enough trauma in washing the corpses and laying them out decently ... and in sending this news to Guyon. What was she going to say? How was she to face and tell him when he returned? It did not bear thinking about and yet,

like the laying out, it had to be done and it was her responsibility.

The reality proved far worse than Judith had imagined. She stitched Godric's wound, poulticed it with mouldy bread, dosed him with poppy syrup and left him to sleep. Heulwen kept crying for her mother, but, apart from being fractious and bewildered, seemed none the worse for her ordeal.

Judith's own ordeal began when de Bec rode in, his face waxen and his expression so stiff that he might have been one of the ten corpses bundled in cloaks and roped like game across the backs of some pack ponies borrowed from Thomas of Farnden. The men who rode with de Bec all wore variations of that same look on their faces and, when the bodies were brought to the chapel, Judith understood why. The abomination beneath Rhosyn's cloak bore no resemblance to the woman she had encountered yesterday. The spirit had flown and the mortal body was so mutilated that it was difficult to know if it had once

been human at all.

Her belly heaved. She clapped her hand to her mouth and staggered to the waste shaft where she was sick to the pit of her soul. It was not just murder, it was obscene desecration.

De Bec gently touched her elbow, handed her a small horn cup of aqua vitae and waited until, choking and spluttering on its unaccustomed strength, she had swallowed it.

Shaking, Judith leaned for a brief moment against his iron-clad solidity. 'He is not a man, he is a devil!' she said and shuddered.

De Bec folded a mail-clad arm around her quivering shoulders, feeling a wave of paternal protectiveness. 'Have you sent a messenger to Lord Guyon yet?' he rumbled. 'He needs to be here.'

Judith shook her head. 'I don't know what to write,' she gulped. 'And I don't know if he is still at Arundel.'

'Tell him naught, only that he is needed swiftly. A

messenger will find him sooner or later. I'll get FitzWalter to do it for you.'

Judith stiffened her spine and pulled away from him. 'No,' she said firmly. 'I'll do it myself.' A wan smile strained her lips. 'You feel like a rock because you are one.'

De Bec's eyes began to sting and he had to blink. In all but name, he had regarded Judith as his daughter from the day of her birth and to see her struggle with her fears and doubts and force them down beneath her will filled him with a fierce burst of tenderness and pride. He could have crushed her between his two hands - it did not seem possible that she could house such strength.

He watched her return to the horror in the chapel and murmur to the priest, her face so pale that every freckle stood out as a deep, golden mottle, her manner composed, and knew that if he was a rock, then she was surely as resilient and strong as the best sword steel.

C HAPTER 26

Guyon shifted in the high saddle and loosened the reins to let Arian pick his way between the trees. The afternoon light was as golden-green as the best French wine. Coins of sunlight and leaf shadows scattered and sparkled among the troop of men who rode with steady haste towards Ravenstow and preparation for war in the marches.

Now that Arundel was theirs and de Belleme effectively cut off from his support abroad, the King intended to move upon de Belleme's chain of grim Shropshire strongholds with the purpose of clearing them out one by one and Guyon was returning to Ravenstow to support him in that endeavour.

As they emerged from the trees on to the waste land, all eyes were drawn to the gleaming lime-washed walls of the keep dominating Ravenstow crag. Guyon's gaze at this, the core of his honour, was both admiring and rueful. It was de Belleme's

design and it followed that winking the Earl of Shrewsbury out of the other strongholds he had also designed, but held in his own hand, was going to prove difficult. God knew, Arundel had been a tough enough nut to crack.

A cowherd touched his forehead to Guyon and tapped the cattle on their mottled backs with a hazel goad to keep them moving. His dog went wagging to investigate the horsemen and was whistled sharply back to place. At the mill, the miller was transferring sacks of flour to an ox-drawn wain; he paused to wipe his brow and salute the passing soldiers, cuffing his brawny son into similar respect. His wife ceased beating a smock on a stone at the stream to curtsy, her expression apprehensive. She touched the prayer beads on the belt at her waist and raised them to her lips.

Guyon eyed the woman curiously and wondered anew at the speed with which news of impending war travelled. He did not believe de Belleme would attack Ravenstow - he was too busy

strengthening his own fortifications - but the Welsh were always ready to harry, loot and burn and de Belleme had several Welsh vassals who would be only too pleased to stock their winter larders at Ravenstow's expense.

The drawbridge was down to admit them and the portcullis up. Guyon shook the reins, urging Arian to a trot and they emerged again into the late sunshine of the shed-crowded bailey. A woman was feeding twigs beneath a giant outdoor cauldron, the girl beside her plucking a wrung chicken to go into the pot. She looked up at the men, nudged her companion and made the sign of the cross upon her breast. The older woman straightened and crossed herself too, her eyes full of pity before she turned to stare at the forebuilding from which Judith was running.

Cadi barked and sprang joyously to greet her, tail swishing like a whip. Guyon dismounted and threw the reins to a groom. The young man said nothing but, with a look over his broad shoulder at Judith, dipped his head and led the grey away to

his stall.

Guyon watched his wife hurry towards him and felt his spirit lighten. Her braids trapped the sunlight and glowed like molten bronze and her face was becomingly flushed from the effort of running down several flights of twisting stairs and across the ward.

And then she was facing him and his admiration fell away as he saw the look in her eyes and the set of her mouth.

'Rhosyn's dead,' she said without preamble. 'I have been wondering how to tell you, but there is no way to make it any easier.'

He looked at her blankly. The sun was warm on the back of his neck but suddenly he felt frozen from crown to toe.

'They were attacked on our land, on the Llangollen drovers' road yestereve. I gave her the escort she requested but they were all cut down. Father Jerome is in the chapel attending to what needs to be done ...' Her words stumbled to a

halt.

He stared at her while everything slowed down and ground to a halt. 'Dead?' he repeated in a blank voice.

She grasped hold of his sleeve like a sighted person taking hold of someone blind. 'Guyon, come within and I will try to tell you what I know. Heulwen is safe. Eric's brother Godric saved her. They were the only two to survive ...'

He allowed her to lead him. Most of her words washed over him like an incoming tide, leaving only a residue of scouring grit and the words 'Rhosyn's dead' indelibly printed on his mind.

Judith gave him wine, lacing it liberally with aqua vitae. He sat down mechanically, looked at the cup, set it aside and raised disbelieving eyes to her.

'Tell me again,' he commanded. 'I don't know what you said.'

She repeated her words. His face never changed but, as she finished, he covered it with

his hands.

'I am sorry, Guy,' Judith whispered. 'Truly I am.'

He did not respond.

'At least you have Heulwen.'

He looked up at that. 'Yes,' he agreed tonelessly, 'at least I have Heulwen.' And then he laughed and shook his head and buried his face again.

Judith knelt beside him, her arm across his mail-clad shoulder. 'I wish I knew what to say, or how to ease the pain, but I don't ...'

'Then don't say anything,' he muttered and, after a moment, withdrawing from her grasp, he stood up and moved towards the door.

'Where are you going?'

'To the chapel, where else?'

'No, Guy!' She sprang after him. 'Wait at least until you have rested. I'll have a tub prepared and see to your comfort.'

'Do you think I care about that?'

'No, but I do.' She took hold of his sleeve.

'Let me go.' Shrugging her off, he continued on his way.

'Guyon, no ... It's not ... I mean ...' She drew a shuddering breath and momentarily closed her eyes. 'She did not die cleanly.'

'Stop treating me like a nursling!' he snarled and lengthened his stride.

Judith caught up her cloak and went after him. He might not be a nursling but he was inadequately prepared for what would greet him in the chapel.

Guyon looked at the row of shrouded pallets laid out before the altar, ten in all, white mounds of recent humanity.

Father Jerome fussed anxiously in the background. 'A terrible business,' he ventured, 'but they are at peace now.'

Guyon drew back one of the sheets to look

upon the face of Herluin FitzSimon, a promising young man who had served with him during the Welsh campaign and who would one day, in his middle years, have captained a keep garrison. All wasted now on the edge of a sword. The linen shift in which he had been clothed did not cover the gaping wound in his throat or the sword slash that had laid his face open to the bone.

'At peace, are they?' Guyon enquired icily, replacing the sheet.

Father Jerome blanched. 'You must not doubt it, my son,' he said, putting out his hand to comfort.

Guyon stepped aside. 'I would rather you left me alone.'

The priest hesitated. Judith lightly touched his arm. 'Go to,' she said. 'It may be that he will need you later. I will stand surety for now.'

Relieved, the priest pressed her arm and quietly left her alone with Guyon. Judith squared her shoulders and went to her husband. He was staring down at Rhys.

'If Godric had not survived, the bodies would not have been discovered for some time. I was not expecting the escort back for at least three days and no search party would have been sent out before five.'

'You are telling me that this is fortunate?' he said huskily, as he drew the sheet back over Rhys's face.

'It could have been much worse. At least they were saved being despoiled by foxes and crows. Heulwen owes her life to Godric.'

'Sensible Judith,' he snarled.

'Guyon, stop it!'

'Do you interfere for pleasure or because you cannot help yourself?' he demanded savagely. 'In Christ's name, Judith, leave me alone!'

'In Christ's name, no!' she retorted with equal vehemence. 'I'll not be your scapegoat!' Going to the last pallet, she drew back the cover herself. 'Look and have done and come away!' she said brutally.

He flinched and his complexion turned the colour of ashes. Despite the work of Judith and the priest, Rhosyn's body was still not a sight for the squeamish. She had fought hard for her life and her beauty was marred by the livid bruises and distortions of strangulation. Her body beneath the shift was mauled and mutilated and her braids hacked off. Judith covered her up again.

Guyon swallowed jerkily. 'Where's Eluned?' he asked, fighting his gorge.

'De Lacey took her with him.' Judith compressed her lips. Guyon whitened further at the implications.

'My lord ...' said Father Jerome and was barged aside before he could say more by a wild-eyed, travel-stained young man.

'Where is she?' the newcomer asked hoarsely, his French so thickly accented with Welsh and filled with raw emotion that at first Judith stared at him without comprehension. His gaze flickered

over the row of bodies and the vigilance candles. 'My Rhosyn, where is she?'

'*Your* Rhosyn?' Judith's expression sharpened. 'Then you must be Prys--'

'I went to fetch her father for burial and now I am told that I must bury her too, and the lad ...' The wild eyes fixed on Guyon with bleak loathing. 'Couldn't you leave her alone? If not for you, she'd still be alive and my wife!'

Guyon flinched. 'I did not know that she was coming to Ravenstow,' he defended himself. 'If I had, I would have stopped her. Christ knows, I tried to warn her.'

'You should have tried harder!'

'How much harder?' Guyon spat. 'How much would you have tolerated? Short of locking her up, there was nothing I could ever have done to hold her.'

'Then what in Christ's name was she doing here at Ravenstow?'

'She came to invite us to your wedding,' Judith said, trying to calm the sparks between the men that were threatening to flare into violence and violate God's altar and the dead who sought sanctuary there, 'and to talk of Heulwen's future.' It was not the whole truth, but she felt no remorse at withholding what could not safely be said.

'Neither matter was so pressing as to warrant this!' Prys gestured towards the row of corpses, and it came to Guyon that the young Welshman was as filled with guilt as himself, for he too had not been there to prevent this dreadful crime and rage was a bolt hole to be dived into rather than face the unfaceable.

Prys pushed past him and Judith. 'Which one?' he demanded. Judith opened her mouth to say that he should not look, but Guyon forestalled her by pointing to the nearest shroud.

'Walter de Lacey was the man responsible,' Guyon said softly. 'I'm going to tear Thornford down stone by stone and make of that keep a burial mound.'

The young man drew back the sheet and fell to his knees at the side of the bier. 'Ah Rhosyn, *cariad*, no!'

Father Jerome set a comforting arm around Prys's shoulders, although there was nothing that could comfort the sight laid out before their eyes.

Guyon gently drew the cover over Rhosyn again. Prys shuddered and crossed himself. Trembling, he rose to his feet and stared at Guyon.

'I'm a merchant,' he said, voice unsteady with unshed grief, and savage. 'I wear a sword for my protection, but I'm clumsy using it ...'

Judith drew a frightened breath, thinking for a mad instant that the Welshman was going to challenge Guyon to a trial by combat in order to assuage his grief. Guyon must have thought so too, for she felt him tense beside her.

'I want you to teach me to wield it properly. If you are going to march on Thornford, I am coming with you. They told me outside ... about Eluned.'

No worse can be done to Rhosyn, she's beyond it now ... but God alone knows what he will do to the child ...' He choked and compressed his lips.

'Be welcome,' Guyon said, his own voice constricted. 'I'll lend you a hauberk from the armoury.'

The chapel was cold and almost entirely dark. The candles on the altar and around the biers made splashes of light in the pre-dawn blackness. Guyon stared at the flames until his vision blurred and repeated the prayers he had known by rote since childhood. Rote without meaning. The reality was the flagged church floor pressing cold and hard against his numb knees, the smell of incense cloying his nostrils and Rhosyn's desecrated body stretched out before him.

He had tried time and again to believe it was a dream, nothing more than a nightmare from which he would wake up sweating with relief. *Ave Maria, gratia plena* ... He had only to lift the linen sheet to know it was not.

The candles flickered in a draught and light rippled over the bier, giving Rhosyn's shroud the momentary illusion of movement. His hair rose along his spine and he stopped breathing. A gentle hand squeezed his shoulder and he jumped and stared round.

'Guyon, come away,' Judith entreated. 'It is all but dawn now and if you are to lead the men, you need to be rested. Prys sought his pallet an hour ago.' She held out his cloak and he saw that she was wearing her own over the gold wool gown of yesterday. She had been kneeling in vigil with him most of the night, but he had not marked her leaving, or indeed Prys's.

'There is a tub prepared above. You must be frozen stiff.'

The words '*sensible Judith*' floated amongst the disjointed flotsam of the upper layers of his mind. He was suddenly aware of exhaustion seeping through his body just as the iciness of the flagged floor was seeping into his knees. 'To the soul,' he muttered, genuflecting to the altar and

rising stiffly to his feet. 'To the pit of my soul.'

Staggering with weariness, he let her lead him up the stairs to the main bedchamber. She dismissed the maids with a swift gesture and, as the curtain dropped behind the last one, began unbuckling his swordbelt.

As the belt slipped into her hands, he took her by the shoulders and tipped up her chin to examine her face. The dim light concealed some of the ravages, but not all. Mauve shadows marred the clarity of her eyes and the bones of her face were sharp, suddenly reminding him of the first time he had seen her.

He was a sleepwalker, jolted awake. 'Ah God, Judith,' he said on a broken whisper and pulled her tight and close.

'I met her on the day before it happened,' she said into his breast, her voice cracking. 'God's love, Guy, I was so jealous, I wanted to scratch out her eyes, but I couldn't. She was so ... so honest, and she did not deserve what they did to her!' She burst into tears, digging her fingers so hard

into Guyon's hauberk that the rivets cut deep semicircles against her knuckles.

'Judith, love, don't!' Guyon pleaded, kissing her wet face while tears spilled down his own. 'Do you want to break me?'

'I can't help it!' she sobbed. 'Since that night in Southwark, we have not had a moment to ourselves that has not been marred by fear and strain and war!' She struck his hauberk with her clenched fist.

Guyon seized her hand in one of his and clamped the other around her waist, holding her tightly, aware through his own shuddering of hers.

At length, sniffing and tear-drenched, she pulled away to look at him. 'I meant to be calm and strong when you came home,' she whispered, 'and instead I shriek like a harpy. The tub is growing cold and you are still in your mail.'

'Never mind the tub,' he said, his whole body shaking with cold and the delayed reaction of shock and fatigue. 'I have lived without creature

comforts for so long that another night and day does not matter. Just help me unarm and come to bed.'

Judith wondered whether she should persuade him to eat some food and decided that, for now, she just did not possess the energy. The battle could be taken up again once they had both slept.

'Judith.' He stretched out his hand to her in supplication. With a soft cry she returned to his embrace, stood tightly enclosed within it for a brief moment, then set about helping him remove his mail.

C HAPTER 27

The dawn sky on the horizon was barred grey and cream and oystershell, striated like marble. Smoke from cooking fires hazed the immediate air. Fatty bacon sizzled. A loaded wain of new bread from Ravenstow creaked into the camp.

Men were hearing mass, their bellies rumbling.

Guyon watched the mangonel launch another boulder at Thornford's curtain wall. There came the crash of stone splintering on stone and a high-pitched scream from within.

'It is a great pity to see such fine new defences reduced to rubble before we take them,' Eric murmured at his side.

'Do you have a better suggestion?' Guyon growled. 'If not, go and find out what's taking those miners so long and get me a cup of wine before my throat closes!'

Eric lifted long-suffering eyes towards heaven

and fetched the latter first accompanied by a mutton pasty. Then, face studiously impassive, he went in search of the sapper's foreman. Lord Guyon had been the very devil to please of late, the knowledge of what lay behind those walls goading him to frustrated rage like a baited bear. Unable to come to grips with de Lacey, he was venting his spleen on those around him instead. It was understandable, of course. All of them were sickened at what had happened to Rhosyn and her escort. Casualties of war were one thing; wanton destruction and rapine of a child were another, especially when the victims were people with whom one had shared companionship and hospitality and had always complaisantly assumed one would see many times again.

Having found the foreman of the sappers who had paused in his endeavours in order to eat his breakfast, Eric asked him Guyon's question.

The small man wiped his earth-smeared hand across his mouth and grimaced. 'We been working all night fast as we can, see. What does

he expect, miracles?'

These men were a law unto themselves, their invaluable skill setting them above the conventions of rank. Mainly Welshmen and brought up to the craft since birth, working open-cast coal seams, they were digging a tunnel underground to a point directly beneath the wall, supporting their work with wooden props. Once completed, the tunnel would be filled with pitch-soaked furze and dry wood and bladders of pork fat, then set ablaze. As the props burned away, the tunnel would cave in, bringing down the wall above, in this case a section of the eastern rampart. It was dirty, difficult work and the rate of pay reflected it. Dai ap Owain and the men literally beneath him earned a shilling a day, which was as much as a fully accoutred knight could expect to command.

'What do I tell him, Dai?'

'Tell him we'll be done by prime and that we need more oil and brushwood.'

Eric looked doubtful. 'No sooner?' he

mistakenly asked, envisaging Guyon's displeasure.

'If my lord desires such a thing, let him come down and dig himself. *A fo ben, bid bont!*'

Eric retreated. 'Prime,' he said to Guyon, 'and they need tinder and oil. I'll go and see to it,' and he disappeared before Guyon could flay him alive with the edge of his tongue.

By mid-morning, the grey light of dawn had brightened into a strong blue heat and the arrows that swished between besieger and besieged were hard black shafts raining down from a cloudless sky. Guyon shot a glance at his archers. Half of them had set aside their bows and had begun preparing their short swords and round shields for the imminent assault. This was the lull, the still before the storm. Guyon's fingers twitched on Arian's reins. He made a conscious effort to relax as the stallion side-stepped, soothing him with soft words and a smoothing hand on the sleek, silk neck.

It had taken three weeks to come this far, and not without trials. Walter de Lacey might be a fool in the political sense, might be a child-molesting murdering pervert, but it did not prevent him from being a skilled soldier and tactician. Their siege machines had been sabotaged by a daring night raid and a couple of attempts to take the keep with scaling ladders had been repelled. The enmity was intense, each foothold gained paid for in blood.

Guyon rubbed his sweating palms on his chausses. He had never wanted a thing so much in his life as to take Thornford and tear its occupant apart piece by little piece. He did not think of Eluned. To have done so now would have upset his balance and thus far he had kept it well on the level.

Over by the water butts two sappers were swilling water down, their bodies lithe, hard and small. He had never met a man of the trade much above five feet in height. Indeed Dai, their foreman, frequently stood on a mounting block or

a keg so that he could address Guyon at eye level. Fiercely independent and forthright, Dai saw no reason to back down from a point of view just because he lacked stature, and the men who knew him had long since ceased to make the mistake of patronising him.

He was at the mine now, supervising the blaze which had been kindled an hour since. Guyon switched his hungry gaze again to Thornford's defences, a muscle bunching and releasing in his jaw. The stone curtain wall had replaced a wooden palisade about ten years ago when Welsh raids had been particularly savage. The original wooden keep had been rebuilt in stone and now stood three levels high. It did not approach the impregnable grandeur of Ravenstow - few strongholds did - but it was certainly stout enough to repel the Welsh and several weeks of determined, conventional siege.

'It's going to go,' Dai ap Owain lilted, appearing out of nowhere to stand at Guyon's stirrup.

'Thank Christ for that,' Guyon said and signalled

his captains to take up their places and make ready their men. They knew what was to be done. Plans had been discussed last night and in more detail this morning while they waited for the miners to complete their work. If any man bungled it now, it was his own fault, but Guyon did not anticipate problems. Eric and de Bec were experienced, dependable men, quite capable of extricating themselves and those beneath their command if a crisis arose.

He looked over his shoulder. Godric was guarding his back, his sorrel fretting and dancing, as anxious as his rider for the action to be upon them. Beside Godric, astride one of the remounts, sat Prys ap Adda, sword drawn, shield held in tight to his body. For all his declaration that he was a clumsy swordsman, Guyon had found little lacking. The Welshman might not have the bulk of the men he would be facing, but he was as fast in motion and ferocious as summer lightning and he, too, had a personal cause to lend vehemence to his sword arm. Had the man been trained to war from birth, Guyon doubted

that he could have bested him.

A dull rumbling sound like the roll of summer thunder grew gradually louder and the ground shook. Horses started and shied. The bailey wall collapsed, crashing down into the tunnel, sending loose stones and mortar bounding across the courtyard floor. Smoke and thick dust mingled upwards, in an obscuring cloud.

'There's pretty for you!' Dai breathed exultantly.

Guyon was not listening. 'Forward!' he roared, flinging all his pent-up tension into the cry as, clapping spurs to Arian's flanks, he bolted for the gap.

He, Godric and Prys erupted simultaneously through the gaping hole, Guyon driving straight ahead, his companions to right and left. Eyes streaming, lungs choking on the boiling fog, Guyon rode down three of the defenders who were not swift enough to scatter before his rage. Arian barged past them, felling two among the debris. Guyon cut down the third. The stallion killed one man before he could rise. Guyon

brained the other with his shield, dealt with another on a vicious backswing and swung the horse towards the inner bailey, the entrance to which was defended by two iron-bound gates, four fingers thick and secured on the inside by a massive bar which took the strivings of at least four stout men to lift from its slots.

'Ravenstow *a moi!*' Guyon bellowed and the men of his group disengaged so they could to run or ride with him, leaving the soldiers under Eric's command to take care of the outer ward. From the direction of the western wall walk, the wind fed them the yells of de Bec's group on the scaling ladders and the deadly whiz of arbalest quarrels.

'The ram!' Guyon shouted and the order was passed swiftly down the line. The huge oak trunk with its reinforced pointed iron head was run forward by fifteen men-at-arms, coughing and sneezing in the clogged air. One of them screeched and fell, an arrow in his leg. Guyon leaped down from the stallion and took his place, the exhilaration of battle coursing through him.

'Heave!' he cried and the ram thrust forward and smacked against the gate, boomed and rebounded. 'Back ... heave ... back ... heave ...' And the rhythm was taken up and echoed down the line. Much to the appreciation of the men, Guyon began a crude song in English about the broaching of a difficult virgin.

A sword clanged on a nearby shield as Prys felled a defender. An arbalest bolt crashed into the ram hard by Guyon's thrusting shoulder. A moment later another one swished past his ear.

'Get that sniper!' he broke off singing to bellow furiously. 'Before he gets me! No dolts, don't stop! God's death, you weren't as hesitant as this when you hit the London stews last summer!'

Bawdy guffaws, capping remarks and renewed efforts greeted his outburst. The dented head of the huge oak log pounded against the solid planks. Guyon began to sweat with effort. His breath grew harsh in his throat; his mouth was dust-dry. With salt-stung eyes he glanced around, assessing the ward. Behind and around them

many of the lesser combatants had begun to cry quarter rather than die and Eric's men were effectively dealing with those who preferred to fight on.

'Lord Guyon!' rasped the soldier beside him. Sunlight glinted from his helmet as he jerked his head energetically at the gates. Guyon squinted at him and then at their target, and abruptly stood up and raised his hand. The singing raggedly ceased. The men rested the ram and stared with their lord towards the scuffed, surface-splintered but otherwise intact gates. Guyon hefted his shield, wiped his hand across his upper lip and commanded forward his two most accurate archers to train their sights upon the gap as the great, thick planks began to swing inwards.

A dour soldier wearing a leather gambeson filled the entrance, grey-streaked hair falling to his shoulders. He was weaponless, not even an eating knife about his person and behind him, like the contents of a stoppered wineskin, cowered what seemed to be all the inhabitants of the inner

ward.

'My lord, we yield ourselves and this keep to your mercy,' he said formally, eyes betraying all the fear that his deliberate deep voice did not.

Guyon said nothing but gestured the men at his back to slip within and take up defensive positions. Prys spoke to him quickly in Welsh. Guyon answered with a single terse word and did not look away from the man they were facing.

'It is no trick, lord,' the spokesman said with dignity. 'I would rather open to you now and spare the lives of good men, than fight to the last drop of blood for such a one as Walter de Lacey. If that is treason, then so be it.' His head came up proudly. There was a rumble of assent from the crowd behind him.

'And precisely where is Walter de Lacey?' Guyon asked in a hard voice.

'He went over the west wall in the early hours of this morning, and his guard with him. I am Wulfric, the constable's deputy and former bodyguard to

Lord Ralph. There is no one else here of any higher authority. You killed the man he left in command on the first charge.' He shrugged his broad shoulders. 'Lord Walter knew he could not hold this place, not without aid. He's gone down the border to look for it, but with the King's forces stretched across Wenlock Edge, I doubt he'll find it, sire, unless it comes from Wales.'

Guyon's sword hand twitched and the blade came up in response to his rage and frustration. Over the wall and through his fingers like a fish through a hole in a net. 'Eric,' he said over his shoulder. 'Find out who was on duty at the west wall last night and bring him to me.'

Eric acknowledged, a chill running down his spine as if it was his own back that was laid bare to the lash.

Guyon returned his attention to the Saxon. 'What about the child?'

The man shook his head. 'He is here my lord, but not well, not well at all. He and his mother are both suffering from the bloody flux and like to die

of it.'

Guyon gaped at him stupidly. In his mind there was only one child, his Eluned, but of course to this man the query could only pertain to de Lacey's heir. 'Not the boy,' he said: 'the Welsh girl.'

The man looked perturbed. 'My lord, she's dead. On the first night it happened. She managed to escape him and jumped off the wall walk yonder.' He looked behind him at the faces shielded by his bulk. 'Nick there was on duty and tried to grab her, but he was too late, just missed the edge of her shift.'

The young man nodded, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down. 'Did my best, but she was slippery as an eel.'

'No!' Prys shouted, shaking his head in violent denial. 'He's lying. It is not true, it is not true!' He lunged at the spokesman, who staggered and put up his hands to protect his head. Guyon intercepted him, but his mind was detached as he

separated Prys from his victim and braced himself against the Welshman's onslaught. Then Eric pinioned Prys in his frenzy and led him aside. As if from a distance, Guyon heard Prys vomiting. His own body trembled with a deadly mixture of fury and fatigue. Somewhere at the back of his mind, he supposed that it was a mercy Eluned was dead.

The old man wiped a streak of blood from the corner of his mouth, his eyes going sidelong to the retching Welshman. 'We buried her in the garth near the churchyard, me and Nick. Lord Walter said to throw her in the ditch, but we couldn't do that. Lady Mabel gave us a sheet to wrap her in ... we did our best, lord.'

Guyon bit the inside of his mouth. 'For which you have my thanks,' he acknowledged. 'It will not go forgotten, I promise you.'

They parted to let him through and he went across the ward and up the forebuilding stairs into the hall, his step no longer light with the spark of battle, but heavy, as though the spurs clipping

his heels were fashioned of lead. It was all for nothing. De Lacey still owned life, limb and liberty. He was suddenly aware of the myriad minor cuts and bruises he had sustained in the heat of the fray. The keep had still to be cleared and inspected and shored up against a possible counter-attack, and a report made to Henry whom he was to join as soon as all was finished here. Only it was not finished, and perhaps never would be.

Sitting in the rushes a few yards from where he stood, one of the servants' children was playing with her straw doll, expression intent as she decorated its ragged sacking dress with a necklace of delicate amber beads.

Guyon put his face in his hands and wept.

C HAPTER 28

When Judith arrived at Thornford in response to an urgent summons from her husband; it was sunset of the second day and work still hard afoot to repair the worst of the miners' ravages.

In the outer ward, scene of so much previous destruction, small cooking fires burned as normal, tended by the soldiers' women and the smells of bread and pottage wafted enticingly on the evening wind. Judith guided Euraidh between the fires. A bat swooped low overhead, casting for insects in the gloaming. Broken arrows and lances littered the ground.

A groom held Judith's mare and Guyon himself stepped from the shadows to lift her from the saddle. His lids were heavy and dust-rimmed. Sweat and battle dirt gleamed in the creases of his skin, but the narrow semblance of a smile glinted before he stooped to give her a scratchy kiss.

'You made good speed, *Cath fach*,' he approved. 'I had not thought to see you until tomorrow noon at least.'

'Needs must when the devil drives,' she answered lightly, her eyes full of concern.

His smile vanished. 'Yes,' he agreed blankly and turned, his arm around her waist, to face the keep. 'Needs must.'

Judith eyed him thoughtfully. His letter had informed her of the victory and asked her to come quickly, little else, and she had hailed the messenger back from his refreshment to reassure her that Guyon was not wounded. First qualm of terror dissolved, she had set out to pump the man for the information not contained in the letter.

'I'm sorry, Guy,' she said softly and pressed his arm.

He made a rueful gesture. Faced by the thought of being unable to go on, he had felt a desperate need for the comfort of Judith's forthright,

astriugent presence and, despite its stilted brevity, his letter had come straight from the heart. Indeed, had he paused for rational thought at the time of writing, he would have left her at Ravenstow rather than command her here to the shambles of a recent battleground - but yesterday there had been little room for reason.

'I suppose it is for the best,' he owned as they entered the inner ward. 'When you crush a flower it falls to pieces. God's eyes, Judith, if only I had--'

'Guyon, no!' She stood on tiptoe to press her palm against his lips. 'You must not shackle yourself with guilt. Rhosyn would have taken her chances on the drovers' roads far more recklessly were it not for your warnings. At least you sought to protect her and the children.'

'But it was not enough.'

The stubble prickled her palm as his lips moved. Judith studied him narrowly. 'When did you last eat and sleep?'

Guyon took her hand away to grasp it in his.

'You sound like my mother,' he said with a hint of weary amusement.

'Who by all accounts was a woman of sense,' she retorted. Her brow wrinkled. 'Why send for me if you did not want to be nagged?'

'Because ...' He drew a sharp breath as if to change his mind, then stopped and faced her, scraping a hand distractedly through his hair which was in sad need of cutting. 'Oh curse it, Judith, because you are the most infuriating, stubborn and capable woman it has ever been my misfortune to know!'

She burst out laughing. 'Is that a compliment or an insult?'

'To be honest, I do not know!' He set his hands on her shoulders. 'All I do know is that I need you as I've never needed anything in my life.'

Judith gasped and staggered. He was pungent with horse and sweat and smoke. His armour could have stood up of its own accord so strong were the mingled aromas.

'And why precisely should you need me?' she demanded archly. 'Apart from the obvious.'

He grinned at that, shaking his head at her tart perception, but sobered quickly as they began to walk again. 'Apart from the obvious, I need you to organise this shambles so that more than just cold pottage and dried meat graces the table. The servants don't know their heads from their heels and Lady Mabel is in no fit state to organise them. I do not have the time.'

'Lady Mabel is here?'

'And her son.' A frown drew his brows together. 'They are both sick with the bloody flux. Look at them if you will, but I suspect it is in God's hands now.'

There was something in his tone, a harshening that made Judith regard him with sharp curiosity. He paused at the foot of the forebuilding steps, fist gripped tightly on the hilt of his sword, as if holding it down in the scabbard.

'What is to become of them if they survive,

Guy?'

He followed her gaze to his clenched fist and removed it carefully from the grip before he answered, his nonchalant shrug belied by the grim set of his jaw. 'The lands will be forfeit because de Lacey has rebelled against his King, but they were only his by right of marriage anyway. I suppose the child will inherit them when he is of an age to do so and in the meantime Henry will appoint a warden. The convent is the best place for Lady Mabel.'

'And de Lacey?' she asked.

'Is bound for hell!' he snarled. 'The reckoning is only postponed, not abandoned.'

* * *

Judith found Lady Mabel and the child in a chamber off the hall. The floor was strewn with new rushes and the bed had been made up with clean linen, but the air was still fetid with the stench of bowel sickness. Judith went to the shutters and threw them back, opening the room

to an arch of smoky twilight sky. Helgund always swore that night vapours were bad for the lungs, but Judith had slept too often beneath the stars to give any credence to such superstition. Besides, night vapours were a sight more sweet-smelling than the human ones of the moment.

Sounds drifted up from the bailey; the good-natured raillery of two serjeants, the outlandish Welsh singing at the miners' fire, the neigh of a truculent destrier.

The woman on the bed thrashed and moaned. Judith went to her and laid a gentle hand on the hot forehead. Mabel de Serigny raised sunken lids and struggled to focus. Her head rolled on the pillow and a shudder racked her wasted body. Red stars of fever burned on the points of her cheekbones and her breath laboured in her lungs: a matter of time only, Judith thought, and short at that.

The child in the crib was awake and alert. As she approached him, his eyes locked on hers and tenaciously followed her movement. They

were his father's eyes, ale-brown in colour, the tone echoed in the thick, straight hair. He drew his knees up to his chest and wailed hoarsely. Judith bent and picked him up. He was hot to her touch, but not burning and, as far as she could see, his condition was not yet mortal.

'Poor mite,' muttered Helgund as she set down Judith's basket of medicines. 'What kind of life is he going to make with the start he's had?' She came to peer into the infant's face and crossed herself at the marked resemblance to his sire.

'Better than the life he would have had otherwise,' Judith answered as she laid him back down and set about mixing a soothing potion to ease Mabel's pain. 'A mother who cannot speak, who never wanted him and a father who has bullied, deceived and butchered and who harbours a vicious lust for young girls. What kind of example would he have had as he grew up? At least now he has a chance to learn honour and decency.'

'Mayhap you're right,' said Helgund, but she still

looked dubious. 'I cannot help but think that wolves breed true.'

'He is only half wolf,' Judith said gently. 'And there is good blood on his mother's side. Come, help me lift her and then I want you to fetch the priest.'

'No hope then?'

Judith shook her head. 'There are others afflicted like this too. My guess is that the well water is to blame and that the weakest have succumbed. My lord has set the servants to cleaning out the shaft.'

'I wondered why you had left the shutters wide.'

'What do you mean?'

'To let her soul fly free, m'lady.'

Judith said nothing. Let Helgund believe that she adhered to that old custom if it would stop her from lecturing on the ills of open shutters at night. Mabel coughed and choked on the bitter nostrum and most of it dribbled down her chin.

The infant was dosed with more success than his mother and his soiled linens changed. Unlike Heulwen, he was slow to smile and exuded not one iota of her engaging charm. His stare was solemn, almost old ... but then, she thought, throat tightening, Heulwen had known only love and affection down the length of her short life and this child never had. Mabel had rejected him, so the maids said, and left him to the wet-nurse who had been a dim-witted slatternly girl from the village with more interest in her trencher and the attentions of one of the grooms than in the infant she was supposed to be suckling.

Judith blinked away the suspicion of tears and sat by the crib, smoothing the child's thick hair until his lids drooped and his breathing came slow and soft and then she rose and, leaving him with Helgund, went to administer similar comfort to her husband.

Guyon stepped into the tub, hissing softly through his teeth as the hot water found cuts and bruises he had forgotten he possessed until now. Slowly,

he eased himself down into the herb-infused water until it lapped his shoulders and, tilting back his head, closed his eyes.

Clouded visions danced before his darkened lids. The imagined image of Eluned's death and the reality of the raw earth mound in the garth behind the churchyard. Rhosyn's mutilated body. Heulwen asking in bewilderment for her mother. Heulwen smiling at him through her lashes in the exact manner that had been Rhosyn's, her pudgy hand curled trustingly in his. He swore, opening his eyes, and jerked forward in the water. Judith cried out and backed away from him, almost dropping her basket of medicines.

'What's wrong?' She looked at him askance.

Guyon subsided with a shake of his head. 'Nothing,' he said, tight-lipped.

Judith set down the basket. 'Strange behaviour for a nothing,' she remonstrated. 'That's a nasty graze on your shoulder. You had better let me look at it before you dress.'

His mouth softened. 'Yes, madam.'

She bent to sort through his baggage and find him some presentable garments, clucking in irritation at the dismal state that three weeks without female attention had wrought on his clothes.

'What of Lady Mabel and the boy?' he asked far too casually as he busied himself with his wash.

Judith looked round, a pair of leg bindings dangling between her fingers. 'Lady Mabel will die,' she said bluntly, 'probably before dawn. There is naught to be done. The child will likely survive.'

There was a long silence. Judith came over to the tub, drawn by the quality of his tone. He looked up at her, then bleakly away into the middle distance. 'Do you know, Judith, when they told me that Eluned was dead and that the boy and his mother were still here in the keep, in my power, I wanted to kill them both?' He swallowed hard. 'The little boy ... he looks so much like his father ...I actually found myself unsheathing my

sword and standing over him ... and then where would be the difference between myself and Walter de Lacey?'

Judith had put her hand over her mouth. Quickly she took it away as his gaze shifted towards her. She knelt beside the tub and gently touched his tense arm. 'You would have derived no pleasure from it, Guy, not like him.'

'You think not?'

'You did not do it, however much you desired,' she replied steadily, 'and that is the difference.'

His look was bleak. 'No,' he said. 'But I thought about it so hard that it might as well have been the deed. If Eric hadn't been in the room with me ...' He broke off the sentence.

Judith was filled with burning anger - at Walter de Lacey, at Robert de Belleme, at this whole war and at how far Guyon had been pushed and pushed and pushed. Suddenly she understood his need of her and that she must not fail him. 'You were overset and there is no point in

brooding upon it.' She shook his shoulder. It was his grazed one and his breath caught. 'Guy, look at me.'

He turned his head. 'You did not do it. You held back,' she said slowly and clearly.

'Yes,' he agreed in a toneless voice, gaze slipping wearily from hers and back to the middle distance.

'Oh, in the name of the Holy Virgin!' Exasperated and cross because she was frightened, Judith thrust herself to her feet. 'Go on then, wallow until you sink in your own guilt. Just do not expect me to follow you!' She flounced away towards the flagon and reached jerkily for a cup.

Guyon shut his eyes and, with a soft groan, leaned his head against the rim of the tub. 'Judith, let be. I can't argue with you, not now.'

'And that is half the problem,' she diagnosed tartly. 'You are so tired that your wits are not serving you as they should. You don't want to

argue with me because you dare not. You need time to rest and recover.'

He gave a crooked smile. 'There is need and need, *Cath fach*. Henry needs my report and then he needs me. My own needs can wait.'

'You will be worse than useless to him.'

'Stop pricking me, Judith. I'll manage.'

'And you have the gall to call me infuriating and stubborn!' she retorted. When he chose not to respond, she narrowed her eyes and, mouth set, reached for her vial of poppy syrup and laced his wine with it, adding a hefty splash of aqua vitae to disguise the taste. Her eyes brightened with tears at the memory of the last time she had poured him wine while he lounged in a tub and she contrasted it bitterly with the present. This time there was no brimming laughter, no electric charge of sexual tension. This time there was only fear-tinged determination and exhaustion.

Returning to the tub, she handed him the spiked wine. 'Speaking of needs,' she said, changing the

course of her attack, 'the men at least will have to be released for harvest very soon.'

'Such as are necessary,' he agreed. 'I suppose I will have to hire mercenaries to replace them. I'll send to Ravenstow for the strongbox.' He took a gulp of the wine and choked on the underlying bite of the aqua vitae.

'Drink it!' she commanded, eyes fierce, cheeks flushed, terrified that he would discover the taste of the opium.

His lids flickered wide at her peremptory tone and then he smiled slowly. 'Dare I? he asked. 'Last time you shoved a cup beneath my nose and commanded me like that, you were hell-bent on torture.'

Judith felt her whole face scorch fiery red. 'I saved your life, didn't I?'

'Yes you did, *Cath fach*.' His look became quizzical. 'Why are you blushing?'

Judith's heart began to gallop. 'I'm not,' she croaked. 'It is the summer heat.'

Guyon gaped at her over the goblet rim with undisguised astonishment. Hot without it might be, but the keep walls were several feet thick, the gaps filled with rubble and, even in the summer months, it was comfortable to have braziers in the private chambers.

'I'll fetch food,' she muttered breathlessly, and detached herself from his scrutiny to dive for the doorway.

Guyon shook his head and then ducked it beneath the water to wet his hair and clear his thoughts, wondering how on earth Judith had the temerity to suggest that his mind was not serving him as it should when her own was quite obviously addled. He continued his wash and, frowning, took another swallow of the wine. That remark about the heat had been a flustered idiocy, her exit rapid before he could investigate further; or at least, he thought, until she had invented a more plausible excuse for her blush.

It was after she had given him the wine. Until then she had been simmering at him like a

cauldron on a blaze. After a moment, a glimmer of enlightenment caused him to taste the wine again and roll it experimentally round his mouth. Smooth, high-quality Anjou and rough border aqua vitae and ... ! He spat it out into the bath water and swore with soft vehemence, staring with furious eyes at the curtain through which she had vanished. Anger sparkled along his nerve endings, an invigorating anger, buoying him up, subduing fatigue. Lace his wine, would she?

Judith returned with a tray of cold roast pigeon and fresh white bread, a new flagon of wine and an excuse for her previous flustered behaviour ready and credible on her tongue, for it was in part the truth. She intended saying that she had been swept by desire at the sight of him in the bath along with the association of pouring him wine, and knowing how tired he was, had not wished to burden him further. It was therefore with a mingling of vexation and relief that she discovered he had fallen fast asleep in the rapidly cooling water.

Eyes raised heavenwards, she set the tray down on a clothing chest, gave Cadi a firm, low command that flopped the bitch down on her belly at the door, eyes still cocked in distant hope on the food, and went to the tub to pick up the empty goblet from the floor.

'In Jesu's name, Guy, you might have gone to bed!' she complained with exasperation, then shrieked as Guyon surged from the water like a pike, seized her and dragged her down.

'And you might refrain from poisoning my wine!' he growled as she tried to thresh out of his hard grip.

'I wasn't, Guy, truly!'

'You deny there was poppy in that wine?'

'Only enough to give you a sound night's sleep. You need it.'

'You did it in deceit!'

'It was for your own good.'

'Ah yes, my own good,' he said silkily. 'Swaddle

me up like a babe while you are at it.'

'Guyon please, you're hurting me!' Judith half sobbed, more afraid of the cadence of his voice than the grip on her arm.

'I ought to beat you witless!' he complained, but let her go. She floundered from the tub, the front of her gown drenched, the ends of her braids dark bronze and dripping. 'Don't ever try that trick on me again.'

Judith took her courage in both hands. 'I'll make sure that next time you don't know!' she retorted. 'My only fault was that in my haste I did not disguise the taste enough.'

Guyon jerked to his feet in a swish of angry water. 'Dare it at your peril.'

'Threat or promise?' she asked with a saucy confidence she was far from feeling, aware that she was playing with fire and that one step too far would ignite a totally different conflagration from the kind she was nurturing now. 'Will you unlace my gown? It's soaked and I'll catch a chill.'

'Your own fault. Call your maids.'

'I can't. Helgund's sitting with Mabel and the child and if you glare at Elflin like that, you will terrify her, not to mention what Brand will do to you if he thinks you have been making improper advances to his wife.'

'What?' Guyon spluttered. He knew by now that he was being led a merry dance, but was too interested in its destination to halt the devious steps of its progress.

'Well, if I sent for Elflin and she saw you in that condition, the Lord alone knows what she might misconstrue. You know how timid she is of all men, saving Brand.'

'What cond--' Guyon followed the direction of her amused gaze, then flicked his own back to her face. Laughter was tugging at the corners of her mouth. She raised her eyes to his. They were round and innocent and she kept them on him as she raised her arms to remove her circlet and veil.

'Shall I leave that uncomfortable, too?' she enquired with spurious solicitude. 'Or would you let me close enough to rub it better?'

'Judith!' Guyon choked, laughing despite himself. Half an hour ago he had been so weary and soul-sick that he could have lain down and died. Now the energy was flowing through him like a vigorous stream in spate. 'What am I going to do with you?'

'Get me with child?' she suggested, slanting him a provocative glance. 'Women are supposed to dote and soften when they are breeding.'

Guyon snorted. 'Since when have you ever done what other women are supposed to do?'

'There is always a first time. You might be pleasantly surprised.'

'For a change,' he said with a grin.

She gave him a lazy, answering smile. 'Unlace me, Guy?' she requested again.

He reached to the side fastening of her gown

and began to pluck it undone. 'You are naught but a hussy, do you know that? Summer heat indeed!'

She stepped out of the drenched garment and turned in his embrace to twine her arms about his neck and meet his lips with her own. He reached for the drawstring of her shift. 'I have practised better deceptions,' she admitted impishly against his mouth. 'It's not knotted this time.'

'I did not think it would be,' he said wryly as the garment slid down from her shoulders and pooled at her feet and her body blended itself with his.

C HAPTER 29

Guyon stirred in response to a dazzle of light across his eyelids and squinted them open. The chamber was dim; sunlight lanced across the bed from a gap in the warped shutter. He moved his head and idly watched the motes of dust glitter in its bright rainbow bars. It took him a moment to remember where he was and why. Then came the familiar feeling as of a cold stone in the pit of his stomach, immediately dissolved by the awareness of Judith's body curled at his side, sleeping with the innocent abandon of the kitten that was her nickname. Hard to believe in the scheming seductress of the night.

He stretched and relaxed, smiling at the incongruity. Flowers and thorns. Sharp claws sheathed in soft padding. He turned towards her and nuzzled his chin on the crown of her head. She murmured and nestled closer. Her lips moved in a sleepy kiss at the base of his throat.

He glanced beyond the luxurious comfort of his

bed and wife to the shifting strands of light and the smile still on his lips became rueful as he realised that it was the first time in three days that he had woken at dawn instead of noon. As usual she had been right, he acknowledged. He had not known the depth of his exhaustion until he had succumbed to it, and succumb he had with a vengeance. The last three days had passed him by like distant scenes from an illuminated psalter and he an illiterate turning the pages. He vaguely recalled rising to eat in the hall and speaking to people, although what he had eaten and what he had said were now a complete mystery. He also remembered going out to inspect the repair work on the curtain wall, but Judith had apprehended him with some specious excuse that had drawn him back within ... and inevitably to bed where, by unfair means, she had enticed him to stay.

Restlessly he shifted his position, aware of a need to be up and doing that was born of renewed energy, not dull-edged desperation. The grief, anger and guilt were still with him, but no longer intruding upon his every waking thought.

Raw, but bearable and probably a burden for life.

Lady Mabel had died on that first night. God rest her soul, since it had not had much rest on this earth. Judith had been tearful about that, although he suspected the tears were more a relieving of tension than any deeper grief for the dead woman. The child still lived. His fever was gone and he had stopped passing blood, or so Judith told him. She kept the babe from his sight and he had no desire to go and see for himself - not yet; perhaps never.

He thought of the incident with the spiked wine. He had always known she was mettlesome, but sometimes she was almost too quick for him to handle. Get me with child, she had said. He was not sure that he could imagine Judith soft and doting. It was not in her nature, or at least not yet. Perhaps children would gentle her, but he doubted it. Kittens did nothing to make a cat less feral. In fact the reverse.

The sound of a horn interrupted his ruminations: a hunting horn, but the notes were not in the

sequence that summoned the dogs or blew the mort and they cut through his sense of well-being. He bolted upright in the bed and reached instinctively for his sword. In that same instant, Michel de Bec clashed aside the curtain without courtesy or preamble and strode into the room.

'My lord, it's de Lacey,' he said curtly. 'He's got lightweight siege equipment and an army of Welsh behind him and he's about to storm the walls.'

'De Lacey?' Guyon repeated. Beside him, Judith sat up, the sheet clutched to her breasts, her eyes filled with sleepy bewilderment.

De Bec wiped his hand across his beard and looked sick. 'We did not see them before. There was a thick mist at first light and they concealed themselves among a flock of sheep being driven up to the keep.'

'Sheep?' Guyon slanted his constable a look. 'Sheep?' he said again and gave a bark of bitter laughter at the irony. 'Do you think it is the same flock, perchance? Thirty pieces of silver?'

'My lord?' De Bec looked at him sidelong.

'Hell's death, Michell!' Guyon shouted. 'He gets out over the wall without being seen and returns in the same wise. God in heaven. I ought to blind every last man on duty. It's quite obvious the bastards have no use for their eyes!' He flung back the bedclothes, tossed his sword on top of them and began swiftly to dress.

'Cadwgan's men, I suppose?'

'I do not know, my lord.'

'God's teeth, what do you know?'

De Bec swallowed. 'They came on us from the west, from across the border, my lord. I do not think they are part of the Shrewsbury force.'

Guyon pulled on his chausses. 'That doesn't make them any less likely to murder us all,' he said in a voice that was husky with curbed temper. 'How far are we outnumbered?'

'About three to one, my lord, but half of them at least are little more than bare-legged Welsh

rabble.'

'Don't underestimate them,' Guyon said sharply. 'They might look like peasants, but they fight like wolves, and a weakened keep, like a new lamb, is game for their sport.' He gave his constable a calculating look. 'They won't sit beyond a couple of days for a siege - it's all got to come on the first or second assault. If we can beat them back so that they lose heart, then we have a chance.'

'The women ...'

Guyon followed de Bec's gaze. Clothed by now in a clinging white woollen undertunic, her hair spilling to her thighs, Judith was a sight to rouse the lust of any man in battle heat and rank offered no protection when Walter de Lacey was leading the assault.

Judith unsheathed Guyon's long knife from his sword-belt. 'I can look after myself,' she said quietly, holding the knife in an accustomed, confident grip.

Guyon opened his mouth to tell her not to be so

ridiculous, but snapped it shut again. There was no point in warning her that most Welshmen were adept dagger-fighters and that she might strike once and succeed by dint of surprise, but not again. Probably she knew it already, but the die was cast and it was too late, whatever happened.

'The women will have to take their chance with the rest of us,' he said to de Bec as he struggled into his hauberk, feeling that it was a prison and punishment rather than security. He looked round at Judith again and held out his hand for his swordbelt. She fetched it and he stroked her cheek lightly with his knuckles.

'Organise the servants as best you can, love. The women can care for the wounded and boil up whatever we have - pitch, oil, water. Let the men douse whatever is burnable and carry supplies to the battlements. I'll send you word in more detail when I've seen for myself how the situation stands. At all costs, Judith, keep them from panicking.'

She nodded more staunchly than she felt. Panic

was like fire when it spread - difficult to contain and very destructive. She would have to make sure that everyone was kept far too busy to give in to its ravages, including herself. Her chin came up. She looked Guyon proudly in the eyes and he drew her against him, arm hard around her waist. Her fingers tightened on his back, on the iron rings of war when not fifteen minutes before they had been resting contentedly on his warm, naked skin.

'Guy, have a care to yourself,' she whispered, suddenly feeling very frightened as it began to hit her. 'Don't go after de Lacey at the cost of all else.'

He released her to buckle on his belt. 'I'll take that as foolishness, not insult, *Cath fach*,' he said. 'I know what is at stake.' He latched the ornate buckle, hitched the scabbard, then kissed her again, this time lightly and tugged a strand of her hair.

She watched him leave, fear squeezing her heart. With icy fingers she braided her hair and

pinned it out of the way. The fear intensified and with it came a rallying anger. She yanked on her overtunic, belted it and thrust the knife down against her left side. It was an act of bravado, but at least it gave her the confidence to stalk from the chamber like an Amazon and begin organising the half-hysterical servants into something less reminiscent of a chicken run with a fox amok within.

Guyon peered down from the wall walk battlements on a scene of utter chaos below and, tight-lipped, rapped out several commands. 'Get the sling stones to the wall and stop their pick before that section of shored-up wall comes down ... the same for the ram. And there aren't enough grappling hooks up here. De Martin, get one of the boys to fetch some up from the stores, and arrows too if we have them. Soak them in pitch and set them alight and see if we can get that mangonel.'

'Christ's bloody bones,' Eric cursed beside him. 'It looks as though half of Wales is howling out

there.'

Guyon smiled grimly. 'Not quite,' he said, 'but enough to send us out of this world if they break through; de Lacey will make sure of that.' He donned his helm and his expression vanished behind a broad nasal bar and patterned bronze brow ridges. He stabbed a finger. 'The trebuchet wants moving over there. It's not a bit of good where it is now. Michel, see to it and you take that section of wall as your command. Choose the ten men that you think will best serve your needs. Eric, come with me.'

'Do we have a chance, my lord?' Eric looked doubtfully at the ant's nest of Welsh below. They were preparing an assault by scaling ladder with remarkable rapidity and making no attempt to conceal their intentions. Walter de Lacey was present, out of arrow range, talking with several of his captains and vassals.

'A fighting one, literally,' Guyon said, as he watched the small knot of men break up and take their positions. His eyes followed de Lacey with

narrowed concentration before he turned and, hand on hilt, stalked to inspect the rest of the perimeter.

The attack came with the searing fury of a summer storm - fast and wild, and as difficult to contain. Stones and molten pitch were dropped upon the ram and boiling water was spouted down on the men scaling the ladders. An exchange of arrows swarmed the air. An arrow tipped off Guyon's helm as he strove with Eric and another knight to grapple loose a ladder. Thirty feet long and set at an angle of about sixty degrees to the wall, they were extremely difficult to dislodge, particularly when loaded with fifteen determined, rapidly scrambling men.

'It's going!' panted Eric, face crimson with effort as he struggled for all he was worth. The foremost Welshman had reached the top and had begun straddling the wall, his round shield held before him, sword already swinging for Eric's throat. Eric was forced to duck and relinquish his hold on the grappling hook. Guyon swept beneath the

Welshman's guard, slashing open his leather jerkin as if it were made of parchment, and kicked him back over the wall. He slammed his sword pommel beneath the second man's jaw, snapping him backwards and then kicked him off too.

The ladder scraped and grated on the stone as it started to slip. Another of the enemy reached the top and met his death on Guyon's blade. His cry mingled with the shrieks of his companions on the rungs as the ladder toppled sideways and crashed into the ditch below. There was no time to congratulate each other, or even to lean weakly against the stone to regain breath and stop their hearts from bursting, for ladders were up either side of the one just dislodged and from one of these the Welsh had gained the parapet and were dispersing along the wall walk.

For a time the fighting was so desperate that Guyon could scarcely hold his own without time to think of the defences elsewhere; when there was a lull in his section, it was only because the wall

had broken on the other side and de Lacey was drawing men away to force the breach.

Guyon sprinted in full mail towards the new danger and was tripped by a wounded Welshman. A knife glittered. Guyon blocked the thrust on his shield and then slammed it into the man's face, rolled and regained his feet. Eric bellowed a warning. Guyon ducked and a hand axe connected with the side of his helm instead of splitting his face, and sent him to his knees. The second blow he caught on his shield, which splintered beneath the impact. The third never landed, for he backswiped the blade across his opponent's shins and brought him screaming down. But there was another to take his place, and then another, and he could not break through.

C HAPTER 30

'I want the Welsh put out of the reckoning, Miles.'

Miles set down the destrier's hoof he had been examining and slapped the stallion's powerful glossy shoulder.'

'Easier said than done, sire,' he said to King Henry. 'When we make war among ourselves, it is the time of their greatest profit.' He wiped his hands on his chausses and reached for his shirt.

'Perhaps I should have said the Welsh who are allied with de Belleme. The last thing I need when we march on Shrewsbury is for Cadwgan's rabble to come hurling out of Wales and attack from the side.'

Miles donned the garment and, hands on hips, signalled the groom to lead the destrier round so that he could assess how well the strained foreleg had mended.

'You want me to go to war against the Welsh,

sire?' he asked with deceptive mildness.

Henry studied the stallion's long, fluid stride. His lips twitched. 'I want you to negotiate with them, my lord - bring them to the trestle and make them see sense.'

Miles snorted. 'Anyone who sits at a trestle with you, sire, usually ends up being the meal,' he said drily.

Henry's smile deepened with appreciation and he made no attempt to deny the remark. 'They'll be susceptible to bribery. Offer Cadwgan whatever he wants - within reason. He's not particularly intelligent, but he's greedy and astute with it. With your Welsh connections and other skills you should be able to persuade him off my back and on to de Belleme's.'

Miles looked wry. 'And what happens to be in it for me?' he asked. 'Apart from the warm glow of knowing that I am a loyal servant of my King?'

Henry pursed his lips. 'A dispensation perhaps?' he said, raising his eyes to Alicia as

she came down towards them, a packet in her hands.

Miles's mouth tightened. He nodded to the groom and the horse was led away. 'When do you want me to leave?'

'As soon as you may. I want possession of Shrewsbury before the winter frosts stop the grass growing.' He turned to Alicia with a gracious smile. Her braids were still as black as midnight and she smelled wonderfully of attar of roses. 'Worth it, isn't it?'

Miles said nothing, but the tight line of his mouth was eloquent.

Alicia lowered her eyes before Henry. Of necessity he was occasionally a visitor, but she felt awkward before him and tried to keep their contact to a minimum. There had been desperate reasons behind her adultery. Henry's own need had been a simple, adolescent lust.

Mischievously, Henry reached for her hand to kiss it, but she evaded him and placed the packet

in his grasp instead.

'What's this?' he enquired.

'I do not know, sire. The messenger has only just ridden in.'

Henry looked at the seal. 'Your son,' he said to Miles as he broke open the wax and then quickly perused the contents. Alicia went to slip her arm through Miles's, seeking the reassurance of his body.

'Hah! He's taken Thornford,' Henry said with satisfaction. 'Says he'll shore up and garrison and move down to Bridgnorth via Ledworth and Oxley to gather fresh supplies.'

'What about de Lacey? Is he dead or prisoner?'

Henry shook his head 'No. Apparently he slipped out before the last assault, to Shrewsbury so one of the garrison said, but Guy cannot be sure. De Lacey's wife and son are at Thornford, both sick of the bloody flux.'

'Does he mention a Welsh girl?'

Henry shook his head and passed the letter to Miles. 'Some special concern of his? Didn't he have a Welsh mistress once?'

'De Lacey murdered her and her son and abducted her ten-year-old daughter to serve his lusts,' Miles said brusquely. 'Her other child, Guyon's daughter, is being cared for at Ravenstow. By a hair's breadth, she was spared her mother's fate.'

'I'm sorry, I did not know.' For a moment Henry's expression was stripped of its customary aplomb to show pity and complete surprise.

'Guyon would not make a parade of it, sire,' Miles replied. 'It was too deep and personal a matter and it happened little more than a month ago.'

Henry tapped a thoughtful forefinger on his chin. 'Perhaps, in view of what you have just told me, it might be as well if you take a detour through Thornford on your way to parley with the Welsh.'

'I was going to do that anyway, sire. He is my

son.'

Henry smiled. 'Well, now you have the royal sanction, don't you? It's starting to rain. Let us go within and discuss what I want of Cadwgan in more detail.'

Miles stared in consternation at the serjeant he had sent ahead to notify Guyon of his imminent arrival, for the man was spurring his courser back towards the troop, not sparing the horse or himself in the late summer heat. Even if Guyon had returned to Ravenstow or already set out for Ledworth, there was no cause for this tearing haste unless there was serious trouble.

Gasping almost as much as his labouring mount, the man gave his report. 'The keep's under attack, my lord, by the Welsh as far as I can see, and it's going hard for the defenders!'

Miles's expression, grim at first, slowly brightened into savage amusement. 'The Welsh, eh?' His lip curled. 'And in search of a little Norman hospitality. Well, why not?'

'My lord?'

Miles shook his head and rode to the front of the column, increasing the pace from a steady walk to a ground-eating lope.

The sun had moved almost an hour's position in the sky by the time they reached Thornford, and the defenders had reached a state of *extremis*. Miles took in the scaling ladders clumped against the wall, the lack of men on them suggesting that most were engaged within the boundaries of the keep; took in too the broken section of the wall and heard on the breeze the sounds of desperate skirmish. Turning his stallion, he swiftly addressed his men who were expectantly threading their shields on to their left arms and readying their weapons for a charge.

'You can see for yourselves what we're in for. You are all experienced, you should know the ways of the Welsh. Watch your destriers' bellies, they'll slit them open if you force them to fight in close. Remember, a Welshman does not wear armour. He's vulnerable, but he's faster than you.'

Kill if you must to save your own skin, but if you engage in combat with any man who seems important, try to take him prisoner. Lives will be useful to barter for Cadwgan's favour and whoever takes a useful hostage will find himself handsomely rewarded. Understood?'

As they acknowledged this, Miles threaded his own shield on to his left arm, checked the secure fit of his helm, unlooped his mace from his saddle and with a yell, spurred his destrier into a gallop.

The Norman charge burst into the outer bailey creating mayhem among the attacking Welsh. A bare-legged hill man flew from the roan's shoulder and was trampled by the destrier following on behind. The mace caught a Fleming's face beneath the brow of his helm and crushed his cheekbone. He fell, screaming. The Welshman behind him tried to protect his head but was too slow and took a splintering blow to his temple. As Miles had said, very few of the Welsh wore armour and the Norman charge went through them like a hammer through a trough of ripe

plums.

Miles felt a hard blow on his shield as he emerged into the daylight of the inner ward. He gasped as his left arm was jarred and in retaliation, launched a blow over his shield rim. A solid thud and a cry answered him. He reined his stallion around and, amid the fighting and chaos, saw a bare-legged Welshman running towards a group of his comrades who were fighting furiously with someone they had surrounded. Bare-legged the warrior might be, but the pommel of his short sword was set with jewels, and his belt was tooled and gilded with gold leaf. A Norman helmet was set jauntily askew on his straggling black curls. With a yell of triumph, Miles rode him down.

The group of Welsh exploded outwards like ripples from a flung stone in a pool. One of their number rolled on the ground, clutching his ripped belly and screaming. Guyon followed through hard, iron shield-boss jabbing dangerously, sword swinging low at the enemy's unguarded

legs. At his back, feet wide-planted, Eric's battleaxe hewed the air and any Welshman daring to venture within the path of the blade's glittering arc.

Miles's destrier ploughed into the Welsh and the mace narrowed the odds.

Guyon spat out a mouthful of blood from a cut lip and pressed forward. He was functioning on instinct now, not finesse, and it took him a moment to recognise his father's stallion and even longer to realise that help, no matter how miraculously, was at hand.

Miles reined the destrier round to block the retreat of the Welsh noble he had marked. The young man's eyes darted between the plunging shod hooves threatening to brain him and the suggestively swinging mace. 'Throw down your sword and yield,' Miles commanded in Welsh. 'I promise you will not be harmed.'

Guyon cast a rapid glance around the inner bailey, saw that the advantage of the battle had swayed back in his direction, glanced further and

saw that the forebuilding doors had been breached. Commanding a handful of his soldiers to follow him, he ran for the keep.

Miles looked towards his son and the Welshman thought he saw his opportunity and bolted for freedom. Miles spurred to block his path and the mace came down on the man's skewed helmet, rattling his wits round his skull and knocking him half senseless to the ground. With a snort of disgust at the man's folly, Miles set about securing him from further attempts at escape.

Within the keep, Judith listened to the screams of men receiving a face full of scalding water, the war cries, the death cries, the thud of the ram, and felt sick to the soul with fear lest one of those screams was her husband's.

She had done all that was possible for her to do, short of joining the men on the battlements; indeed, she might have even dared that were she not so fettered by her responsibilities to the wounded and those within the core of the keep

who looked to her for succour and guidance.

She knew their situation was desperate. The Welsh alone they could have fought off, but with Norman leaders the matter was not so sure. Guyon had had to batter Thornford hard to take it and four days had not been long enough to shore it up to withstand the kind of punishment it was taking now. She could only thank Christ that she had left Heulwen at Ravenstow, for she had been in half a mind to bring her and only the doubt of what she might find here had made her leave the child behind ... perhaps to be raised an orphan.

Judith's belly heaved as she contemplated her future at the hands of Walter de Lacey should he prevail. She swallowed. What had Guyon said about panic? The room started to close in on her and the wounded man she was tending groaned and jerked. Chagrined, she apologised to him and finishing with the salve, reached for a roll of bandage. There was none and a swift investigation among the maids showed that there was very little left. She took a swaddling band

from Helgund to bind the man and, relieved to have an excuse, left the hall to raid Lady Mabel's linen chest in the solar.

She was kneeling by the chest, cutting a tablecloth into strips with Guyon's knife, when she became aware of how much nearer the battle sounded to the keep. The shouting was no longer an amorphous muddle; she could distinguish actual words now and hear the blows and thuds of sword upon shield. From without there came a tremendous crash and then the screams of women and the grating screech of sword on sword. She ceased her task and rose to her feet, her breath catching in her throat. Weapons clashed together outside the curtain. She heard grunts of effort and a hissing curse, and tightened her fingers on the grip of her knife.

There was a solid thud, a grunt, and then a bubbling groan. The curtain clashed aside and she was confronted by Walter de Lacey, his mail shirt glistening like snakeskin as he breathed in heavy gasps. His sword was edged with blood

and his eyes were aglow with triumph.

Her throat closed, but not before a whimper had escaped her lips. Rape and a living hell. She could see her future clearly imprinted in his voracious stare.

'You're not properly attired for a wedding, but you'll do,' he said with a smile.

'Keep away from me!' Judith snarled.

He shook his head at her. 'Is that any way for a wife to speak to her husband? It seems that I am going to have to lesson you into meeker ways.' Sheathing his sword, he advanced.

Judith backed. Her thighs struck the chest and pressed there. She was cornered, no retreat, and he was going to do all the things to her that Maurice de Montgomery had once done to her mother. She thought of Rhosyn and Rhys and Eluned, of what had happened to them. She thought of Guyon sprawled sightless in the ward, for surely de Lacey would not be gloating here otherwise and, as he reached for her, her eyes

flashed and her chin came up.

Guyon ran, not feeling the weight of his mail or weapons, only filled with a dreadful sense of foreboding. A Fleming, intent on pillage, barred his way and Guyon cut him down like swatting a fly. The maids were screaming and cowering. The wounded who had been unable to run away were all dead. A Welshman was swigging raw wine straight from the flagon. He was still clutching it to his chest when Guyon ran him through. Blood and wine soaked into the rushes. Guyon seized Helgund's arms. 'Where's your mistress?' he demanded.

'She went ... solar ... fetch more bandages!' Helgund gulped through a mask of tears and terror as around her men skirmished, chasing each other over and around trestles, hacking and slashing, killing or being killed.

Guyon released her arm and ran the length of the hall. Prys was sprawled across the solar entrance. He stooped and turned him over, but the life had flown and Prys was as limp as a rag.

Guyon's blood froze. Standing straight, he parted the curtain and made himself enter the solar.

A shaft of sunlight slanted across the room to the wall above the prie-dieu and illuminated a splash of blood and a beadwork of sprayed drops above it. He followed the pattern up and then down to where it disappeared into the deep corner shadows beside the open linen chest, the napery it contained spilling untidily over the edge and embroidered erratically with great scarlet flowers of blood. Hesitantly he trod in the wake of his gaze until he was looking down on the body of Walter de Lacey and beneath it, the russet homespun of Judith's oldest working gown.

If his blood had run cold before, now he felt it congeal, and for a moment he was unable to move. A wet, cold nose nudged at his hand and Cadi whined. Her tail swished against his chausses and he broke eye contact with what he dreaded to face to look at the dog. She sniffed at de Lacey's hauberk and growled.

The power of movement returned to Guyon's

limbs, although they seemed to belong to a total stranger. He stooped and, grasping de Lacey's shoulder, rolled him over and to one side. There was a jagged tear in his throat and his eyes were fixed in a baleful stare.

Judith was drenched in blood, but how much was her own he had no idea. Her face was unsmirched except for one small streak that only served to emphasise her pallor. Her eyes were closed and for a heart-stopping moment he did not know if she was dead or alive.

'Judith?' he said softly and, kneeling, lifted her and braced her weight against his shoulders. 'Judith?' He patted her face and she flopped against him like a child's cloth doll. Frightened, he hit her harder and then, by pure reflexive instinct, shot out his arm and grabbed her wrist before she could do to him with the knife what she had just done to Walter de Lacey.

'Guy?' Her eyes cleared. She looked at him and then at the knife and let it drop before turning into his arms with a shuddering sob.

'Judith, are you hurt, love? I cannot tell for all this blood.'

'Hurt? ... No ... It is all his. He did not know I had the knife until I struck - it was hidden under these bandages ... I thought when I saw him that you must be dead ...' Her breath caught in her throat and Guyon smoothed her hair and kissed her. She kissed him fervently in return, then pushed him away to look at him. 'You talk of my hurt, as if your own were of no consequence!' she gasped, pointing to a bloody rent in his mail.

'It's nothing,' he answered, not entirely telling the truth.

'I've taken worse in practice. And it doesn't matter now. It is all over.'

His tone was so weary that she panicked. 'What do you mean? Surely with de Lacey dead, the Welsh will be willing to talk ransom?'

'That is what I am hoping, although at the best of times they can be contrary bastards and I'm in no state to negotiate myself.' His eyes flickered to

the doorway.

Judith stared at Miles in open-mouthed astonishment as he stepped over the corpse on the threshold and entered the chamber.

'I thought you did not have the time to send for succour,' she said to Guyon in utter bewilderment.

'I didn't, love.' Guyon released her to wipe his sword on de Lacey's leggings, then wished he had not, for as he bent, his vision fluctuated and he felt as if he were on the deck of a ship in the midst of a storm. He straightened slowly and, with great care, sheathed the blade. 'It was sheer good fortune, or the will of God ...' He looked at his father. 'If you had not come when you did ...'

'The will of the King, you mean,' Miles said wryly as Guyon fumbled to remove his helm. 'And as it happens, this situation could not have profited him better.'

Guyon looked blankly at his father. 'Forgive me. I've fought my way to the gates of hell and back. I can't think.'

Miles went out into the hall, returning with a jug of wine that had miraculously survived the onslaught. 'Henry wants me to negotiate with the Welsh. Well, thanks to you and Walter de Lacey, I've a nice fat collection of caged birds to lure Cadwgan to the table ... including his own son.'

'Cadwgan's son?' Guyon gulped the wine straight from the flagon, spilling more down his mail than he actually got into his mouth. 'You mean that idiot with the jewelled sword and no notion of how to use it is Cadwgan's son?'

Miles grinned wolfishly. 'The very same. Do you think that his father values him above his loyalty to Robert de Belleme?'

Guyon shook his head in wonder. His gaze moved to the sprawled corpse of Walter de Lacey and a tremor ran through his body. He put the wine down. 'It is a pity he is dead,' he muttered. 'I would have borrowed one of de Belleme's greased stakes and let him dance on it awhile. He escaped too cleanly.' He rubbed his hand over his face and swore as his palm

opened up a cut and it began to bleed again.

Concerned, still trembling herself with shock, Judith rose and went to him.

He stroked her cheek. 'Don't fret, love,' he said. 'The shoring up of Thornford will take some little while to accomplish this time. I won't be going to Bridgnorth just yet, so you can stop scheming how you're going to disguise the white poppy this time.' He tugged her braid, smiled at her and slowly slipped down the chest to the floor.

C_{HAPTER} 31

ASHDYKE AUTUMN 1102

Below Ashdyke Crag, between it and the River Wye, the common grazing land was illuminated by a huge bonfire around which the people from the surrounding villages clustered and capered. The water glittered with gemstones of firelit colour, the sharp autumnal breeze skimming the jet surface with creases and pockets of ruffled gold.

Judith looked down on the scene from an arrowslit in the small wall chamber overlooking the river, and smiled as she replaced the hide screen. There was so much to celebrate that it was hard to believe that less than a season since they had been caught up in the violent ugliness of death and war.

She turned away and picked up her new, marten-lined cloak. Helgund was moving quietly about the chamber, tidying and setting to rights. The night candle softly illuminated the faces of the two sleeping children. The King had given Guyon

the wardship of Adam de Lacey and thus the infant and his inheritance were Guyon's responsibility until Adam should reach manhood. Guyon had balked at first, but Judith had managed to persuade him otherwise. The boy was not responsible for the crimes of his sire and in the years that they had him they could mould him to their own pattern and codes. Guyon had consented, because at the time he did not have the strength to argue with her and she had taken shameless advantage of his weakness to install the child in their household. Adam was still slow to smile and solemn, but he had gained in flesh and confidence and followed Heulwen everywhere that she would tolerate him.

Heulwen. She looked so angelic and innocent with her rose-gold curls and delicate features that it was impossible to believe in the hellion of her waking hours. In all but her physical appearance and her ability to flirt, Heulwen might have been a boy. She romped and climbed and swung and already straddled a pony with more confidence than either of Helgund's grandsons.

'Are they asleep now?' asked Alicia, tiptoeing to look over Judith's shoulder at the children.

'Soundly.' Judith smiled in response. She considered her mother. Alicia was wearing a fetching gown of rich blue wool that turned her eyes the colour of hyssop flowers. Her hair was braided with pearls to match those worked at the neck of her gown and up the hanging sleeves:

'I suppose,' Judith said mischievously, 'that I ought to be organising the bedding ceremony.'

Alicia's face grew slightly more radiant as she blushed and then laughed. 'Do not you dare!' she cried. 'It might be sport for everyone else but ... well, the bedding ceremony with Maurice was enough to give me a lifelong dread of that ritual and with myself and Miles ... it is hardly the first time, is it? We are not likely to repudiate each other.'

Judith embraced her mother. 'I was only teasing,' she laughed. 'I am pleased to see you so happy.'

Alicia returned the embrace warmly. 'I never thought to be. I was so frightened that I would lose him in this war.'

For an instant they clung, women aware of the fragility of their present joy, for even now it was not entirely over. Banished from England de Belleme might be, but for how long? Banishment could be revoked on the whim of a king.

Alicia was the first to step away. She looked Judith critically up and down. 'Does he know yet?'

Judith's hand went instinctively to her belly which was still tight and flat. It was early yet to be sure, the symptoms vague, more a knowledge of the body than of the mind.

'How did ... ?'

'You've put on flesh. Oh, not there yet, that will not show for some time, I think, but you never filled your gowns so well before.'

Judith's gaze flicked down to her bosom. 'I suppose I ought to make the most of it before the rest catches up,' she sighed with false regret and

smiled as they left the room and began to wind their way downstairs. 'No, Guy doesn't know. I suggested to him that the best way to handle my waywardness was to get me with child, and he took me at my word ...' The smile became a giggle at her weak pun, but then she sobered. 'I conceived at Thornford some time between Lady Mabel's death and the second siege. In a way, I suppose it is a new beginning, a light out of darkness and all the more precious for being so.'

She found Guyon standing alone by the riverside, watching the reflection of the flames dazzle in the water, and picked her way carefully over to him across the autumn grass. Hearing the rustle of her approach, he turned quickly, then his expression relaxed into a smile and he held out his hand.

'Brooding alone?' she asked in a light voice, but with a qualm, lest he was mulling over the private losses of the last year.

'Not now,' he answered easily enough, drawing her close. Their breath frosted the air and mingled. The water lapped near their feet, tipped

with light. 'I was wondering what will happen in Normandy now that de Belleme is banished there.'

'It is not our concern now.' Her fingers anxiously tightened in his.

'No, but I cannot help but pity Duke Robert and the rest of the Norman lords. He will eat them alive.' And then Henry would interfere and there would be war again, but in Normandy, not England.

'I do not care, just as long as he leaves us alone.' She was fully aware of everything that he was not saying. He had been very ill after the battle for Thornford - not unto death as the last time, thank Christ, but enough for Bridgnorth to have fallen and for Miles to have negotiated his treaty with the Welsh before he was capable of taking the field again and, in her ignored opinion, it had been too soon. He still tired easily. He had been at the bitter siege of Shrewsbury, one of the barons present to witness Robert de Belleme and his brothers ride away to exile in Normandy. For

the nonce at least, they were safe.

'Are you weary?' She rubbed her cheek against his cloak.

He shrugged. 'A little.'

'Perhaps we should retire,' she suggested, then looked anxiously up at him as she felt him shudder, only to realise that he was laughing.

'Before the bride and groom? Shame on you, you hussy.'

Her lips twitched. 'Yes,' she sighed meekly. 'Shame on me.'

'Judith, you are never seeking to agree with your husband?'

'Well, if I am, it is all your fault.'

'Mine! Why?' he gave her look filled with indignation.

'Why else should I grow soft and doting?'

That stopped him as if he had walked into a keep wall. He gaped at her like a peasant drunk

on rough cider.

'Late spring, I think,' she added, eyes wide and guileless. 'Aren't you pleased?'

Guyon took her by the shoulders. A wondering smile gradually replaced the dazed expression on his face. '*Cath fach*, I love you,' he murmured.

She put her arms around his neck. 'Show me,' she said. 'I want to know.'

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THE WILD HUNT

Elizabeth
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