



THE  
LION  
OF  
KENT

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## The Lion of Kent

By Aleksandr Voinov & Kate Cotoner

Squire William Raven has only one goal—to finally receive his spurs and become a knight. When his lord, Sir Robert de Cantilou, returns from a five-year crusade in the Holy Land, William wants nothing more than to impress him.

After Sir Robert's return, noble guests arrive from France, bringing intrigue to the castle. William is oblivious to the politics, as he's distracted by nightly visits from a faceless lover—a man who pleasures him in the dark and then leaves—a man he soon discovers is none other than his master, Sir Robert.

But William can't ignore the scheming around him when he overhears a plot to murder Robert. He becomes intent on saving his lord and lover from those who would see him killed...

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# Dedication

Aleksandr: to Raev Gray, Gileonnen, Barbara Sheridan  
and Kate Cotoner for their passion, talent and friendship.  
You guys rock.

Kate: Alex, thank you for letting me play with William!

# Chapter One

*England, 1176*

William gave no quarter. He struck blow by blow—fast, vicious, with little technique, but enough strength to make up for it, and an uncontrollable anger. John had hit him so hard in the knee that everything felt numb there, and William’s reaction was as much pain as surprise, which made him fly into a rage. Everything around him blurred until he was aware of nothing but his enemy. The pain radiated through him, firing his anger. His arm ached with tiredness, yet there was always another blow in him, and even though he could see fear in the other squire’s eyes, it didn’t occur to him to relent.

“Enough! William!”

He ignored the voice, refusing to obey the order. He wanted John to yield, wanted him to fall to his knees, to give up, to beg for mercy.

“William!”

Strong hands gripped his sword arm, one hand on his elbow, the other on his wrist. He whirled around, wincing when the instructor used the grip against him, changed the angle and almost made him drop to his knees. He gave up the sword, snarled, but there was also a yelp of pain.

“Sir Robert is back, you bloody fool,” Ulric hissed and let him go after a punch in the arm.

William straightened, considered taking up the training sword again, but then he realised what the instructor had said, and turned.

Men on horseback had entered the cobbled courtyard. Richly clothed, swords and shields at their sides as if they'd been worried about robbers on the road, they made a bright display against the dull stonework of the castle keep. Sir Robert de Cantilou was their leader, and William thought his lord had changed much since the day he'd left his lands. When had that been? Five years ago?

Robert's dark hair looked now like it would in winter, in a heavy snowfall, the colour more grey than black even though his lord wasn't an old man. He sat proud in the saddle and, William thought with a hint of shame, he wore an expression of amusement. Sir Robert must have seen him fight and lose his control.

"Well, then, now that the squires are listening, too... It's good to be back." Sir Robert slid off his horse, hands adjusting his sword belt. The household gathered in the yard, regarding their master in amazement. He'd arrived completely unannounced, and William wondered why that was. Why had he not sent a messenger first so everything was prepared?

Instead of lowering his gaze, William stared open-mouthed at his lord. Sir Robert was tanned, his blue eyes seemingly glowing in the dark face, and his rich red clothes played around his form in strange, outlandish splendour. His sword hilt now bore a large jewel in the pommel, and the heavy rings on his gloves sparkled in the late autumn sun. He must have made a fortune abroad, but it wasn't the flaunting of wealth that impressed William so much. Instead, it was Robert's bearing.

Five years ago Sir Robert had seemed cold and distant, and though he was a lord admired and respected by the people of his manor as well as by his peers, he had too little humour and too much impatience. Always fair, always just, but somehow lacking. The death of his wife had not improved matters. Rather than seeking a new bride, Robert had announced he would go on crusade. He took with him five senior knights and left the castle and his children in the capable hands of his widowed sister, Lady Alais.

In William's limited experience, the Robert of five years ago had been much the same as any other noble, but now he'd changed. It was said that the Holy Land made its mark on a man's soul, scouring away the bad and revealing the good. According to the Church's rhetoric, no one—except the heathen Saracens—could walk on the same soil as the Christ and not be humbled and remade for the better. William had been sceptical, but looking on Sir Robert now, the claims seemed to be true. Never had William seen a man more confident and assured. This was how a knight should be—composed, gracious, benevolent.

He stepped forward as Robert strode past. "It's good to see you back, sir."

Robert paused, then glanced over his shoulder. His sharp gaze raked over William as if remembering the gangly youth he'd been and fitting that old image against the man who stood before him now.

"And you, William," Robert said. "Seems we have a young lion in the dog kennel."

William flushed, unable to tell what his lord meant by the comment, understanding only that Robert was making fun of his family and upbringing. The acknowledged bastard son of the manor's reeve, William owed his place

at the castle to the charity of Sir Robert's late wife. Regardless of the knowledge that he should guard his tongue in the presence of his benefactor, he couldn't stop the angry retort from springing to his lips. "If a kennel is what you call your house, sir."

Sir Robert turned, making William's heart pound with sudden anxiety. He tried to rein in his anger, which wasn't directed at Sir Robert at all, but at Ulric for twisting his arm and at John for not yielding. Sir Robert's eyes grew hard and William winced inwardly, but he'd take his punishment without flinching. At least that.

The darkly tanned face didn't betray any emotion as he was measured, and William fought the embarrassment under his liege lord's gaze.

"I wager, young William, next time I sail for Constantinople, I'll take you with me to unleash on the heathens. They would certainly deserve your belligerence."

"Forgive me, sir."

Sir Robert gave him another of those level, unblinking stares, then turned, heading for Lady Alais, who emerged from the keep with smiles of welcome for her brother, Robert's three children following after her.

William hung back, mingling with the other squires who nudged one another and whispered, some in excitement and others in apprehension. The younger lads scarce remembered Sir Robert and knew him more from the songs of travelling minstrels than from deed. William had always thought minstrels embroidered their tales, spinning webs of fantasy for the enjoyment of whoever gave them shelter for the night, but as he stared at his lord's sumptuous velvet cloak and those jewelled rings glinting from his gloved fingers, he wondered if the songs



were true and if Robert really had discovered a basilisk's nest, saved a princess of the Comneni and fought off twenty-eight Saracens single-handed.

Robert greeted his children before giving his attention to his sister. He drew her into an embrace, pressing a kiss to her forehead, then spoke a few quiet words for her ears alone. A moment later he turned to include the men at his back and raised his voice. "Call Philip and Ranulf to the solar. You squires, too—you will need to hear this. I bring news and a command from the king."

Ushering his sister and children ahead of him, Robert strode into the keep, followed by the knights who'd accompanied him on the road. The squires shoved forward to get inside the castle, and John, William's opponent from a few moments ago, elbowed him, catching his sore arm in his haste. William snarled, whipping around.

John stumbled backward with a good-natured laugh, lifting his hands in apology. "An accident, my friend—I didn't mean anything by it..."

"Careful, lad." His instructor's hand clamped on his shoulder, holding him back. He shrugged Ulric off, impatient to be on his way, and only half listened to the words called after him. "Watch that temper of yours, William Raven! Unless you learn some control, it'll bring you to Sir Robert's attention in all the wrong ways."

William shook the warning aside and ran into the keep, dashing up the main stairs and only slowing his pace as he crossed the great hall. The shutters were open, revealing the long tables pushed up against the walls and, in one corner, the bedding reserved for the squires, men-at-arms and upstairs servants who slept in the communal space. Three wolfhounds lay sprawled on the rushes in front of

the hearth where a couple of serving boys raked through last night's embers before laying the fire for the evening.

As he ducked beneath the lintel at the far end of the hall to enter the private quarters of Sir Robert's family, William paused to allow a maid carrying a basin of hot water to pass in the narrow corridor. A door opened and he heard the calm voice of Lady Alais giving the maid instructions to attend the knights who'd come with his lord.

William went in the opposite direction, running up a short spiral staircase to the lord's withdrawing rooms, following the sound of excited chatter. He shoved at the door to the solar and went in, placing himself against the wall near the window. The other squires crowded close to the small fireplace, surrounding the stool where the clerk, Ranulf, sat. Philip, the castle steward, stood on the other side of the room clutching his account books. Both men had known William's father when he still lived, yet as usual they didn't even look in William's direction.

Conversations faded when Sir Robert entered the room. He strode to his chair, giving William a brief, inquisitive glance as he passed. Though he had put off his riding cloak, the dust of the road still clung to his boots and he looked weary. Philip put down his ledgers long enough to pour his master a cup of wine. Robert drank deep, wiping his mouth on his hand when he'd finished. He leaned against the chair, gripping its back, and looked around the room. His gaze came to rest on William, who fidgeted slightly in response.

Robert inclined his head toward his men. "I apologise for causing such disarray with my early arrival. I can travel as quickly as any messenger, so thought to bring the news myself." He paused for effect, then continued, "A

hunt will be held here within the month, by order of the king. We are to entertain certain French nobility from the County of Toulouse.”

A murmur of comment washed around the room. William shifted against the wall and folded his arms. A hunt could be the outlet he needed. He'd have to borrow a horse from Sir Robert's stables, but if he acquitted himself during the hunt, perhaps he'd gain his spurs at last. If he performed well, he might even catch the interest of one of the visiting nobles. Not that he wanted to leave the de Cantilou household, but a knight needed to win renown and riches, and he had been five years waiting for the chance to make his mark.

He paid attention as Robert lifted a hand for quiet. “The emissaries from Toulouse are as yet at Westminster and will make their way here in a week or so. His Majesty indicated that their business is somewhat delicate...which is no doubt why he wants them rustivating here in Kent.”

A few chuckles sounded, but Robert didn't smile. William wondered what sort of business the Frenchmen wished to discuss with the king. As William understood it, the southern French squabbled periodically with their northern neighbours and feared the day the French king and the Duke of Burgundy put aside their differences and combined forces to bring Toulouse within their fold.

Ranulf spoke up. “My lord, are we to assume these noblemen from Toulouse are here for a diplomatic purpose?”

“We are to assume nothing without His Majesty's permission.” Finally a wry smile warmed Robert's expression. “Perhaps they have simply heard about the good hunting in these parts.”

More laughter from the squires, though the knights who'd accompanied Robert from London wore smiles more cautious than genuine. William straightened, his curiosity piqued.

"All that's necessary for us to know," Robert said, raising his voice a little, his gaze hard, "is that the French are our guests and we are duty-bound to entertain them. There will be no discussion of any other matters. Do I make myself understood?"

The men murmured their assent, and Ranulf scratched out whatever he'd written in his day-book. William knew what must be on everyone's minds—the attempted rebellion of Young Henry and Princes Richard and Geoffrey, three years ago. Sir Robert had been on crusade at the time, far from the political maelstrom that had swirled through England and France. William envied his lord that distance and wished he, too, could have avoided the revolt. William's father had been one of the men-at-arms who'd died in the quelling of the Earl of Leicester's uprising, and though William and his father hadn't been on the best of terms, William felt the loss in other ways.

Now, with the news of the emissaries from Toulouse, it seemed as if trouble was stirring again across the Channel. This time William was old enough and experienced enough in practice combat to wield a sword for real on the battlefield. The thought of fighting alongside his lord made William curl his hands as if to grip a weapon. Sir Robert's family had done more for him than his own father, and William would repay the debt with his loyalty all his life.

Robert spoke again, this time without tone, though a curl of his lip indicated his emotions. "When our noble

guests arrive, they will be accompanied by my brother Stephen.”

William frowned. Everyone knew there was no love lost between the two de Cantilou brothers, but five years ago Robert and Stephen had had a common purpose. He spoke up, posing the question he was sure no one else would dare to ask, “Did your brother go with you to the Holy Land, sir?”

Robert gave him a quicksilver look and uttered a bark of laughter. “That was his plan, but in the end Stephen saw no profit in it. Too much risk and not enough gain. Only a churchman would see the world in such mercenary terms. No, my brother did not come with me. He went as far as Marseilles. By then he’d attached himself to the Bishop of Poitiers and has since been travelling thither and nigh across the length and breadth of France.” Resignation crossed Robert’s face, and he shrugged. “Stephen has been busy. Busier than me. But he is still my brother, and I must welcome him into my house.”

He paused, once again gazing at the assembled men as if he debated telling them something more, and then he gave a snort. “Be on your best behaviour when Stephen arrives. He’s aiming for a bishopric. Loose talk and immoral actions make him fly into a rage, and he’s likely to begin excommunications before he’s even invested.”

The men chuckled and called aloud the names of those most likely to cause offence. William started when he heard his own name shouted out. Before he thought better of it, he stepped forward, his fists bunching.

“Who said that? Who says I will give offence to our lord’s brother?” He stared at his fellow squires and the senior members of the household, then realised he’d spoken out of turn again. He winced inwardly,

remembering too late Ulric's admonishment to guard his temper. The damage was done, and now he needed to prove himself humble.

He turned to Robert and bowed. "Forgive me, sir. I am too quick to anger and hasty in my judgments."

Robert narrowed his eyes. "Indeed. You may take comfort in the fact that these are not grievous sins. My brother would probably commend you, for he makes all his decisions with remarkable swiftness." He walked toward William, the sunlight through the quarries of the window playing shadows upon his face. "For myself, I prefer the men who share my hearth to be more temperate in their manners."

William lifted his chin. "I was not sent here to become a milksop."

"No." Robert seemed amused. "You would be wasted as a serving maid."

Guffaws broke out around the room. William stood firm, refusing to succumb to humiliation. He had not half the wealth and connections of the other squires, but he had more pride than all of them combined, and the fighting skills to match any of them in battle. Swallowing hard, he met Robert's light gaze. "At least a serving maid can use what skills she has, my lord."

There was a collective in-draw of breath around them, followed by a sharp titter from Ranulf.

Robert raised an eyebrow. "Do you feel neglected, William?"

Now William couldn't stop the blush, and the hearty laughter of the other men made him even more embarrassed. "It's not a complaint, sir. Just..."

"You wish to be used. Or useful, at least." Robert came closer, his lips quirking. "You are the oldest of the

squires in my service. My absence these past years will not have been easy for you.”

William held his tongue. He’d heard tales of men who’d gained their spurs at the age of fourteen or fifteen, when they were scarce old enough to become a squire, and he’d dreamed of such an achievement for himself when he’d been younger. Those days were long gone. Now he just wanted the chance to become a knight. “I am impatient to prove myself to you, my lord.”

Robert’s eyes gleamed. “Patience is a virtue.”

“I fear I am not a truly virtuous man.”

A look of devilry came into Robert’s expression. “Then perhaps you need to be taught a lesson.”

William stepped back in confusion. “Forgive my forwardness, sir. I only wanted to get your attention.”

Robert gave him another sparking look. “You have it. Don’t waste it.”

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*You have it. Don’t waste it.*

Over the next few days, William brooded over those words, held them inside like a gift he didn’t want to share. He did see the glances, though, and heard the men murmur about him, the hot-tempered squire who, on the first day of the lord’s return, acted like a boor—impulsive, with no regard for respect, only ever apologising after the fact.

One of the younger squires told him he admired William for his courage, but William found it hard to determine whether the lad was joking or currying favour with him, or both.

If anything, he worked harder. The training fights were the only occasions that allowed him to vent his temper, and Ulric worked him tirelessly, telling him that if he wanted to be a knight soon, he'd better work harder. William knew he was being teased, but it made no difference. It still stung, and he resented having given his peers that opening.

Worse was that Sir Robert sometimes watched him—in the great hall during meals or when William did his chores around the castle—but it was when he fought that Robert paid closest attention, and if William became aware of his lord's assessing gaze (he often didn't, because fighting absorbed him completely), he felt clumsy and slow and uncontrolled, and he could have screamed with frustration. He wanted to prove himself so desperately that whenever the chance arose, he ruined it, or wasn't at his best, or the situation was so mundane it didn't warrant any special attention. Nevertheless, Sir Robert did watch him, nurturing hope.

The preparations for the guests were in full swing days before anybody arrived. The servants worked tirelessly, the maids cooked and cleaned, presenting the estate in the best possible light for when the guests arrived, and the smells of cooking and baking emanated from the kitchen day and night. Meanwhile, the men planned the hunt, which in itself was an art.

It was unthinkable to disappoint the French guests with too little game, so the woodsmen and huntsmen spent days outside, tracking stag and boar, planning the route as well as the best place to pitch tents for rest and refreshments. All this would cost Robert a fortune from his own purse, but William knew how important these matters were for powerful nobles. He only looked forward



to the chase and the kill. Both were opportunities to demonstrate knightly virtues and would be ways to win honour and maybe catch another noble's eye. Every new knight needed a sponsor, and William hoped he would find favour with one of his lord's visitors.

Everyone was excited the evening before the guests arrived, and with them news and ways to break the familiar routine. The squires and hearth knights in Robert's service stayed up longer that night, and the drinks flowed more freely. When it came time to settle in for sleep, William lay on his bedding in the darkness and listened to the sounds that invariably followed. Girls from the village and some of the castle maids took the opportunity to earn a few coins by joining those who were awake or half-asleep.

Not far away, one such deal was struck in whispers. William heard the sounds of their coupling, little more than the rustle of clothing followed by harsh breathing and the rhythmic slap of flesh on flesh. From the direction of the noise, the girl had straddled one of the squires, and from his grunts and the position of his bedroll, it had to be John. William couldn't help but smile a little. John was famously well-endowed, and William didn't think for a moment that the girl's squeaks of delight were entirely put on.

A hand touched his thigh, moving up to his groin with obvious intent, and William became aware of somebody standing over him, or crouching. It was too dark to tell. "Leave me alone, I have no money," he whispered and turned away, lying on his side to signal rejection. As much as some relief would be welcome with those sounds so close by, stirring his body into arousal, he couldn't afford to pay for the pleasure.

But the hand persisted, and a body settled down behind him. Fingers found and freed his cock from the confines of his hose. William inhaled sharply. Not a woman's hand. It was too strong, the skin callused and hard like that of a warrior. One of the knights? A squire? Whoever it was, the offer was unmistakable, and he couldn't help but groan when that hand stroked him, a firm touch softened only by William's half-drunk state.

He felt the hot tickle of breath on his neck while the other man stroked him. Acting on instinct, he reached behind to touch the hard shaft that eagerly pressed into his hand. Even through the thin covering of linen, William felt the thickness of the man's cock, the heat of it. He could see nothing, couldn't guess anything about the other man, but heard and felt and smelled him. The strokes on his own cock grew harsher, more demanding, and William struggled to give anything back, all intent ceasing under those touches too rough to enjoy fully. He winced, hissing out his breath, then took the hand from his cock and spat into the palm.

A rumble of laughter sounded in his ear, and William shivered. The man's slick hand closed tight around William's cock, then resumed its strokes. This time the action was slow and measured, the grip alternately hard then loose. William groaned now, his hips moving as he tried to impose a steadier rhythm, pushing his arse back to rub shamelessly against that hard prick.

Sweat beaded his upper lip and dampened his hair. A few feet away, John and his girl were approaching their climaxes. The girl's moans intensified, became a thin wail, and John's snarls of need snapped out of him at each thrust. William swallowed, his breath coming faster, rasping in his throat. The sounds of lust nearby combined

with the firm grip on his cock, and the guilty, forbidden pleasure of not knowing who lay with him drove all rational thought from his head. The next thing he knew, he'd turned his head back and shared a kiss with the other man, tasting spiced wine and honey on his breath.

William pressed closer, pulling the man toward him, feeling all solid muscle and strength. Definitely a knight, though William no longer cared about the man's identity. Not now, not when he was so close to release. Their mouths clashed, teeth and tongues and the wetness of saliva, the kisses fierce and breathtaking.

He realised he was making the same kind of sounds as John had only moments ago, but his own panted groans were muffled, suppressed by those searing kisses. He tensed, catching his breath, moaning into the knight's mouth as he spilled his seed in a hot rush. Still the other man touched him, working his cock with slower strokes, licking at the corners of William's lips, holding him while William gasped, heart racing, his mind lost.

At length he calmed, disentangled himself from the unknown knight and lay on his back. He felt as tired as if he'd been practicing for an hour in the courtyard and tried to control his breathing as Ulric had so often instructed them. The thought of Ulric was so unwelcome after what had just happened that William gave a soft snort of amusement. He was still smiling as he drifted off to sleep, the languor of his orgasm warm in his body.

What seemed like mere moments later, he woke with a guilty start. He'd been so focused on his own pleasure that the other man had received nothing in return. William intended on remedying that lack, but when he reached out in the darkness, he found he was alone.

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William woke again at the sound of the shutters slammed back against stone. Early morning sunlight streamed into the great hall, and groans of protest issued from the huddle of squires still abed. William yawned and stretched beneath his blanket, then memory caught up with wakefulness and he froze, his heart suddenly pounding.

Someone had given him pleasure last night, lain behind him and taken his cock in his hand and worked him to completion. Someone had kissed him. William peeked over the top of his blanket, remembering that rough touch and the steel of the other man's body as they'd embraced. God's teeth, he'd been drunk but not that drunk—he couldn't have conjured his lover out of a dream. He slid a hand over his hose and felt the stiff stains in the woollen fabric. Definitely real.

Nearby, John stood and scratched his arse. "Great night," he said, grinning at his fellows. "Had the miller's daughter. She's a saucy one, wet as the mill-race. Knows how to grind." He thrust his hips to appreciative laughter from the other squires, and then he turned to William. "I wasn't the only one busy last night. Who was your girl, Raven?"

William busied himself with folding his bedding, glad of the fall of tawny blond hair hiding his expression. "I didn't ask her name."

One of the other squires gave a malicious laugh. "You went with a whore, William? I thought you were too high and mighty for that. Thought you were saving yourself for a lady at the very least—maybe even a princess!"

“Ah, leave him be,” John said magnanimously. “William takes his training seriously. Isn’t Ulric always telling us not to dip our wicks if we want to do well in combat? ‘It saps a man’s strength and makes him weak.’” John imitated their instructor’s tone perfectly. “‘Take heed, lads—women are a necessary evil.’”

The other squire rolled out of bed. “I swear he’s one of those woman-haters. An unnatural man who prefers other men.”

William felt ice pierce his chest but remained calm. “That’s ridiculous. You know he’s got two young daughters he’s trying to keep pure from the likes of you. Apart from his girls, he hates everyone equally. I’ve even seen him kick his dog, and you know how attached he is to that mongrel.”

More laughter, and the conversation turned to the sighting of an immense boar on the far side of the forest. It was agreed that every effort must be made to lure the animal closer for the hunt, as killing such a large beast would surely fetch a great reward.

William joined in the discussion, his unease fading. Though he’d tumbled a couple of village girls in the past, his desires ran to male flesh. Such a sinful proclivity made life difficult but not impossible. When he was younger, he’d enjoyed mutual hand-jobs with other squires. He’d confessed to the castle chaplain, received a suitable punishment and accepted it was a natural part of growing up. But while John and the others had gone from jerking each other off to paying for whores, William longed not for the delicate softness of a woman but for the hard touch of a man.

A man like his lover of last night.

He glanced at his fellows, wondering which of them it had been. Not John, but who else? William struggled to recall any hint of affection from any of his companions. That one lad had praised him a few days ago. Perhaps it was him. But no—the hand that had gripped his cock had belonged to a knight, a man of experience. Maybe one of Sir Robert’s escorts from London had taken a fancy to him. The idea made his belly flutter with a mix of excitement and anxiety.

One of the serving maids, pink and breathless, ran into the great hall. “They’re coming—the noble guests—they can be seen on the road!”

William snapped out of his thoughts. “Everyone to the yard! Let’s give the French a hearty English welcome.”

Though impatient to be outside, he waited until the rest of the squires had gone ahead. A couple of servants scurried around the hall, making final checks. As the most senior of the squires, William felt he had a responsibility to ensure that his fellows presented themselves in the best possible light, and he collected up a few articles of clothing that hadn’t been tidied away. He dumped the clothes in the corner and hurried out into the open antechamber at the top of the staircase. After the light of the hall, the antechamber seemed dark, and he blundered into someone.

Strong hands grasped his arms. William tried to pull away, muttering, “Excuse me,” but then he registered the feel of velvet and fur beneath his own hands. He took a startled breath, suddenly aware of a warm, spicy scent far removed from the stink of sweat or the kitchen.

“Sir Robert!” Jerking out of the grip, William stepped sideways. His lord’s scent tickled at his awareness. In confusion, he began his apology all over again.

“Peace, William. The French come here as our guests, not as invaders. You don’t need to rush out as if obeying the call to arms.”

Robert sounded amused, and William’s mood sank. Yet again he’d managed to look foolish in front of the one man above all others he needed to impress. He gritted his teeth and mumbled, “Yes, sir. I didn’t want to be late to greet them, sir.”

“Don’t worry. You will make a good impression.” Robert laid his hand on William’s shoulder. “That’s what you want, isn’t it? The chance to impress.”

“You know what I want,” William said before he could stop himself.

Robert gave him a look. “Yes. I do.” He hesitated as if he would say more, but then he released William and turned away. “Join the other squires. I will be down shortly to welcome our guests.”

Puzzled by the exchange, William watched Robert stride away. His scent lingered, and a flash of memory caught William. His lover of last night had worn the same spicy fragrance. Or had he? William frowned and shook his head as he started down the staircase. It was the kiss he was remembering, nothing else—the kiss that tasted of honey and spiced wine.

Still, the idea of Sir Robert as his lover gave William a thrill of pleasure. His lord was a handsome man. It would not be a hardship to surrender to one such as him, though William would make sure the fight was equal until the final moments. The thought made his heart beat faster and brought a grin to his face, and William strolled out into the courtyard in good spirits.

## Chapter Two

“Brother, this meat seems tough and overcooked, and its flavour does not suit this wine, which is a thin, indifferent sort of vintage. I’m afraid your wanderings in foreign climes have made you a poor host.”

William glanced up from the squires’ table in the great hall. He swallowed his mouthful of beef and braised greens and stared at Sir Robert’s younger brother. Stephen de Cantilou had not aged half as well as Robert and wore the marks of good living in the broken veins of his nose and the paunch that overspilled his belt. His thin, reedy voice shrilled through the chatter and the music, and both French and Englishmen paused to see how Robert would respond.

Stephen had been dropping insults all day the way a cow dropped dung. William had escorted him to the bedchamber set aside for his use, and Stephen had complained about its location, the hardness of the mattress, and the draught from the open window. Since the party had gathered for dinner, Stephen seemed to find fault with everything. He had already chastised John for looking at the breasts of a serving girl, and the girl herself had run weeping from the hall after Stephen had described in detail the hellfire that awaited her for showing an immodest amount of flesh.

But it was Sir Robert who bore the full brunt of Stephen’s ire. William felt the insults on behalf of his lord



and longed to challenge the fat churchman to a fight. By the surly expressions around the room, it appeared as if Stephen was universally unpopular. Even the nobles from Toulouse looked uncomfortable and disapproving of Stephen's latest remark.

Robert took his time to reply, using a chunk of soft white bread to mop up the rich sauce smothering the beef. "It saddens me to hear that you dislike the wine. The Viscomte de Murat brought it as a gift." Robert gazed at his brother. "Perhaps your palate has been spoiled these past five years."

Stephen snorted. "From the tales I've heard, mine is not the only palate that's been spoiled."

Robert gave his brother a sharp glance. "If you had deigned to join me in the Holy Land, you might have found yourself more accepting of human nature."

William grinned at the retort and hid his expression in a cup of ale.

"Alas," Stephen said, looking pious, "my work as commissary for His Grace the Bishop of Poitiers forced me to abandon my plans to do God's work amongst the heathens. But a good shepherd heeds the cry of his flock, and I am happy to have been of service to His Grace."

Visibly annoyed by his brother's prattling, Robert turned to Baron Albi, a cheerful, stocky man who'd earlier spoken to William about the rigors of the journey and his concern for the delicate stomach of his destrier. William had ventured an opinion on the best mix of feed for the war horse, and Albi had seemed delighted. Now the baron said something, leaning close to Robert, who smiled and nodded.

Stephen seemed to realise no one was paying any attention to him. Raising his voice, he bleated, "Of course,

it was while in His Grace's retinue that I had the good fortune to be introduced to His Majesty King Henry."

Conversation faltered, and William put down his ale. Sir Robert broke off his discussion with Baron Albi and faced his brother. "You refer to Young Henry? His Majesty King Henry is the only man we owe allegiance to in this house. Young Henry may have been crowned the heir, but he cannot claim the full majesty of his father."

"And yet it is to King Henry the Younger that I cleave," Stephen said. "He has as much right to ruling this land as his father, for didn't his father invest him with equal splendour?"

"No, he did not." Robert tapped his fingers on the arm of his chair, his brows lowered. "While you are beneath my roof, brother, you will refrain from playing politics. Our friends from Toulouse are doubtless wearied by such talk—they came here for enjoyment and diversions, and our arguments make for poor entertainment."

Stephen's face twisted with spite. "If it's entertainment they crave, I'm sure I could tell them several amusing stories about your crusading exploits."

The Frenchmen once again looked embarrassed and began to talk amongst themselves, their southern dialect altogether impossible for William to understand. Robert's hands clenched into fists, and William wondered exactly what had happened in the Holy Land for his lord to react in such a way to Stephen's jibes.

Baron Albi attempted to smooth matters. "I heard you saved a princess of the Comneni from a street gang."

"She wasn't a princess but a companion to the princess." Robert gave his guest a disarming smile. "The part about the gang is true, though. Unfortunately

Constantinople is overrun with violence. After dark the streets aren't safe for decent citizens."

"And for indecent citizens?" Stephen asked archly. "You spent a long time in Constantinople, brother. A city full of sin and temptation as well as violence."

William frowned. Surely Stephen wasn't accusing Sir Robert of immorality? A man had needs. It was quite natural for him to slake his lust with any willing female, whether she was a camp follower or a princess of the Comneni. Robert was a widower, after all, and though he had several times in the past expressed an interest in joining the Templars, he had not yet taken any vows that would require him to be chaste.

Robert resumed his meal, spearing a slice of meat with his knife. "Constantinople is also a city of great beauty with many learned men willing to share their knowledge."

"Yes," Stephen said airily, "I heard you grew quite fond of certain Greek practices."

William's mouth dropped open. Though he didn't entirely understand the nature of the insult, he knew it was serious from Robert's suddenly blank expression. The knife in his lord's hand glittered, and for a moment William thought Robert would plunge the blade into his brother's chest.

Eager to avert a scene, William jumped to his feet. His cup toppled, causing a clatter and a splash as ale spilled across the table, and then all eyes were upon him. Even the minstrels ceased their playing, lutes and tambours falling silent. He looked around the hall then bowed to the French nobles and to Sir Robert. "My lords," he began, casting about for some reason to explain his interruption, "I bid you welcome to Kent."

The Viscomte de Murat and Baron Albi seemed bemused, and their knights and men-at-arms shifted on their seats. Sir Robert stared at William, his expression intense.

Feeling a blush climbing to his face, William dropped his gaze to the knife in his lord's hand and had an idea. "My lords, here in England we may lack the polish of the French courts, but we are fighting men who serve the sword, not poetry. Our manners may seem uncouth, but we have no need to apologise for that. Our weapons speak for us. We can make our blades sing sweeter than any troubadour. So to bid you welcome, I propose a friendly contest—a wager—between English and French."

"Gambling? Disgraceful!" Stephen squawked.

Baron Albi sat forward, a gleam in his eyes. "A wager! What sort of contest are you suggesting?"

William glanced at Robert, gauging his reaction. "A knife fight, my lord. To the first blood, in this room."

Robert nodded, and the baron clapped his hands. "A fine plan! There is space enough between the tables. I accept the challenge. Viscomte, do you have a champion amongst your men, or shall I nominate one of my fellows?"

The *viscomte* flapped a languid hand. "Do as you please, Raymond. Your men seem more ferocious than mine."

"Excellent!" Baron Albi gestured to a tall, thick-set man seated at a neighbouring table. "Pierre, you are unmatched in close-quarter combat. Teach these Englishmen a thing or two about fighting."

Sir Robert looked amused. "Who shall be my champion?" He rose to his feet and surveyed his men, toying idly with his knife. "Surely not you, William

Raven, for you have been off your stroke these past few days...”

Laughter echoed around the hall, and William forced himself to smile. He hadn't been at his best recently, being too aware of his attempts to impress, but to have it remarked upon in public was embarrassing. The slow fire of pride burned inside him, but he remained on his feet, his head held high.

After a long moment, Robert smiled at him. “Since you are the architect of this entertainment, William, I give you leave to prove yourself. If you lose, your shame will be known to all—but if you win, you will be well rewarded.”

“Thank you, sir.” William stepped forward and took Sir Robert's knife, then cleaned the blade on his thigh.

The Frenchman strode into the middle of the room opposite him. William noticed the way the man's weight rested on the pads of his feet, doubtlessly to lunge at him in a heartbeat. He was wary of the man, watching him closely, still aware of every sound in the room. The yawn of a dog near the fire, a cup set down on the table, the gurgle of poured ale. And his lord was watching him again.

William estimated that Pierre was older than he was, likely by a good five years. A healed broken nose stood at a strange angle to one side, but that only meant he hadn't evaded a fist fast enough once. It didn't mean he was a better fighter.

William held the knife firmly but kept his wrist, arm, shoulders relaxed, the other hand reaching a little forward to obstruct a block or push an attack to the side. He was sized up in turn, the Frenchman's light eyes alert under a mop of curly black hair, showing anticipation and real

pleasure as they circled each other, both careful, neither betraying any fear or reluctance, instead measuring defences, each ready to block or attack.

William was not a man to wait until he was attacked. Before anybody could mock him for his lack of courage, he lunged forward, finding that Pierre met his attack by surging forward, too. Their knives suddenly locked and, before William could free the blade, change the angle and stab for him, the Frenchman's open hand grabbed his face and pushed him back, fingers digging into his nose and lips. William stumbled away, just barely evading a wide swing aiming for his belly.

God's teeth, but Pierre was fast. William managed to save himself with a jump to the side, very nearly falling over the legs of one of the other Frenchmen and cursing himself for getting too close there. Pierre grinned at him, motioning him closer with a free hand.

William thought he could hear the groan from his instructor. "Raven," Ulric would say with a sigh, "heart of a warrior, balance of a pig."

He shook his head, gritting his teeth. Unwounded. The fight wasn't over. He moved away from the French table and found himself facing Robert, who had steepled his fingers and was watching him intently with that quicksilver gaze.

If the Frenchman had been one of the squires, they would have been trading insults by now, but Pierre was still a guest, and serving a French noble wasn't out of the question for his own future. That might change if he insulted anybody.

He kept circling, turning his back to lords, then suddenly Pierre was on top of him, forcing him against the table, and from far away William heard Stephen bleat

in annoyance about spilled wine and ruined clothes, but he was too busy escaping the stranglehold of the heavier man whose knife was again locked with his. Pierre leaned into him with all his weight, forcing the edge of the blade closer to William's chest.

The snarl could have been mistaken for a wild grin, and William found himself utterly taken over by the fight, the blood singing in his veins as they wrestled, he from below, the Frenchman from above. When he didn't relent, the Frenchman changed his stance to get a better angle to bring his weight to bear. That allowed William to get both feet between them. He kicked Pierre double-footed in the chest, making him stumble back. William rolled away, spilling more wine to the laughter of the nobles, and got back to his feet.

"Enough puppy play," he said to the Frenchman, rolling his shoulders.

Likely convinced that William was nearly done, Pierre lunged again, and this time William ducked underneath the attack and slipped to the other side, laughing now, completely enjoying himself. It was a thrill having an opponent he hadn't faced a hundred times in training. Unlike the practice sessions, when he was invariably matched with John, William had no idea what the Frenchman would do next, and he loved it.

He changed the grip on the knife, then inched slowly closer, feinting attacks but never concluding them, always moving back before Pierre could force him again to commit to an attack—or, worse, a defence.

*I can do this.* Suddenly calm settled like a layer of snow over the excitement of the fight.

When the Frenchman lunged into another attack, William's response was pure instinct. The knife went

across the striking hand while he twisted his body to the side. Pierre paused, half-incredulous, then raised his hand. Blood ran from his palm down toward his wrist.

William stepped back, scarce believing his eyes. He'd felt the blade bite true, had known he'd drawn blood, but the sight of the stunned Frenchman holding up his injured hand made William want to whoop in delight.

For a moment the crowd was silent, then came a burst of cheering from the squires and English knights, and a chorus of groans from the French. A grin spread across William's face as he turned, savouring the acclamation of his fellows. Coins clinked and flashed in the firelight as they changed hands, and men shouted for more ale and wine to toast William's victory or drown their sorrows.

Pierre rubbed at his misshapen nose then cursed as he smeared blood over his face. He slid his knife back into its sheath and came forward to grip William's hand. "You got lucky," he said, his accent thick. "But that was a good move. You fight well. Drink with us later."

William nodded, pleased at the gruff respect in the Frenchman's eyes. He slapped Pierre on the shoulder and strode across the hall to the dais where the nobles sat. The *viscomte* and the baron applauded, accepting the defeat of their champion with good grace. Stephen seemed more interested in the contents of his wine cup than in anything happening around him. William cared little for the responses of the three men. Instead he fixed his gaze on Sir Robert.

Robert stood and approached him. They looked at one another, and William fancied he saw approval in his lord's expression. He wiped the knife again, cleaning it of the drops of French blood, and offered it hilt-first to Robert. "My lord."



“Keep it, young lion,” Robert said, without looking at the blade. “You have earned it.”

Surprised, William glanced down, examining the knife for the first time. During the fight he’d been aware only of its capacity as a weapon, the weight of it in his hand, the reach it gave him. Now he examined the wave-patterned blade, recognizing it as costly Damascus steel set in a pear-wood handle, the grip embellished with a dark metallic wire he realised must be tarnished silver. Though it was a simple table knife for a nobleman, it represented much more to William. Conscious of the honour of being given Sir Robert’s personal blade, he attempted to hand it back, murmuring, “My lord, this is too good for me.”

Robert raised an eyebrow. “Nonsense. Don’t sell yourself so cheaply.”

“I did not mean to offend...”

“You didn’t.” A faint smile played on Robert’s lips. “You are very much like someone I used to know, William. Very much like him indeed.”

Feeling bold, William asked, “Someone in Constantinople, sir?”

Robert looked at him sharply, a strange expression in his eyes. “Constantinople? No. Not at all. You remind me of myself at your age. All that pride. All that hunger. All that—”

He turned away abruptly, took a few steps toward Baron Albi, then swung back, raising his voice above the renewed noise of chatter and music. “Clean yourself up, William. You too, Pierre. Then come and be feted by your comrades. No doubt the drinking will go on until dawn.”

William hummed a bawdy tune as he finished his bath. Water pooled on the stone-flagged floor of the buttery, and more splashed over the low sides of the small wooden tub he'd managed to fill from the copper kettle in the kitchen hearth. There'd been barely any hot water left, and what there was he'd had to share with the Frenchman. He'd topped up the tub with cold water from the well and had retired to the buttery as the only private place within the castle keep where he could take his bath in peace.

He grinned as he thought of what Pierre must be enduring. In the aftermath of the fight, the big Frenchman had been tended by the cook, who'd offered to press a red-hot poker against the injury to seal the wound. The offer and Pierre's reaction had caused great hilarity amongst English and French alike. The Frenchman had been led off to the kitchen, surrounded by a gaggle of maids who hung on his every word.

William's grin became a chuckle as he wondered why women always preferred the loser of a fight to the victor. Certainly Pierre had seemed to enjoy the attention, and William didn't begrudge the Frenchman his romantic triumph. Not when William had won the knife fight in front of three noble lords and a bishop's commissary.

He clambered from the shallow tub and dried himself on his tunic. Outside the buttery, he heard the bustle of servants passing and snatches of rowdy singing from the great hall every time the doors opened. He dressed in clean clothing, combed his fingers through his damp hair, then bundled up his old garments for the maids to launder next washday.

He stepped out into an empty corridor. The torches guttered, trailing black smoke. William stood for a moment, strangely reluctant to return to the great hall.

He'd thought he'd want to celebrate his victory, no matter how small it had been, with as many of his fellows as possible, but instead he wished for just one. He wanted to relive the excitement of the fight with his lord.

William shook his head at his foolishness. Sir Robert had better things to do with his time than sup ale and listen to the impassioned chatter of one of his squires—and he'd be better off joining his fellows before that glutton John drank the barrels dry.

As he made his way back to the great hall, William heard a sound. He stopped, listening, filtering out the shouts and music from the hall and the hum of noise from the kitchens. At length the strange sound came again, and this time he identified it as two men speaking in urgent whispers. Curious as to who had slipped out of the hall or kitchen for a conversation, William followed the whispers around the dark walls.

The corridor narrowed and made a dog-leg, then opened out again near the central light well that ran for the full height of the keep. On each floor two windows overlooked the light well, which provided illumination and fresh air to what would otherwise be the darkest, stuffiest rooms in the castle. Now William understood why the voices sounded so strange—they were distorted by an echo.

William approached the window that opened into the light well, keeping to the shadows so he wouldn't be seen by the whisperers. He angled himself against the recess of the window and peered up, wondering if the voices came from Sir Robert's private chambers or the guest rooms above.

Another low murmur, and William drew back. The men were standing directly opposite him on the other side

of the light well. From the direction of their voices, the whisperers must be standing in the lower part of the chapel, the section reserved for the household servants. It was as good a place as any for a clandestine meeting, and he wondered who they were and what they were doing. Perhaps two forbidden lovers trysting in secret—or perhaps it was Stephen badgering Father Andrew, the castle chaplain, for not showing sufficient knowledge of the Gospels.

Either way, now he'd satisfied his curiosity, it was none of his business. William turned away, only to be brought up short when one of the whisperers raised his voice, his words cutting clear across the light well. "Robert must not know—must not even suspect!"

William felt his heart stop. He spun and pressed against the wall, holding his breath as he edged closer to the window. Inside the chapel, the other whisperer hushed the first, their voices lowered and jumbled as if they were both speaking at once, perhaps arguing over something. William strained to hear without revealing his presence, and from the morass of whispers he caught oddments of phrases.

"...Robert..."

"...kill him..."

"...gratitude and reward..."

The murdering bastards wanted to kill Sir Robert!

Anger burned a sour trail to William's stomach. It was an effort for him to stay silent. The idea that anyone would dare harbour disloyal thoughts toward Sir Robert beneath his very roof made William grit his teeth. He dug his fingers into the cold stone and realised his hands were shaking. Forcing himself to relax, he took a calming breath and inched closer to the window.

The traitorous scum were discussing when would be the best time to carry out their plans. William listened closely, committing each word to memory.

“The day after tomorrow, during the hunt,” one of the men murmured, and William detected the lilt of a southern French accent. “I trust you to know when it will be best.”

The other man fell silent for a heartbeat. When he spoke again, he sounded uncertain, almost plaintive. “Is this really necessary? Robert has been good to me.”

The Frenchman chuckled. “I will be good to you, too, my friend. Come, it is a fine plan. Accidents happen. An angry boar, a tired or lame horse, a stray arrow—these things are a natural part of the hunt. Who would question an accident? It would be seen as God’s will.”

“If it must be done...”

The Frenchman’s voice turned to steel. “It must. Believe me. My master is never wrong.” There was a pause, and then the Frenchman continued, softer this time, “Then we are agreed?”

A heavy sigh. “Yes. I will do it.”

“Good. Now, as for payment...” The voices trailed off and the words became indistinguishable as the two men moved away from the chapel window.

William remained frozen in place, his mind whirling. His first instinct was to tell Sir Robert, but as soon as the thought entered his head, he crushed the idea. It would do no good for him to go running like a tattletale. Time he thought with his head rather than charge into the situation at full tilt. He had no clue as to the identities of the whisperers and the details of the plot, and to admit as such to his lord would be embarrassing. A man like Sir Robert demanded certainty and proof, not rumour. Besides, he’d

been eavesdropping, and though the danger had sounded real enough, it could just have been idle talk between disgruntled men.

It would surely be better if he investigated the matter discreetly, tried to uncover at least the names of the whisperers. Alerting even one other person could lead to loose talk, which might scare off the plotters. It was best to let them go ahead and think they were safe with their plans, and then he, William Raven, would step in and destroy them.

He lifted his chin as if going to do battle with his unknown foes. This was his chance to prove his loyalty, to show his worth as a knight. Winning the knife fight was child's play in comparison to protecting Sir Robert's life. He'd been given the opportunity to show his devotion to his lord, and he would not fail in his task.

His anger faded as he considered his own plans. The slam of a door on the other side of the light well brought him out of his daydreams, and he hurried back to the great hall. Perhaps he could draw up a list of suspects by checking who was missing from the gathering.

Noise and heat washed over him as he entered the great hall. The smell of wine and ale hung in the air, mixed with the stink of sweat and the cloying notes of perfume. Several of the trestle tables had been shoved back against the wall, and people were dancing to a jaunty tune. The village girls had been admitted as extra entertainment, and the Frenchmen were trying to out-gallant the English knights for the women's favours.

John shoved a mug of ale into his hand and shouted an invitation at him. Distracted, William nodded and followed him, glancing around the hall to see if anyone obvious was missing from their place. It was impossible

to tell—with half of the French knights flirting with the village girls and castle maids, and the other half carousing with the English knights, the careful seating plan of earlier in the night had been abandoned. Even the Viscomte de Murat had come down from the dais to sit by the minstrels, and was requesting songs with the interest of a musical connoisseur.

A door opened to one side of the hall close to the high table, and William's pulse leaped. That door led through a suite of rooms and adjoined the chapel—perhaps this was one of the killers? His spirits sank when Baron Albi entered the hall with an unsteady gait, his face wreathed in a beatific smile, his arm around a pretty maid and his clothing askew. He stumbled into the nearest chair and patted the maid's backside before tossing her a silver coin.

William closed his eyes in frustration. Already in the drone of noise surrounding him, he'd forgotten the exact phrasing and intonation of the two men. There was no way he'd be able to identify the murderers like this. He'd just have to keep his wits about him.

"Raven! Over here!" The squires beckoned him over to their table.

He fixed a smile to his face and started across the room. He almost tripped over Stephen, who sat on a bench with a flagon of wine addressing a large wolfhound. The dog was the only living creature interested in what Stephen had to say, but even then it was probably more concerned with getting its paws on the meaty chunk of thigh bone Stephen held in his free hand.

Stephen was regaling the dog with boasts about his close friendship with Young Henry and how the junior king had promised him a bishopric. "I have my eye on Chichester," Stephen slurred, waving the bone close to the

dog's nose in emphasis. "It's not Winchester or York or Canterbury, but it will do nicely for a start. When Old Henry departs this life, his son is sure to elevate me. An archbishopric would be a just reward. His Young Majesty trusts me absolutely. Many times he has told me how invaluable he finds my advice."

William rolled his eyes and turned away, only to see Sir Robert watching him from the other side of the hall. They locked gazes, and William felt a jolt of awareness go through him. His emotions of the past week coalesced. His thoughts blurred as if he were drunk, and a moment later he realised the feeling wasn't concern for his lord's safety—it was lust, pure and simple.

Stunned by the strength of his feelings, William covered his confusion by raising his ale in a silent toast. Robert didn't respond but continued to stare at him, his bright gaze stripping away the layers William wore until he felt naked. It was an oddly pleasurable experience, waking hungry urges and giving him a shiver of anticipation.

"William! Don't just stand there, come and tell us how you defeated the Frenchie!" John swayed over to him and slung an arm around his neck before dragging him toward the table of squires and knights, who saluted him with raucous cheers and the clashing of ale mugs.

William grinned. The squires made a space for him on the bench and his mug was topped up with frothy ale. He glanced back at Robert one more time, but his lord had gone.



## Chapter Three

William staggered outside in the grey hours of morning. The air carried a hint of frost, a first taste of winter. In the hall, the carousing had died down. Most people were getting ready to sleep, which, in some cases, only meant they collapsed where they sat or stood. He inhaled the crisp air deeply, relishing how the cold bit into his lungs and sobered him.

There. A flash of colour near the stables. Without thinking too much, William followed.

The door was open. He peered inside, breathing in the smell of horseflesh and straw, then moved forward, his feet silent on the beaten earth floor. "Anyone there?"

His eyes gradually adjusted to the semi-darkness after the wakening light of day. Horses shifted in their stalls, whickering softly. William looked for a movement that would betray another's presence. The horses knew him, but from their quiet reaction, they also recognized the other man.

Who would be hiding in the stables at this time of morning? There was no need for anyone to come here...unless it was one of the conspirators. A chill shivered down his spine as he recalled the Frenchman speaking about a lamed horse. Surely no one would tamper with one of Sir Robert's animals in the stables? Now the thought was in his head, William couldn't shake it. He ventured farther into the darkness.

His hand touched the knife, but he didn't draw it. It would be giving away his suspicions. He walked past Robert's mighty destrier, the war horse's hoof thumping loudly against the wooden box. But William wasn't worried about the stallion. For the hunt, a lighter horse would be used, so he moved on toward where the riding horses stood asleep, their heads hanging.

A creak of a wooden board above his head might be from the weight of a man. The ladder into the loft was close by. William reached blindly for it, then began to climb up. Here, the smell of hay was even stronger.

Dust motes danced through the air in a faint shaft of light as he reached the top of the ladder. The loft stretched away, heaped piles of hay concealing shadows and who knew what else. William took a steadying breath, blinking at the light and trying to focus on what lay beyond. He strained to hear any betraying noise, but the thundering beat of his heart distracted him. Now he was certain that whoever was here with him intended some evil purpose. A servant or squire would have announced themselves by now.

He stood, moved away from the edge of the loft, and circled the nearest pile of hay. A shadow shifted, and William held his breath.

"Are you alone?" the man said, turning toward him.

William paused, too taken aback to reply at first by the realisation that the man was Robert. Relief filled him, but immediately he grew tense again, though this time for other reasons. He forced himself to respond as he tried to control his reaction. "Yes, my lord. I'm alone."

Robert seemed to accept that as truth, because now he came toward him with a sudden speed and force that made William almost breathless. He wondered for a

moment whether Robert would hit him when he raised his hand, but that was only to take his chin with gloved fingers. Robert was suddenly close, and drew closer, their breath mingling.

William stared, at a loss to say anything. That lust welled up in him again, leaping like fire. It rendered him weak, yet the power of his desire burned through him, and he knew this was a feeling to treasure, to feed from. Now he understood why squires would often pledge their lives, their very souls, to the service of their lord. William trembled with the force of his need.

“You wonder about your reward, young lion?”

“No. I...have it here.” Recollecting himself, William was about to touch the knife at his side, but Robert took his hand in a firm grip.

“Yes, you do.” Robert’s mouth quirked into one of those smiles, and he came close enough that their lips almost brushed. William moved forward, completing the kiss, suddenly hungry for it like never before. His lover of the other night had been his lord, not one of the knights, then. He remembered the taste, the wine and spices, but also the other taste that was all Robert.

It had been him all along, and that sudden knowledge was heady like strong liquor. He’d been lured and baited, and now they were here together, alone. William’s head swam with possibilities, and he reached for Robert’s powerful neck, pulling him closer, pulling himself closer. It didn’t matter, because now they were body to body, locked together by hands and lips, and William couldn’t help but push against his lord.

The heat of the kiss only made him hungrier for a touch. The memory of Robert’s hand around him, giving without taking anything in return, made him dizzy with

need. "What...whatever you want," he whispered, voice rough. "This time it should be your pleasure, my lord."

Robert nodded for him to move over to the hay, and William lay back in the rustling softness. The sweet scent of the hay tickled his nose, mixing with that spicy fragrance he already knew so well. Anxious and eager to please, he began to remove his clothes, kicking off his shoes, unbuckling his belt, pulling the plain woollen tunic over his head, but he paused when Robert didn't follow his example. William crumpled the tunic in his hand, wondering what to do. Had he displeased his lord somehow? What else did Sir Robert expect from him?

"Continue," Robert said, watching him intently.

William pulled off the rest of his clothes, conscious how naked he was in his arousal. In contrast, his lord's rich splendour, velvet and fur and jewels, made his nudity seem more sinful.

Robert unclasped his mantle and placed it down on the hay, motioning William to get on top of it. It was soft and still body-warm against William's skin, and smelled of Robert, who now knelt down near him, but not touching, merely regarding him. Robert took off his rings and gloves. William lay back, breathlessly waiting for his lord to undress and claim him any way he desired. Any way William wanted, too.

"Calm, William." Robert smiled, placing his fingers against William's chest, as if ordering him to stay there. "You won't win your knighthood on your back."

"I didn't—"

The protest was only half formed before it choked off. William gave a cry of surprise as Robert bent down and took his cock in his mouth.

The sensation, so warm and wet, reminded him of the few village lasses he'd fucked, but this was different—completely different. The heat and tempo, the clasp of lips around the base of his cock, the slow slide to the tip, the flicker of tongue against the sensitive underside... He groaned, grasping handfuls of the velvet cloak, fingers tightening into fists. It would be too easy to spill his seed this way, and the idea of it made him blush.

Shocked to the marrow, William made another feeble attempt at a protest, but his voice lacked conviction and his words ended in an incoherent moan. This was surely the most wanton, sinful thing he'd ever experienced, and while he trembled at his wickedness, his cock jerked and grew harder between Robert's lips. Arousal stabbed at him, stronger than any desire he'd had before.

*This must be a taste of pure heaven.* The blasphemy only made him harder, and he shifted restlessly on the cloak.

William lifted his head to watch his lord sucking at him. Robert's eyes were half-lidded, his expression one of deep contentment and concentration. His silver-touched dark hair tumbled forward, obscuring his face, and William brushed it back, an instinctive response that made Robert draw him in deeper.

He'd never felt anything like Robert's warm, wet lips and mouth, his tongue that teased him. William pushed toward it, greedy for more, wanting to control the rhythm, before Robert took his hips in a firm grip and held him motionless while he sucked.

William bit down on the groans, teeth clenched as if he were in pain, but it was the most delicious, excruciating feeling he could have imagined. Sheer lust jolted through him as Robert looked up, seeking and holding his gaze

while he did this. William all but squirmed, soon breathless, beyond thought or reason. If this was the beginning of whatever else Robert wanted, his lord could have it all. William vowed to give anything, to do anything Robert wanted, as long as he didn't stop now.

Desperation gave his cries a sharp, frantic edge. William arched and thrashed on the cloak, his limbs trembling, sweat sheening his body. He strained toward his climax, feeling it build in his balls, feeling the power of it coil around his spine. He bucked, breaking free of Robert's grasp, his hips thrusting harder and faster, driving his cock into his lord's mouth. William gasped, his chest tight, his breathing short. He shuddered, sheathing himself a final time, and cried out as he came.

He tried to withdraw, but Robert held him close, fingers digging into his thighs to keep him still. William stared when Robert simply swallowed his seed and then pulled back.

"It's a sin to let it fall onto the ground," he said with a smug expression.

William gave a half-laugh, breathless and disbelieving at what he'd just felt, what he was still feeling. "Why? Not the seed...I mean, why did you do this?"

"Your reward." Robert's eyes glittered. "And it pleases me, too."

"And it was you. That...that night. You."

Robert lifted an eyebrow. "Did you expect someone else? *Is* there anyone else, William?"

"No." William sat up. "No. I didn't...expect anything." He hesitated, dozens of questions crowding his mind, but the only one he could say out loud was, "My lord, why me?"

Robert smiled again at him but didn't reply. He ran his fingers down William's heated cheek, and William thought he might stay, might do more, take something in return, but he collected his gloves, got to his feet and stepped away, twisting the rings onto his gloved hands as he did so.

Conscious that their time together had ended, William rolled off the mantle, stood and offered it. Robert accepted the garment, stroked a hand over the disordered nap, then turned and left.

William ventured to the edge of the loft and watched his lord walk out of the stables without a backward glance. Though he wanted to call Robert back, William knew he had no right, none at all. He had no words to offer more, and he'd thought—no, expected—that Robert would claim and take whatever pleasure he wanted from William's body. Instead, he was left in confusion, torn between shame and pleasure.

He dressed in a hurry, more bewildered than before, and the nagging feeling arose that he should have told his lord about the hired murderer in his hall, so Robert would be prepared.

Just as quickly, he pushed the thought aside. No. He would deal with this matter himself. He would prove how loyal and responsible he could be. He wanted Robert to look at him with admiration and respect as well as desire. He wanted—and William shied from the thought like a nervous horse—he wanted to win his lord's love.

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William emerged from the stables still shaken. His body seemed sensitive to the simplest touch, be it the morning

breeze or the brush of his clothes against his skin. He picked a stalk of hay from his hair and gazed at it with a half smile, then tucked it inside his tunic. A moment later, he tossed the keepsake away. God's wounds, but he was acting like a lovesick maiden!

Chuckling at his foolishness, William strolled across the courtyard. Now the sun was up, he had to be about his duties before someone remarked on his absence.

The day was almost upon them, and though they'd been preparing for the hunt for a full week, there was still too much to do. Arrows had been fletched especially for the event, and last eve Lady Alais's gentlewomen had been called upon to stitch strips of fur onto mantles and riding cloaks for added warmth against the chill of the autumn air.

William paused at the gateway to the yard. A handful of French knights were practicing with short spears, stabbing at bales of straw. A couple of bleary-eyed English squires stood and commented on the performances, hoping for the chance to impress with their knowledge. Usually William would stay and watch with his fellows, but today he had other thoughts occupying his head.

He rushed up the staircase and snatched a roll of warm barley bread from the kitchen, ducking away with a grin as the cook shouted after him in mock anger. William stuffed the bread into his mouth, chewing quickly as he entered the great hall. A few hours ago, drunken and inert bodies had lain scattered about, but now everyone was awake, if not entirely sober, and the soiled rushes were being removed so the servants could scrub the floor.

No one needed him for the moment, so William went to the far end of the hall and pushed open the door to the



adjoining suite. The sacristy and chapel lay this way, the light dim and the air bearing traces of incense and snuffed beeswax candles.

He wasn't sure why he'd come here. Perhaps to stand in the same spot as the conspirators, to see if God would grant him the illumination of their identities. The thought of the Almighty made William uneasy even as he turned the iron handle and opened the door to the chapel. He was walking on consecrated ground and had committed a sin not one hour ago. By rights he should seek out Father Andrew and ask to make his confession, but William wanted to treasure the memory of what Robert had done to him. Such pleasure might indeed be a sin, but if so, William would atone for it in his own way by unmasking the bastards who plotted against his lord.

Weak light filtered through the stained glass lancet windows. A solitary candle burned on the altar. With a shock, William realised he wasn't alone. The man who was on his knees in prayer lifted his head and looked in William's direction.

"Ah, young Raven. Have you come to pray for victory in tomorrow's hunt?" Ulric signed a cross over his chest before he rose to his feet with a smile.

"I...yes, I am." William struggled to contain his surprise. He couldn't remember the last time he'd seen their drill instructor in the chapel outside of a Sunday or holy day. Lightening his tone, William joked, "I suppose you are praying to be rid of me."

Ulric paled beneath his ruddy complexion. "Rid of you, lad?" A moment later he recovered and gave a jovial laugh, his colour returning. "Oh yes—you'll be expecting to win your spurs. Let's hope the game runs plentiful and wild tomorrow. That monstrous boar the squires were so

excited about—he'd make a fine prize for you. Or a stag...yes, a stag should ensure you were noticed by those whose opinions matter."

William blinked. It was one of the longest speeches he'd ever heard from his instructor. "And you, Master Ulric?" he asked to be polite. "What do you hope to gain from the morrow?"

A strange expression flickered over Ulric's face, but it was gone so swiftly that William wondered if it had been a trick of the light.

"Tomorrow I hope everything goes to plan." Ulric's gaze went to the elegant gold cross Sir Robert had brought back from the Holy Land. He shook himself and smiled again. "Listen to me fretting. I'm an old worrywart to concern myself with such things. Our lord is a master of the hunt, and he knows the forest as well as he knows the lines on his palm. If anyone can lead the French visitors to good game, it's Sir Robert."

William watched the single flame on the altar dip and weave in the draught from the half-open door. "Do you think something will happen tomorrow?"

Ulric smiled, misunderstanding the nature of the question. "I think you'll do us all proud, lad. Sir Robert is very taken with you, so don't let the opportunity slip by. Mind you're on your best behaviour tomorrow, and if you get the chance to wield that knife with as much skill as you did last night, you'll be knighted before the week's out."

William grinned, and although he knew it was sinful to boast in church, he couldn't help himself. "I hope you wagered on me. That Frenchie was a tough one to beat, but I did it."

“You did indeed.” Ulric’s gaze moved over the altar once more before he looked at William with a mock scowl. “But how you won when you could barely stand up is beyond me. What have I told you about balance?”

“I admit my lessons weren’t at the forefront of my mind.”

“You young squires will be the end of me.” Ulric clapped William on the shoulder as he moved past him. “I’ll leave you to your prayers. Stags and boars are not like Frenchmen.”

William bid his instructor farewell, then waited until Ulric closed the chapel door behind him. Silence drifted and settled, and for a while William prayed without knowing what he was praying for. At length he stood and made his way to the back of the chapel. The wooden shutters into the light well had been closed at some point since last night, and he pulled them open. The bright shaft of sunshine made him blink, and then he studied the floor close to the window in case he could find any clues. There were no telltale threads of cloth caught on stonework, no identifying talismans trapped in the floorboards—nothing, in fact, that could help him catch the conspirators before they acted.

Feeling foolish, William closed the shutters and left the chapel, his thoughts agitated and his emotions torn.

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By evening the castle was abuzz with speculation and excitement about the coming hunt. All the preparations were in place, and the hall was full of relaxed, cheerful knights and squires. Even Stephen looked pleased, though William thought this was due more to Lady Alais’s

flattering attention at the high table than anticipation of a successful day's hunting. She surely had the patience of a saint to endure her youngest brother's droning, boastful talk.

Sir Robert managed to ignore Stephen without seeming to slight him, focusing instead on his noble French guests. William hunched over his mutton stew, his gaze continually darting around at the assembled company as he sought for the would-be murderers. God's teeth, at this rate he wouldn't know the men if they wore a sign around their necks! Frustrated, he shoved his dish aside and snatched up his ale mug.

John elbowed him. "What's the rush? Straining at the leash to be away at daybreak?"

"I'm...nervous." Admitting it was embarrassing, but the truth had slipped out before William could think of a plausible lie. He shrugged and flashed a grin at the other squire. "Tomorrow could make or break our reputations."

"I'm happy with my reputation." John winked at one of the maids, who was reaching over to collect their empty bowls, then he turned back to William. "But you need all the help you can get with enhancing yours."

Laughter rang out around the table, and even William chuckled. It struck him then how much this business was disturbing him. Usually John's joking remark would have caused him to spark into an angry retort, but tonight William let it go without comment. How could he countenance losing his temper over something so petty, when his lord's life was at risk?

The conversation moved on, and William let it flow over him. As soon as it was polite to do so, he excused himself from his fellows and strode out to the courtyard, breathing in the night air. It was cold enough to feel sharp

on his skin, and he thought there'd be a frost on the morrow. The sound of the dogs yipping in their kennels reminded him of John's remark.

Suddenly William felt ashamed. He was like a hunting hound, trained to do one thing and to do it well. He'd been stupid to think he could also handle conspiracies and court politics. He was no gently born nobleman instructed in the ways of half-truths and manipulation. His ambitions ran no higher than to be a knight, to serve his lord, and to amass enough prize money to live comfortably.

William cursed softly, his breath clouding in the cold air. He'd been worse than a fool, thinking he could solve this problem alone. He'd wrestled with it all day, and only his arrogance and pride had kept him from sharing what he'd overheard with someone better placed to deal with it. He should have told Ulric when he had the chance. No—he should have told Robert.

Squaring his shoulders, William lifted his head. He'd do it now. He'd go to his lord and tell him of the plot against his life.

He went back into the keep, using the stairs from the storerooms to avoid running into his fellow squires. He emerged into the kitchen, where a serving lad was pouring hot water from the copper into a basin. William paused long enough to ascertain that the water was intended as a top-up for Sir Robert's bath, then took the basin and continued up another flight of stairs to his lord's private chambers.

William balanced the basin against his chest and knocked on the door. He heard movement from within and hoped Robert was alone. He didn't think he could explain about the would-be murderers if anyone else was

present. He swallowed a sudden flutter of anxiety and banged his fist harder against the solid oak.

The door opened. "What's wrong, lad, why—" Robert fell silent, looking at William in surprise and then amusement. "And why does a squire do the work of a kitchen boy?"

William stared. Naked but for a colourful silk robe, Robert stood in the doorway awaiting a reply. Still struggling to find words, William mutely held out the basin of hot water. He tore his gaze away from the expanse of Robert's hard-muscled chest with its stripe of silver-dusted dark hair and peered into the room. He glanced at the canopied bed, then at the clothes spread out for the hunt, and finally at the edge of the tub behind the folding screen.

"Nothing to say for yourself, William Raven?" Robert stood aside, allowing William to enter the room.

The door thudded shut behind them, and Robert stood close, so close that William felt the heat from his lord's flesh. He dropped his gaze, still clutching the basin, and studied the intricate embroidery on the silk robe. Somehow it made him all the more aware of Robert's damp skin, the wet hair on his chest curling and glimmering with water droplets, and the way the flimsy silk clung to his body.

Summoning back his voice, William said, "I apologise for disturbing your bath, sir. I didn't mean—I had no intention..."

"No intention of what?" Robert tilted his head, still amused, his expression half challenging. "Why did you come here?"

"To—to..." William gritted his teeth. He sounded like a lack-wit, and humiliation bit hard, making him angry.

“To deliver this water,” he snapped, and strode across the chamber to pour the contents of the basin into the already half-full tub. He told himself it was the steam that heated his cheeks, but he knew it was embarrassment.

Straightening, he poured the hot water into the bathtub, set the basin down and tried to find the words to apologise for his attitude.

Robert leaned against the door, his arms folded, his gaze assessing. “You look like a creature at bay.”

“I’m not.” William heard the snap of nervous arrogance in his tone and dropped his gaze.

“I heard of your father’s death.” Robert walked across the room, trailing one hand over the clothes laid out on the chest. He stopped at the window recess, gazing out through the open shutters in the direction of the village. “He was a good man. You might like to know that your brothers are thriving under Reinford’s care.”

“Half-brothers,” William muttered. His legitimate siblings had long ago joined the retinue of Sir Alan Reinford in Suffolk. There was no love lost between the four brothers, and William didn’t miss them.

Robert continued as if he hadn’t spoken. “However, I believe I have the best of your father’s sons. Margaret was right when she spoke to me about you. My wife was often right in things where a woman’s opinion shouldn’t count. She knew which foals would become the best destriers, and she knew which squire would make the best knight.”

William stared, trying to match his memory of Lady Margaret, a sweet, fragile-looking woman, with what Robert was telling him. “I thought she took me in because she felt sorry for me.”

Robert laughed and turned from the window. “Margaret did many charitable and kindly things, but

persuading me that you were best suited to the martial life was not an act of pity. She saw something in you that your father and I lacked the vision to see, but now I know she was right. You have grown into a fine man these past five years, William—a man made for battle.”

These revelations, though small, shook William’s composure. Though he’d never been openly shunned for being illegitimate, he’d been aware of his status and had held himself apart. When he’d left the village to live at the castle as a squire at the age of fifteen, he’d measured himself against lads like John, who’d already been half his life in training, and felt even more of an outsider.

“I never knew,” he whispered. “Never imagined...”

“Of course not.” Robert closed the window shutters, sealing out the night, and the candles guttered in the sudden draught. “It never does a man good to know he’s valued. At least not when he’s still unformed...untested. A man needs to start out in life hungry for more.”

“Like you did?” William asked, forgetting to be cautious.

Robert smiled. “Yes. Like me.” The smile faded. “It’s only later when disappointment and cynicism sets in, and hunger becomes desperation—but a man must bear many trials throughout his days, and the true test is in how he deals with these tribulations.”

Intrigued by this rare glimpse into his lord’s mind, William leaned forward. “How did you deal with it?”

The response was a gentle laugh, and William knew he’d been too eager with his questioning. Embarrassed again, he hefted the basin. “I should go now, my lord, and return this to the kitchen.”

“Stay awhile longer.” Shaking off his mood, Robert strolled across the room and sat on the side of the bed,



carelessly adjusting the fall of the robe. "I have finished with the water. But rather than waste it, you should bathe, too. It will still be warm."

William pulled his attention away from the strong lines of Robert's thighs and looked up. "Me? But I washed yesterday."

Robert held his gaze. "Wash again."

Hesitant, but remembering how Robert had enjoyed the sight of him naked and aroused in the stables, William set down the basin and undressed. He fumbled with his clothes, wishing he could seem as worldly and confident in his skin as his lord, conscious the whole time of Robert watching him. He was conscious, too, of the intimacy of this setting—not the impersonal space of the stables, but Robert's bedchamber. This was more than just a slaking of lust, he realised. It was more than he'd imagined or dreamed.

Casting aside the last of his garments, William hurriedly stepped into the tub, tucking his knees to his chest and hissing a little at the heat of the water.

Robert chuckled and leaned forward to dip his hand in the tub. "Every town and city in the Holy Land has a public bathhouse. Cleanliness can become an addiction, albeit a pleasurable one."

"Is it true that men and women bathe together?" William asked, remembering some of the more salacious tales he'd heard.

"There are certain bathhouses that cater to certain needs." Robert gave him a gleaming look. "But respectable women do not bathe with men."

Cautiously, aware of the danger of overstepping the line between them again, William said, "And you, sir?"

Did you bathe with the...ladies who were not respectable?"

"Upon occasion." A smile of reminiscence curved Robert's lips.

William splashed water over his shoulders and chest, self-conscious beneath the weight of his lord's stare. He hesitated over his next words. "My lord, I am not a bathhouse whore."

"Indeed you are not." Robert stood and paced around the screen, circling the tub, watching William like a hawk. "Perhaps I have treated you with less courtesy than might be expected, but I do not think of you as something as easily gained as a whore."

The conversation was drifting out of his control. William felt the chasm dividing their rank and experience, but held his chin high. "You owe me no explanation, sir, but I am aware of the debt I owe to Lady Margaret's notice and..."

Robert lifted a hand for silence, his expression serious. "I honoured my wife and respected her for her skills as a chatelaine and for bearing my children, but ours was a political union and not a love match." He smiled slightly. "Put aside your romantic notions of knights and their ladies, William. The time will come when you, too, must forge an alliance when your heart and desires are engaged elsewhere."

William shook his head. "I doubt I will ever rise high enough that I will be obliged to marry for social gain."

Robert chuckled. "Where has all your confidence gone, young lion? If you acquit yourself well tomorrow, you'll become a knight. With prize money and favours under your belt, you'll be able to join the tourney circuit in France and make a name for yourself. You may even

catch the attention of Prince Richard, and then your future is guaranteed. Men have come from beginnings far more humble than yours and have risen far beyond their wildest imaginings on the strength of their lances alone.”

The double entendre was inescapable, and William blushed. His fingers had started to wrinkle from the water, so he got out of the tub and stood dripping on the woven mat placed on the floor. He took the drying-cloth Robert offered him and blotted his skin, then wrapped the linen sheet around his body. He was aware of his nakedness beneath the cloth, aware, too, of his lord beside him. Tension rose in him again, the warring of desire and anticipation.

His gaze went to Robert’s robe with its gold-threaded embroidery. It was so unlike anything he’d seen before. “Is that from the Holy Land?”

“From Constantinople.” Robert stroked a finger over the delicate silk. “A gift from a friend.”

“A lover,” William said with certainty.

Robert nodded. “He was my lover as well as a good friend.”

William considered this for a moment. “You miss him, and so you set out to seduce me.”

“You have very forthright opinions.” Robert seemed amused rather than offended. He came closer but did not touch. “I miss him, and you are nothing like him. He roused desires in me that I’d repressed for years. I know you have those same desires. It would be a shame to crush your proud spirit, the way I allowed mine to be crushed.”

“Sex between men is unnatural. The priests say so.” William swallowed, feeling the throb of desire uncoil within him. He remembered how it felt to have Robert’s

hands on him, the warmth of his mouth, the roughness of his embrace. "No matter how good it feels, it's still a sin."

"Sin can be expiated." Robert moved closer still. "Forgiveness can always be found through penance."

"Are you sorry?" William stared at him. "For your lover, I mean. For the sins you committed with him."

"No." The bald reply made William catch his breath, but then Robert continued, "I am not sorry for the things we did, just as I will not be sorry for the things you and I do. But I am sorry for the time I wasted, the lies I've told, the struggle against my own nature. In Constantinople I found my true self. I learned things forbidden by our Church. Going on crusade—journeying into the Holy Land...it changes people, William. So much is possible there."

They looked at one another for a heartbeat, then Robert glanced away and made a dismissive gesture. "If you are truly worried about your immortal soul, you may leave now."

William remained where he stood. A shrug, and the drying-cloth slipped from his body, leaving him naked. "My lord, teach me what you learned."

He moved forward, and Robert met him halfway. They kissed, a tentative touch, more a caress of breath than an embrace. William murmured, changing the angle and increasing the pressure. Robert responded, stepping closer so their bodies crushed together. William pushed a hand through Robert's hair, gripping it to bring him down into a longer kiss.

Robert opened his mouth, his lips soft and warm. William nipped at him, ran the tip of his tongue over Robert's lower lip, then deepened the kiss. The sweet, spicy taste of wine rolled across his tongue, a familiarity

that excited him. He felt Robert dance his fingers down his spine. The sensation of his lord's hands cupping his arse made William hard in an instant.

Robert stroked up his spine, a rough caress, then placed his hands on William's shoulders, pressing down. William resisted for a moment, puzzled. When the pressure came again, stronger and more insistent this time, he glanced up.

Robert smiled. "There are times, William, when a man must be on his knees."

A jolt of lust seared through him. William let out a shaky laugh, hurriedly dropping his gaze. He drew in a breath and sank down, rubbing his face against Robert's chest like a cat as he slid lower, feeling the shirr of the silk robe against his cheek. Once on his knees, William tilted back his head and smiled at Robert, who stared down at him with a hungry expression.

William lowered his gaze in a teasing suggestion of subservience and nuzzled at the growing bulge beneath Robert's robe. He slid his hands up Robert's thighs, rested them at his waist, then untied the silken belt. Moving with slow deliberation, William pushed the robe apart. Robert's cock stood erect, long and thick with a slight curve, the flaring head glistening with moisture. William smiled, half closing his eyes as he inhaled the odour of sex, the potent mix of salt and musk.

Deliberately, he glanced up and ran his tongue over his lips, watching Robert's expression blaze with violent heat. Robert gave a muffled groan and thrust forward. Remembering what Robert had done to him in the stables, William pressed a hand against his thigh, keeping him back, and then knelt forward and licked from root to tip. He took a breath, high on the scent, and rubbed the

cockhead against his face, breathing hard as it jerked against the soft pout of his mouth. It dirtied his lips with a sticky trail, and he chased the wetness, curling his tongue to catch the spooling pre-come.

Robert groaned aloud as William ran his tongue around the rim of the head before opening wide and taking him in deep. William felt the answering echo of lust with each movement he made, his own cock painfully tight. Saliva flooded his mouth as he worked his lips up and down Robert's shaft, leaving a wet trail of his own. He circled his thumb and fingers around the base of Robert's prick and jerked him off, his fingers meeting his lips as he drew the foreskin over the swollen head then pushed it back in a strong, steady rhythm.

He hummed slightly, his concentration intense. The taste of the salty fluid of pre-come leaked across his tongue. Robert's balls rose high and tight; his hands stroked through William's hair, grasping it, scrabbling for a harsher grip, shoving William's face hard against his groin. William nuzzled through Robert's pubic hair, licking at the rough curls and probing at his balls.

Robert urged him on with incoherent moans. He swayed where he stood and tried to move a few steps to the bed, but William refused. A sense of power filled him, better than the taste of musk, better than the reality of hot, hard cock thrusting into his mouth. William sucked, riding the wave of his own pleasure, his hand pumping around the base of Robert's cock. A moment later, William felt the tremor of orgasm approach, tasted the initial squirt of semen—then, with a hoarse groan, Robert pulled free of him.

William cried out in disappointment and then gave a second, startled, yelp as Robert came over his face and

chest. His seed was warm and sticky, a thick rain spilling onto his skin. Moments later, Robert exhaled on a deep, contented sigh, and then he chuckled.

Still surprised, William peered up at him. He didn't know how he felt, and could only imagine how he looked with Robert's semen dripping from him. He snaked out his tongue and licked a drop from the corner of his mouth. Glancing down, he saw the thick white trails over his chest. He thought he should feel dirty, but instead the sight made his heart beat faster.

Robert stared down at William with a smile. "Now it's your turn. You may use your hands."

William gazed at him blankly, uncomprehending for a second. He lifted a hand to touch the semen decorating his chest, smearing it, rubbing it into his skin with slow amazement.

"I want to watch you pleasure yourself," Robert said softly.

William tried to speak, but no words came. The request robbed him of rational thought. Obediently, he sat back on his heels and wrapped his hand around his cock. Pleasure built immediately. It wouldn't take long. He fixed his gaze on his lord's face, but soon he had to close his eyes, too self-conscious to be so bold. He gasped, jerking his cock with harder and rougher strokes as he chased climax. His erection throbbed and strained, oozing trails of wetness to smooth his grip.

He gasped, his head falling forward as he came, his free hand cupped over his cock to stop the spurts of semen from splashing everywhere. His hands and thighs caught the torrent of hot seed. He quivered, his breath rasping in his throat, and then he gave a sob of surrender and slumped to rest his head against Robert's knee.

“My lord,” he said when he could speak coherently. “My lord...”

Robert stroked his sweat-streaked hair. “That’s enough for tonight, young lion. Save the rest of your strength for the hunt.”

Though kindly said, it was a dismissal. William crouched on the floor, his mind spinning, as Robert pulled the embroidered robe about him, belted it, and walked out of the room.

William cleaned himself on the drying-cloth then crawled toward his discarded clothes and dressed. It was only as he crept from the bedchamber that he realised he hadn’t warned his lord about the dangers awaiting him tomorrow.



## Chapter Four

“The boar is of the devil.” Stephen’s high-pitched voice rang out. “A good Christian meets the devil’s minion at danger to his soul.”

William glanced up from his breakfast, forcing the food down even though he wasn’t hungry. He’d awoken much too early and lain awake thinking of—what else?—Sir Robert. His touch. His words. The rare revelation of his master’s thoughts.

He wished with all his heart that he could have been old enough to go on crusade with his lord. But he’d been an untested youth when Sir Robert left, not yet ready for the pursuits of men or warriors. Fighting at his side against the beastly heathens, seeing all the wonders of Constantinople, praying at the sites hallowed with the blood of the Messiah...what a wild and wonderful life, and he’d missed it.

He looked at Sir Robert, who ate calmly in silence, his features betraying nothing as Stephen continued to bray his opinions like a donkey on a village green.

“But youth of course is too busy making cow-eyes at worldly men to see the dangers awaiting their souls. And what dangers they are!”

The murmur in the hall silenced, and William only caught it when John elbowed him in the ribs. He glanced up at the high table and saw Stephen’s stare directed at him.

Shifting uneasily on the bench, William noticed for the first time that Stephen had a stare of similar power as his brother. No wonder the junior king Young Henry had fallen under Stephen's spell. William blinked. What was the churchman on about? Worldly men? Cow-eyes? He met the stare, unsure how to defend himself. He was destined to be a warrior, a knight, not a priest. Chastising him for it seemed an unjust allegation.

"You should know that men killed by the boar lose their souls," Stephen said, his hard gaze still on William, who felt a shiver run down his spine. "The boar is a pagan beast, a devil that was worshipped in the dark forests of Germania before the Lord's missionaries tore it from the darkness."

"Well, but they are Germans," Robert said with the hint of a smile. "Baron Albi, what do you think?"

"I'm curious to meet a proper English boar. There is excellent hunting at home—we have *sangliers* there, fierce black pigs that taste very good. You will have to visit and see if they are to your taste, Robert." Albi grinned and raised his cup of wine, observing his host over the silver rim. "And you have quite the reputation for lion hunting, I have heard."

Robert lifted his cup in response, eyes gleaming with humour. "I've found the lions of Damascus to be a match for a good English boar. Yet I've seen more men killed by boars than lions, and the boar is more dangerous than the lion, for he is the only beast that kills a man with one blow. And where the boar charges blindly in its rage, the lion demands you meet him as an equal, noble encountering noble on his terms, on his lands."

William's heart raced and he lowered his gaze, desperate not to reveal what he felt at those words. Every

syllable seemed like half praise, half gentle mockery, and made his blood surge. He wanted Robert's touch again, desperately, but knew he'd have to be patient. After last night, he no longer thought that Robert found him wanting, but it was no consolation knowing that his lord was in mortal danger from somebody in this hall.

"Well, here's an English lion that he's tamed rather than killed," John said under his breath at William's side, and William shot him a glance.

"What?"

John grinned at him. "You've been a kitten ever since Sir Robert returned."

God's teeth, the last thing he needed was the other squires talking about them. William's hands tightened into fists while his mind raced. But anger had a way of making it difficult to come up with a good retort. Everybody seemed eager to rile him, and he didn't know how to defend himself against that. He couldn't talk back to Sir Robert's brother, but John was a different matter. A shame he couldn't find the right words, not right now.

"I just want my spurs," William ground out. "I don't know what it is you want, but if you're content to fuck whichever wench happens to cross your path, that's your decision."

John's eyes narrowed and he grabbed William's tunic right under the throat. Immediately, William was on his feet, needing distance to even have a chance against the larger, heavier man.

"You arrogant bastard," John spat, quick anger in his eyes, and then shoved hard at William's chest, letting him go and forcing him to stagger back.

The last word rang loud around the hall. Dazed with anger, torn between attack and flight, William saw

Robert's watchful gaze on him. It was the only thing that could bring him back from the verge of mindless rage. Lion. Not boar. He suddenly understood Robert's words and felt deeply ashamed of his temper, but the fury didn't fade. It simmered within him, and William took deep breaths to calm himself the way Ulric advised them to do before a fight.

Robert stood, a signal for everyone to rise and make ready for the hunt. The little spat was ignored and seemingly forgotten, like the tussle of two dogs playing between the feet of the nobles. Vaguely amusing, but of no consequence in the larger scheme of things.

The lords had already decided which boar to hunt. The chief huntsman had brought news of the black beast that had been terrorizing the countryside for a while, and fresh tracks had been found.

Excited chatter broke the tiredness of a very early morning as the kennel-men took the dogs outside. Horses still warm from their stables steamed in the crisp, dark autumn morning, and weapons gleamed. Some of the guests had chosen strange-looking hunting swords to fell the beast, sharp at the tip and blunt at the top as to not injure the horse with an unfortunate miss.

William, like Robert and the other Englishmen, chose a good short spear with a broad blade at the tip and a metal cross section that held the boar at bay when it impaled itself on the blade. The wood was old seasoned oak, the hilt well-worn and solid in William's grasp, reassuring him that it would withstand the attack of a boar even of the monstrous size given in the reports.

*Men killed by the boar lose their souls.* Should he make his confession? With all those thoughts he'd had of

Sir Robert, with what they'd done, wouldn't it be better if they both confessed?

But his goal wasn't the black beast, no matter how much he longed to be the one to bring it down. This spear was for the murderer.

William mounted the horse he'd borrowed from Sir Robert's stables and sat for a while in the saddle as the rest of the party prepared to ride out. Finally, the chief huntsman blew the signal to leave, and the assembly left for the forest.

It was a short ride of about half a mile to the start of the woodland, and William spent the time surreptitiously studying the guests. The Frenchmen laughed and joked in their barely comprehensible tongue, the strangely musical way of speech growing more pronounced the longer they spoke amongst themselves.

Ulric rode up to him, staying by his side for a little while. "You'll join the noble lords on the chase, William?"

"Yes. To ensure the beast finds enough spears to stop him."

Ulric nodded, his hand on the crossbow across his saddle. "Remember, he'll kill you if he knocks you down. The boar spends all day sharpening his tusks. That's why he has a pair in the upper jaw, too—they sharpen the ones in the lower jaw. Just two years ago, they brought down a boar like that...he resembled a hedgehog with all the spears and crossbow bolts sticking out of him, and yet he'd killed six dogs, two horses and one man, splitting him from thigh to chest."

*Did that man lose his soul?* Another anxious chill ran over his skin. "Why aren't they hunting deer?"

“You hunt the noble hart, and it’s a king’s beast, but only a special bone in his heart keeps it from dying with fear when it’s chased. The boar, now...” Ulric grinned, baring all his teeth in a snarl. “He’s a warrior in battle rage. You beat him in single combat. He’s much more like our lord, who enjoys the combat more than the chase. Are you planning to bring down the boar yourself?”

William locked gazes with his instructor. “I have my eyes on the most dangerous, blackest beast in the forest today.”

Ulric urged his horse on. “You do that, lad. You do that.”

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A well-appointed tent awaited them in a clearing. The sun was rising now and cast a fresh, clean light over the silvery frost on the blades of grass, which melted at its approach. In the distance, the barking of the lymers sounded through the trees. The dogs sought the trail of the boar while the hunters drank hot wine and waited, more or less patiently, for the report.

Robert stood between his guests, sipping steaming wine in measured mouthfuls, while his brother already showed signs of drunkenness. Maybe Stephen would be too drunk to go out on the hunt. At least that would spare them his shrill voice and endless hectoring, which would make it easier to guard Robert from the murderer.

Baron Albi stood near Stephen, encouraging him to drink more of the heated wine. William shook his head but couldn’t help but smile a little. It seemed the baron had his own way of incapacitating an unwelcome addition to the hunting party.

One of the huntsmen came running. "We found his bed, my lord."

Robert's eyes flashed with excitement and he mounted his horse, the other hunters following his example. Stephen was a little unsteady on his feet and needed help lifting his bulk into the saddle, but he managed, much to the chagrin of Baron Albi, who gave William a comical resigned grin when their eyes met.

They followed the huntsman deeper into the forest, where, in a thicket, the man knelt to touch the boar's bed with his hand. "It's still warm, my lord." He blew the horn to signal the opening of the hunt.

The hounds were released, barking and yipping with pleasure at being let free, and Sir Robert touched the flanks of his horse to follow, short spear at his side, eyes seeking the target. William, a less experienced rider, struggled to keep close to him during the chase. Robert's whole attention was on the hunt, while William sought the underbrush for a hidden murderer, a stray arrow or a traitorous blade from the other hunters. If he'd only known whom to watch! How foolish of him to believe he could guard Robert from an arrow or crossbow bolt trained on him. He was just one man, he couldn't watch every tree and every angle of attack.

*There!*

In front of them, the boar broke cover.

It was an enormous, ugly beast, its blood-coloured mouth bristling with yellow teeth. Unlike any other hunted creature of the forest, it turned immediately and charged the dogs, tossing one of the hounds to the side with only so much as a flick of his neck, and hurling aside the next animal with another vicious attack.

The dogs' snarling persistence faltered under the fierce assault, and they scattered in disarray, allowing the boar to make his escape. The beast was already foaming at the mouth, eyes wide and full of evil, the gleaming, horrifying tusks bared and ready like a man's drawn sword.

Robert galloped forward, but he kept his spear low, for now merely intent on not losing the boar. He rode so swiftly and without warning that William had to hurry to catch up with him, fearing for Robert's life now worse than ever. He should have told him so Robert would take better care and be able to defend himself. Worried, William glanced over his shoulder, but the Frenchmen were in hot pursuit, and even Stephen had kept up. The priest was a keen horseman; William hadn't expected that.

The chase led them deeper and deeper into the forest, every yard bristling with danger to his lord, but there was no time to catch up with Sir Robert and confess his worries to him. The boar ran without fatigue, only turning against the dogs when they tried to cut off his path or drive him down a path he didn't want to follow.

An evil intelligence inhabited that pig and made him a worthy adversary. William tired earlier than the boar and wiped his sweat-soaked face on his sleeve. They passed a new kennel of dogs, the relay set up with great skill by the chief huntsman. The fresh dogs were released and took over immediately from their panting brethren, whose bright pink tongues very nearly touched the ground.

William was almost hoping the attack would happen at the relay; the tension of expecting an attack was wearing him down faster than the hunt.

"He's turning back!" Robert shouted, and he was right. The boar changed direction and returned whence he came.



Maybe he'd try to make for the brook, shaking off the pack that way. By now the sun was high up in the sky, and a friendly breeze dried the sweat from both men and horses. William stayed close to Robert and noticed that Stephen still persisted in the hunt.

Back they raced. The hunters now split up, with the Frenchmen racing ahead, attempting to flank the boar and finally force him at bay. The trap closed as planned. Huntsmen on foot and with dogs formed a barrier in front of the boar, and the massive animal stopped dead in its tracks, its mighty body quivering with rage. William knew exactly how that felt.

Despite the terrible danger from man and beast, excitement surged in his chest when the boar turned. This was the moment, he could feel it in his bones. The moment of combat to the death. The boar's ears were flat against its head, the snout low, tusks gnashing to sharpen them one last time before the attack, and its eyes burned with otherworldly rage, before he charged toward Stephen's horse. The animal danced back, spooked by the attack, and the half-drunk priest called out in fright.

Robert spurred his horse to get between his mewling brother and the ferocious beast, spear lifted high to thrust the triangular blade between the boar's massive shoulders. Instead of hitting true, the blade tore open a wide red gash across the boar's left foreleg, making the creature scream in rage. Immediately, it lunged to attack Robert's horse.

In the chaos, William saw a flash of movement. Huntsmen. Ulric. His instructor had the crossbow lifted, waiting for a clean shot at the boar in case Robert needed help. But Robert guided his horse without losing his wits for a moment. His face betrayed nothing but determined concentration, devoid of fear or excitement, just a fierce

gleam in his eyes. Robert thrust the spear deep into the boar's back, his whole body sinking down to drive the steel deeper, but the boar tore itself free to attack again. "William, your spear!"

William's eyes caught another movement—Ulric's crossbow bolt pointing at its target. But the target wasn't the boar. Neither was it Robert. The realisation that Ulric was the traitor shocked him to the marrow of his bones, and William spurred on his horse to bring it between Ulric and Stephen. In the same instant, he hurled his spear at the killer.

The crossbow bolt hit William's horse. It screamed and fell, and William fell with it, barely managing to untangle himself from the stirrups. The boar was closing in on him, tusks promising murder.

Robert suddenly vaulted from the saddle and stood on the ground between William and the boar, short spear snatched from his startled brother's grasp, ready to welcome the charging black beast. One foot forward, the other back, Robert leaned forward, front hand in the middle of the spear, back hand aiming the weapon for impact. If the boar tossed him to the ground, Robert would die, disembowelled.

William scrambled desperately to his feet, his horse screaming as it tried to get up.

The boar came on like rolling thunder, as fast as if all the demons of hell possessed it. The spear went into the thick raised neck behind the head, and Robert immediately pushed, straining against the massive body that still didn't tire, still didn't give up, pushing deeper into a second wound behind the boar's head.

William rushed to find Robert's lost spear and thrust it into the solid body, mimicking Robert's stance. Finally,

the boar's legs buckled and it collapsed, pink foam dripping from its terrible teeth.

"Don't let go, not just yet," Robert calmly advised, leaning on the spear for a little longer, as the mad fire in the boar's eyes dimmed and finally died.

"No, my lord." William didn't think he could let go even if his life depended on it. He needed the grip on the spear to keep himself upright, adrenaline still churning through him, his stomach roiling with a queasy yet exhilarated sensation. He gave a bark of laughter, tried to stop it, then laughed again. "My lord, I thought—I thought the boar would—"

Robert gave him a gentle smile. "I know." He straightened, looking William up and down with his keen gaze. "Laugh if you need to, William Raven. God knows there has been excitement enough here today. You did well on both counts."

His hands still shaking, William let go of the spear and glanced down at his fine clothes. He was covered in gore from the final spasms of the dying beast and from his injured horse. His mount's screams had stopped. One of the huntsmen must have killed the animal to stop its suffering.

The barking of the excited dogs quieted as the kennelmen drew the hounds away from the kill. The riders who'd broken off from the main party during the chase now returned, several of the Frenchmen amongst their number.

"Brother!" Stephen still sat atop his horse, his face puce as he swayed in the saddle. He pointed a trembling, accusatory finger at Ulric, who had been dragged from his mare and now knelt upon the ground, guarded by two burly knights. William's spear had sliced a gash in his

side, and blood stained his garments. "Brother, that man tried to kill me!"

"Indeed he did," Robert said, his tone cheerful. He took a knife from the chief huntsman and prepared to unmake the boar and reward the dogs, which were straining at their leashes to get to their hard-won quarry. "Worry not, Stephen, for you are alive and well, thanks to the bold—some might even say reckless—behaviour of my squire William Raven."

Stephen mopped at his face with a square of perfumed silk. "I suppose I am grateful to the young man. But Robert, what will you do about this murdering lout? He *is* one of your men, I take it?"

"Ulric is my man, yes—and as for what I will do about it...that very much depends on what Master Ulric has to say for himself." Robert crouched by the carcass of the huge black boar while, close by, the chief huntsman started a fire.

William marvelled at his lord's equanimity while he sliced open the thick hide, severed the beast's head, and removed the feet. His own composure had been so badly rattled, he scarce knew himself. That Ulric was the traitor still shocked him, and as he stared at his instructor—the man who'd trained him and taunted him and urged him to fight harder, to dig inside himself for strength, to strive for glory—something shattered inside him. Naivety, perhaps, or maybe his idealism. Whatever it was, he knew he'd never be the same from this day on.

The chief huntsman now took over the preparation of the boar as the fire burned merrily. Two crossbars were slid through holes cut into the front and back legs, and a pole supported them lengthwise. The boar was hoisted up

and hung over the fire to burn off its bristles, the sharp stink tearing William out of his thoughts.

Robert stepped close to him, hands bloody from the work, and touched his cheeks with two fingers, smearing the blood on him. William shuddered at the touch. Blood, as if to strangely mirror what they'd done last night in Robert's bedchamber. Sharing something as wild, as magical, as blood and seed. "It's your kill, too, William."

First kill just like in war, facing a demon and remaining victorious. But he really only cared that Robert was unharmed.

While they stood close, William whispered, "There was more than one. I overheard them plotting in the chapel."

"Yet you did not see fit to inform me," Robert murmured.

"I meant no disrespect, my lord. I thought you were the target, not your brother, and I wanted...I wanted to protect you." It sounded ridiculous now, the kind of thing a knight would say to his lady in a troubadour's song, and William was glad of the blood on his face, hiding his blush.

"You wanted to be a hero. There is nothing wrong with that." The warmth in Robert's gaze suddenly turned cold as he looked toward Ulric. "Did you know it was him?"

William swallowed. "Not until he acted. I just heard their voices. But the other—the man who ordered this—he was French."

"Ah." A wealth of meaning seemed to linger in that sound. The boar's bristles now had been beaten off, and Robert returned to the carcass, which lay on its back, and cut out the testicles.

“Robert!” Stephen snapped. “A crime has been committed! How dare you wallow in the gore of that devil-beast, dismembering its unholy parts as you exchange platitudes with a squire, when you should be attending to your own brother’s welfare!”

Robert examined the boar and began slicing away at the shoulders and hams, every cut precise and powerful. “Very well.” He stood and signalled the chief huntsman to continue his work of removing the best pieces. The wet, visceral sounds of butchery were a grim backdrop as the lord now turned his attention to justice.

He gazed around the clearing at the group of nobles, knights, squires and huntsmen gathered there. “You, gentlemen, shall be the witnesses and jury. This is my manor, and I have the authority here—not the Church, Stephen, but I—and I will have the truth of what happened today.”

The Viscomte de Murat seemed bewildered by proceedings while Baron Albi maintained an amused, nonchalant air. One of them must have been the second man in the chapel, and William wished he knew which it was.

“Master Ulric.” Robert gestured with his bloody knife. “Rise and explain yourself. Why did you conspire to kill my brother?”

Ulric dragged himself to his feet, pressing one hand to his side to stem the flow of blood. His gaze flickered toward William. “You knew. Somehow you knew what was planned. That day in the chapel—I wondered if you were trying to warn me.” His face crumpled but then he forced himself to stand tall, forced himself to meet Robert’s gaze. “My lord, this wasn’t something I

undertook lightly. I wish to God I'd refused the offer, but I was desperate."

"Desperate enough to kill a man of God?" Robert raised an eyebrow. "Tell me. We have known each other too well and for too long to hide behind half-truths now. Was it the old problem—dicing, cock-fighting?"

Startled, William stared as Ulric dropped his gaze and shame flooded his expression. "It was the dice, my lord." The words seemed to choke Ulric. "I've lost everything. The house. The bit of land. The dowries for my girls. All of it gone, and yet I still have debts. They said they'd take my daughters and sell them to the bathhouse stews in town. The youngest first, for she's the prettiest. My lord, she's only nine years old!"

William looked away, unable to bear the furious misery and despair on Ulric's face. Emotion formed a lump in his throat and he tried to swallow. He wondered how he would act if he were faced with the same problems as Ulric. As the poorest of the squires, William had often borrowed money for his daily living expenses, but he'd always paid it back as soon as he could. He'd placed bets, of course he had—didn't every man?—but he'd never bet beyond his means and he'd known when to stop. The irony was that Ulric liked to harangue the squires about the dangers of gambling as much as the dangers of whoring. Now William realised the anger in Ulric's voice all those times had not been aimed at them—he'd been angry at himself and his own weakness.

From the height of his horse, Stephen gave a dismissive sniff. "Gambling is the devil's work. This man has fallen into sin through his own fault. However, while we should pity him and pray for him to find forgiveness, I

am not so charitable that I can forget he tried to murder me. I hope you will not excuse him, brother.”

Robert ignored Stephen, keeping his gaze fixed on Ulric. “Why in God’s holy name didn’t you come to me for help?”

“Because I was ashamed!” Ulric made a wild gesture, and the two knights guarding him reacted, seizing him and twisting his arms behind his back until he cried out in pain.

“Release him,” Robert snapped, and the knights stood down.

Ulric rolled on the ground, dried leaves and mud clinging to his garments. “My lord,” he said, pushing himself to his knees, “you have helped me before. You gave me a living and a reason to feel proud after I lost my wife. Your lady and then your sister advised me on the best way to raise my daughters. Your family has done everything for me, and because of my weakness, I have repaid you with failure.”

Robert’s gaze flicked to William. “Not everything was a failure.”

“Aye,” Ulric said, noticing the look. “He’s the best of them. I let you down in everything else, but I trained your squires hard and well, and William Raven is the best. Pig-headed, quick to anger, a lion in battle—he’s like you when you were his age, my lord.”

Even though he knew he shouldn’t feel proud of a compliment from a traitor, William felt a glow of pleasure at being likened to Sir Robert. It soon faded, his nerves stretched and his mind troubled by where this would end.

He shifted on his feet and stared down at the remains of the dismembered boar. The huntsmen had removed the innards and were broiling them over the fire, and great



rounds of bread dunked into the blood were roasting, filling the air with an almost appetizing smell after a cold day out in the forest. The rich, coppery stink of blood was both sweet and nauseating. It made his stomach turn, and the yipping of the dogs as they were let loose on their share of the kill distracted him. Seeing teeth dig into cut-up pieces of bread and intestines, and dogs fight over the best pieces, was a grim view while Ulric's life was at stake.

"You needed money. You didn't want to come to me." Robert tilted his head, his gaze inquisitive. "So who offered to solve your monetary problems?"

Ulric lowered his head and refused to speak.

"I see." Robert walked around him, slowly. "You would betray my family's loyalty, and yet you will stay silent to save this wretch's hide. You would prefer to suffer the consequences of your actions rather than implicate your accomplice."

"Make him tell you, brother. The real villain must be a man of high standing, otherwise this scoundrel's tongue would be wagging freely." Stephen appeared to have recovered from his fright. His expression sharp with cruel intent, he nudged his mount closer to Ulric. "He should hang for his crimes. At the very least he should be mutilated. Chop off his right hand for daring to raise a weapon at me. Cut out his tongue for discussing plans for my death."

Robert faced Ulric, who grovelled before him. "You deserve punishment for what you did, but as you did not act alone, I will give you one final chance to name your co-conspirator."

William held his breath, silently urging Ulric to confess—and then Baron Albi spoke up. "Very well.

Since this Englishman is so stubborn, I will be loquacious on his behalf. It was me. I paid this man to kill your brother.”

“No! This cannot be!” Viscomte de Murat exclaimed, then broke into a loud stream of incomprehensible, musical words. From the speed and pitch, William guessed the *viscomte* was shocked and furious.

Albi shrugged, his jovial expression undimmed. He held up a hand to silence the *viscomte*, then looked at Robert. “I see no reason to conceal the truth. If I tried to run away now, your men would hunt me down just as they hunted down this pig. If I admit to my crime, you will send me to the king and we may negotiate the terms of my release like civilised men.”

William shook his head, disappointment eating at him. He’d liked Baron Albi just as he’d respected Ulric. The day’s events had left a sour taste in his mouth, and all he wanted now was to get back to the camp and wash that taste away with strong, honest ale. Instead, he stood and listened to Albi’s unemotional explanation of why he’d targeted Stephen.

“My master the Count of Toulouse wishes to make a treaty with King Henry as regards Aquitaine,” Albi said. “The province may belong to the English crown and be held by young Prince Richard in the king’s name, but it is our closest neighbour and, so my master believes, a valuable ally against the King of France. My master admires Prince Richard for his courage in defying his father during the recent rebellion, and he believes Prince Richard will make a better ruler than Henry the Young King.”

William nudged the dead boar with his foot, scarcely listening to Baron Albi’s speech. He didn’t understand

politics. He didn't want to understand it, not if this was what came of it—men manipulating each other for gain, luring the weak to do their bidding, making people betray all those they held dear.

“My master wants an alliance between Aquitaine and Toulouse, but in order to get such a treaty, he must approach King Henry.” Albi glanced at Stephen, who sat with his mouth hanging open like a gargoyle on a church roof. “Young Henry is feeble and indecisive, a spendthrift and a coxcomb. He relies on his advisors, even if most of them are sycophants. My master believes that if some of the more voluble advisors—such as the noble Stephen here—are removed, Young Henry will crumble. His position will weaken and King Henry will elevate Prince Richard as heir to the throne...which is precisely what my master wants. We would much rather ally ourselves with a strong future king than a weak king, particularly when we fear for the safety of our northern borders against the changeable whims of King Louis and Duke Hugh.”

Albi turned his horse toward Stephen and sketched an ironic bow from the saddle. “My apologies. It was nothing personal, you understand. You are merely a small thread in a much larger tapestry.”

Stephen opened and closed his mouth like a carp in the village fishpond. Haughty anger swept across his face, and he sat straight in the saddle, quivering with rage. “Me, a small thread? I have never been so insulted in all my life! How dare you brush me aside as if I am a person of no consequence—I am the—”

Robert waved a hand for silence. “Peace, brother. Your arguments do no good now.” His gaze moved between Ulric and Albi, one man dejected and broken, the other composed and confident. He nodded, a grim smile

curving his lips. "Take Master Ulric and Baron Albi back to the castle and place them under guard. Under no circumstances are they to speak to anyone. Treat them kindly until the hunt is ended and I return, and then I shall decide upon their fates."

"Thank you, my lord." Ulric bowed, his forehead touching the ground, then he allowed the two knights to haul him to his feet. Three more of Sir Robert's men clustered around Albi, and the baron's smug certainty wavered for a moment.

The group rode out. Robert shifted his attention to the boar and nodded for the hunters to take it back to the castle kitchen, while the dogs busily licked up the last scraps from the ground.

"You're not going to continue with the hunt?" Stephen's voice rose in querulous complaint. "I was almost murdered, and you intend to play at sport?"

"Ah, but you were not murdered," Robert said. "Thanks to the quick thinking of this squire here."

"So you keep saying." Stephen looked disgruntled. "Well, I might have escaped unharmed even if he hadn't interfered. I daresay I would have survived. The crossbow might not have been wound very well and the bolt might have struck a tree. I might—"

Robert reached across and seized the reins of Stephen's horse, making the animal toss its head and stamp its feet. "Brother," he said softly, dangerously, "William Raven saved your life. The least you could do is thank him."

"Yes. Indeed." Stephen smoothed his velvet cloak with nervous fingers and deigned to glance at William. "Thank you."

Uncertain whether he should laugh or be grateful, William settled on bowing a little in return.

“You should also offer him a reward,” Robert continued, his eyes gleaming with unholy delight as Stephen attempted to protest. “A nice fat purse full of silver coin, perhaps. Or a horse—a knight needs a horse, after all. You can afford dozens of horses, brother. Give William the means to buy his own mount, and the debt between you is paid.”

Stephen muttered as he snatched back the reins, making his horse shift sideways. His manner churlish, he finally snapped, “Oh, very well! I will give him the money for a destrier. Now lead me to the camp. I am exceedingly tired and in sore need of refreshments.”

“Thank you,” William called after him as Stephen and an escort of huntsmen rode off, but Stephen ignored him. Amused, William turned his gaze to Sir Robert. “And thank you, my lord.”

Robert mounted his own horse, turned it, and smiled down at William. “You deserved more, young lion, but my brother, like all churchmen, is sparing with his generosity. You will have your horse, and from my own purse I will pay for the equipage.” He paused, his expression becoming serious for a moment. “I dislike Stephen and his politics, but he is my brother. I am grateful for your actions.”

Tongue-tied, William could do no more than mumble a response.

“Still so shy, despite everything,” Robert teased, chuckling. “Perhaps later you will find the confidence to engage in another battle, my young lion. I will see you at the encampment.” He dug his heels into his horse, and the gelding sprang away.

William watched his lord leave, and then realisation hit him. Robert had demanded a horse for him. A horse as his reward from Stephen. *A knight needs a horse.*

A joyful whoop broke from his throat, and William punched the air in delight. He'd done it. He'd won his spurs—and now only the formal ceremony remained before he could call himself a knight.

## Chapter Five

They hunted lesser game after this, stags and pheasants, doves and rabbits, merely to provide some variation for the feast table. The mood, however, was subdued, the wild exhilaration gone. The Frenchmen seemed thoughtful about what Baron Albi's plot and its failure now meant, and the English discussed Ulric amongst themselves.

Robert, however, didn't let anybody hear his thoughts and seemed entirely concentrated on the hunt, displaying his skill as time and again he brought down lesser game. He rode with the Viscomte de Murat, as if to show he bore his guests no ill will despite Albi's treasonous actions, and the dark mood eventually lifted a little. The amount of spiced wine and heated ale had something to do with it, or maybe the fact that Stephen had retired to the castle to "recover from the insolence."

William stayed in the background, too nervous and excited to think of much else but the knighting. And Robert's touch. His taste. Desire raced through him whenever he thought of his lord, and he couldn't wait for the time to pass.

When Robert led them back from the forest, he seemed just as calm as he'd been riding out, but his hair was tousled and a smile played around his lips, clearly satisfied with what the forest had yielded to him. Soon it

was time for the servants and huntsmen to break camp and stow everything away.

On the way back to the castle, William stayed close to Robert, who rode next to the *viscomte*, but neither man spoke, just rode side by side in companionable silence. It seemed whatever needed to be said had already been said, and the two nobles were now in agreement.

At the castle they found the servants busy preparing the feast under Lady Alais's direction. Robert gave further orders, then leaned against the high table, his gaze assessing the group of tired but excited squires who gathered around William. Gossip travelled fast, and everyone wanted to hear about Ulric's betrayal, the traitorous Frenchman, and the events leading to William's impending knighthood.

He'd thought he'd enjoy this more, boasting of his achievements in front of his peers, but William felt strangely dissatisfied. Restlessness stirred inside him, and he was all too aware of his lord's attention.

"William," Robert called, and motioned to him.

William joined him, lips suddenly dry just from Robert standing close. "My lord."

"Prepare yourself. Have a bath and try to find some rest before the vigil tonight."

William felt his heartbeat rise up in his throat. "Tonight?"

"I have reason to be impatient with you, young lion." The way Robert's voice dropped low only made William's heart beat faster. Desire? It had to be.

"Why so...soon?"

"I may explain myself later. Go and prepare. Bathe, fresh clothes, rest, then seek out Father Andrew and confess your true sins." The addition of "true" sat



strangely there, and William thought Robert didn't want the chaplain to know what he felt for him, what they'd done. What he still wanted his lord to do. "Then join us for the banquet. I don't believe in making a lion fast, but you will want to be moderate with the ale."

"Yes, my lord."

William rushed off to fulfil the order, changing clothes encrusted with blood from boar and horse and washing himself. He remembered his lord's pleasure in cleanliness and scrubbed himself vigorously before he put on fresh garments.

The smell of roasting meat hung deliciously in the air when he sought out the chaplain and confessed his sins. They were always the same, and William wondered if Father Andrew tired of hearing about his anger.

"At least, young William, you're not given to lust." The chaplain sighed and assigned him a light penance, obviously more interested in attending the feast than attending to the state of William's soul.

Left alone in the chapel, William wondered about lust. Only now did he really understand it, the way a glance could stir him up, or the pitch of a voice, a touch, even something as innocent as marking him with boar's blood. Did these feelings condemn him to hell? Was that a mortal, unforgivable sin? But it was all about his lord. He didn't think of anybody else in those terms; he had no interest in other squires or knights. Was that lust, then? Wouldn't a sin feel different? Dirtier? Or was he so far gone along the road to hell that he fooled himself into believing it wasn't?

He wasn't the man for these kinds of thoughts. He would be a knight, a man of arms, of war, sworn to loyalty to his master. Maybe it was simply a different

form of loyalty, of the love he owed Lord Robert for his generosity and care.

He crossed himself and walked to the banquet, deep in contemplation. The noise and crowd in the great hall failed to rouse him from his ponderings, and even John left him in peace, as if everybody knew what would happen tonight. Nevertheless, William found himself toasted and patted on the shoulder. He ate some of the boar meat and only sipped from the ale, glad when he could escape a little later.

When he stood, Robert followed him to the chapel. William slowed his stride, and his master walked beside him.

“Tonight, think about what you want to accomplish as a knight, William,” Robert said. “The time passes faster that way.”

“My lord, what about Ulric? He taught me everything I know.”

“And he taught you well.”

“Will he hang?” The thought of his instructor being pulled up on a rope and dancing that terrible dance disturbed William. Killing a criminal was the right thing to do, but this was his instructor, and as unforgivable as the attempted deed had been, wouldn’t a father do everything in his power to protect his daughters?

“Don’t worry about him tonight.” He placed a hand on William’s shoulder as they stopped outside the chapel door. “Or even me.”

“I can’t stop thinking about it.”

Robert’s smile indicated he knew that William hadn’t meant Ulric. “You did when you aided in the kill.” His touch lingered. “I am impatient myself.”

William swallowed. “Can’t we just...”

“No, William. Did you hear what I said about lions? A lion seeks an equal. But I’m not a squire.” His lips curved in amusement. “I was, but a long time ago. When I take you to my bed, I will not take a squire.”

William’s breath caught at the promise. He wanted Robert desperately, hungrily, and yet was forced to patience. Right now, he’d have given the knighthood to wait no longer. Maybe this was the hardest lesson yet.

“Come.” Robert walked him toward the altar.

William knelt down on the bench, folding his hands in prayer. It was all he could do not to try to touch his lord. Two large beeswax candles were burning on the altar, illuminating the golden cross from the Holy Land and filling the room with their sweet fragrance of honey and warmth. Robert reached for a bundle near the altar and pulled out a sword in its scabbard, the belt slung around it. He drew the steel blank and placed the naked sword on the altar, crossed himself, and then stepped back, resting a hand on William’s shoulder.

“I will meet you on the morrow, William Raven.”

William nodded, gaze on the cross and sword, but aware of Robert’s closeness until he heard him walk away.

Knighthood. Was he even worthy? Just a little while ago, he’d have answered yes without a doubt, but now, facing the cross and his own desires, he wasn’t so sure. Courage, loyalty, obedience, faith. If even a man like Ulric could act against those virtues, then they were not something one possessed, but something to be constantly guarded and reclaimed. Maybe there would come a time when he’d be tested and found wanting, and that thought unnerved him. A trial like a charging boar...and he would only know if he possessed enough mettle when he actually faced the challenge.

What to accomplish now? He'd never dreamt of his future beyond attaining his knighthood until Sir Robert had returned. Then he'd desired to go on crusade and fight beside his lord.

William shifted on the hard wooden bench, his eyes blurring with tiredness. He blinked, looked back over his shoulder at the echoing silence of the chapel and the darkness pressing in on him. His feet in their black shoes, a symbol of death that came to all men, no matter how noble and brave, seemed to sink into the shadows. He shivered, lifting his gaze to the back of the chapel where the two conspirators had stood only a few days ago.

His mind cleared, and William faced the altar again. He knew what he had to do. Fight honourably and not engage in politics like Baron Albi, protect his master with his sword and his life, but also to touch and embrace him. Those images simply would not flee. Robert. A smile, a flash of pale eyes, that eerie calm that settled when other men lost their nerve.

William wanted to be Robert's equal, yes, in virtues. And if what he felt and what they did in pursuit of physical pleasure was a true sin, then he wanted to be equal in this sin, too. Maybe such a sin would be forgiven if he possessed enough of the other virtues?

Yes, he would. He would have all that in abundance. He'd be the best knight any noble or court had ever seen.

When the grey morning came, William was cold and his body hurt from the lack of sleep and kneeling, and he only looked up when a warm, heavy hand settled on his shoulder. His lord.

"I know what I want," William said. "I'll be the best."

Robert smiled. "Maybe you'll even learn patience and humility on the way."

The chapel doors opened, and the guests and members of the household filed in, taking their places according to rank. Robert retired to his usual spot close to the altar, and William shuffled farther back in the chapel. The Viscomte de Murat inclined his head as he passed, a flicker of acknowledgement on this, the most important day of any squire's life. Stephen sailed in, his nose in the air and his gaze firmly fixed on anything but William. The senior and French knights followed, and then came the squires, for once not jostling and irreverent but hushed with respect.

Once all were assembled, the priest entered. William gave a brief prayer of thanks that Stephen hadn't seen fit to conduct the Mass himself. Unlike his lord's brother, Father Andrew knew the ways of knights and men-at-arms and kept his sermons brief, his instruction simple. This morning he spoke about the duties of a knight, using examples from recent events that all within the chapel could remember and understand.

William listened intently, absorbing everything as he tried to fix in his mind the details of this moment. He wanted to be able to recall this morning for the rest of his life, so that even at the end of his days, he'd be able to look back on his dubbing and feel again the pride and excitement, the sense of honour and awe.

As he glanced around the chapel, William wondered who would stand as his sponsors for the ritual. He'd always imagined Ulric presenting him to Sir Robert, but that was impossible now after all that had passed. A piercing sadness lanced through him, and William hastily hung his head and offered up another prayer for Ulric's fate and the safekeeping of his daughters.

He jerked out of his reverie at the shuffle of feet and whisper of cloth as all present turned to look at him.

William caught his breath as the Viscomte de Murat stepped forward and approached the altar.

William stared, realisation quickening his pulse so much he was sure those closest to him could hear his heartbeat. The *viscomte* was standing as his sponsor! Aware of this honour, he scarcely heard Father Andrew's words of blessing over the sword.

The *viscomte* lifted the blade from the altar. He turned to face the assembly, joined by Sir Giles, one of the knights who'd accompanied Robert on his journey home. Together the two men walked the short length of the chapel to stand beside William.

Father Andrew performed a last benediction. The doors opened and the crowd followed the priest out of the chapel. William and his sponsors were the last to leave their places, and they walked with what felt like excruciating slowness across the adjoining rooms and into the great hall.

The rest of the household had assembled there, everyone from the smallest pot-boy to the kennel-men, and the sense of anticipation was palpable. William felt dizzy as he looked around, the familiar space now seeming new and wonderful. At the back of the hall, half concealed behind a door, Ulric stood between two men-at-arms. Pride and regret filled Ulric's face as they looked at one another, and William fought back a swell of emotion. He would thank his lord for this boon, for this gesture of respect even toward a criminal.

The hum of conversation faded as the *viscomte* and Sir Giles led William to the centre of the great hall. Robert stood on the dais, dressed in rich velvets and fine Flemish wool, jewels flashing from the chain across his chest, the soft ermine on his cloak collar nestled against his throat.

He wore his sword, and William stared at it, almost overwhelmed by what he knew would follow.

His sponsors formally presented him to Robert then stood back. Complete silence fell over the hall. William remembered to breathe as he gazed up at his lord, his lover, and waited.

Robert lifted his hand. "Squire, kneel and say aloud your vows and swear your oath of allegiance. Be humble in your swearing and fearful in your heart, for those who do make these vows and take this oath answer to Almighty God if ever they are false."

William sank down onto the stone-flagged floor, feeling an inappropriate flash of lust as he remembered going on his knees for Robert two nights ago. He shouldn't be thinking such things now, and experienced a moment of panic. He stared up at his lord in mute appeal. Every squire knew what words to say. He'd recited the vows many times, but now it was happening for real, his mind had gone blank.

Robert smiled, his expression composed, his gaze amused and affectionate. William remembered the touch of his lord's hands, the heat of his kisses, and he relaxed. Robert trusted him, and this realisation brought a surge of confidence. William began to speak.

"May it please my lord and our Heavenly Father, I do most humbly and solemnly swear never to have dealings with traitors. Likewise do I swear never to give evil counsel to a lady, but to respect and defend her against all foes. I swear I will observe the days of fasting and abstinence, and as I am able, to hear Mass each day. I do also swear to honour my liege lord and follow his example, and to honour and obey my king and his commands, and remain loyal to him even unto death.

These things I do swear most solemnly within sight of God and all those assembled here."

Robert drew his sword. The sound of the steel rasping from the scabbard made William shiver. He held himself still, his body tense for the first touch. Robert brought the flat of the blade down hard on William's right shoulder, then again on the left. "I dub thee Sir Knight." Robert's voice rang clear and loud around the hall. "Rise, Sir William Raven."

William stood, tears in his eyes, lightheaded with pride and delight. He stared at Robert and saw an answering expression, as if his lord was remembering the day of his own elevation from squire to knighthood.

Then the *viscomte* and Sir Giles stood by him again, and William turned to allow the *viscomte* to present him with the sword and gird him with the sword belt, while Sir Giles gave William his spurs.

Robert motioned to the youngest squire in his service, and the lad came forward bearing a long riding cloak. The boy bowed as he handed it to Robert, who took the cloak and held it out. William stepped closer to his lord and stood motionless as Robert swept the cloak around him. The rich, heavy wool settled over his shoulders. Dyed a deep shade of blue and edged with sable, it was an expensive garment, the costliest thing William had ever worn. Near the collar was a circular bronze clasp, its edge of punched design and its middle an openwork pattern of vine tendrils and unfamiliar flowers.

William trembled as Robert moved even closer, ostensibly to fasten the cloak around him. Keeping his voice low and intimate, Robert murmured, "The clasp is from the great market in Constantinople. Its only value



lies in its antiquity, but I admired it and wore it into battle. I would not gift it to a lesser man, Sir William.”

“Then I will value it more highly than any bauble of silver or gold, my lord,” William said, his throat tight and aching with an emotion he’d never be able to put into words.

Robert smiled and smoothed down the folds of the cloak, his touch seeming to burn through the fine cloth. Then he turned William to face the crowd gathered in the great hall and raised his voice to a shout. “I present Sir William Raven!”

Cheers broke out, applause and cries of acclamation. The castle musicians struck up a jaunty tune, and the men pressed forward to offer their congratulations. The *viscomte* and Sir Giles were first to commend him, and even Stephen managed to mutter a blessing.

Overhearing his brother’s reluctant words, Robert called out that he’d arranged for a horse-coper to call at the castle in the next few days so William could choose a destrier. “Have your purse-strings open,” Robert commanded with a wicked smile, and Stephen scowled.

The women entered to join the festivities, and Lady Alais approached William to offer her warmest congratulations. The ladies of her bower giggled and flirted with him, and William realised with a grin that now he’d become a knight, he was finally an object of female interest. The irony made him want to laugh, and he excused himself from the cluster of women and for the first time took his place at one of the tables reserved for knights.

Dish after dish of food was brought in for this breakfast feast—soft white bread still warm from the oven, honey-glazed chicken roasted with spices, tiny brown

pigeons stuffed with nuts, individual fruit tartlets—and the ale and wine flowed freely. William ate and drank with pleasure, then later there were songs and dancing.

The Viscomte de Murat approached as William sat catching his breath after a particularly boisterous dance. “Sir William,” the *viscomte* began, his lips quirking at the use of the title, “I have a proposition for you.”

William straightened, his heart pounding with a mixture of excitement and dread. “My lord?”

“Your behaviour impresses me. You have courage and integrity, and you are clever—for an Englishman.” Another smile. “You have the pride of a Frenchman, though, and above all you display the most admirable loyalty. I could do with more men like you in my service, Sir William. I would like to offer you a place in my retinue.”

“You do me a great honour, my lord. I—I don’t know what to say.” William winced as soon as the words left his mouth. He knew what he should say, but he didn’t want to say it—not yet, not when he still didn’t know Robert’s intentions. He shouldn’t risk his future on a wild hope, but until he learned Robert’s feelings toward him, he didn’t want to leap to a decision.

The *viscomte* nodded. “I understand you may need time to consider the offer. Give me your answer on the morrow.”

“Thank you, my lord. I will think on it.” William watched the *viscomte* stride back to the high table, and then his gaze locked on Sir Robert’s narrowed expression. They stared at each other for the space of several heartbeats. William’s emotions churned, and he wished he could see beneath Robert’s impassive features.

He turned away, worrying at his thumbnail. Only a fool would turn down the offer of service to such a wealthy lord. He had more of a chance to win riches and renown in France as part of the *viscomte*'s retinue than he did staying here in a country where tourneys were banned by royal order. William glanced at the high table again. Robert would want him to accept the offer, surely. Robert would expect it of him. Perhaps Robert would consider it an insult if he refused.

His thoughts hopelessly muddled, William breathed a sigh of relief when John and two maids came over to drag him back to the dancing.

By early afternoon, the excitement that had carried him through the morning had ebbed, and the lack of sleep from the vigil caught up with him. He kept a smile on his face, conscious that this was his day of celebration, but exhaustion pulled at him, and coupled with the confusion over what his decision should be, all William wanted to do was lie down to rest.

His tiredness was noted. As the musicians started up another round of tunes for dancing, Robert left his guests and crossed the hall. He bent close to William. "You need to sleep, young lion. I would have my new knight at full battle strength for tonight."

Desire sharpened William's dazed wits, and he stared up at Robert. "My lord, I would gladly sleep now, but the musicians are making merry in the place where I lay my bed."

Robert chuckled. "Then I give you leave to sleep in my bed."

"But—" William wanted to protest, wanted to blurt out his dilemma, but his head spun with weariness. "My lord..."

“I want no disagreements. Away with you to rest. Sleep well, Sir William.”

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William awoke when light flickered in front of his eyelids. He turned toward it, then opened his eyes to see a candle placed on the clothes-chest near the bed. He blinked, confused for a moment about where he lay, and then he remembered. This wasn't his thin, lumpy mattress rolled out near the hearth. This was soft, curtained, the bolsters full of goose down. It was Sir Robert's bed.

He pulled himself up onto his elbow and looked beyond the wavering flame of the candle. In the faint glow of light, his lord was just shedding the last of his clothes, his actions swift and economical. Muscles rolled under tanned skin when Robert placed his clothes on top of his sword and belt on the chest. William could have watched the motion of his shoulder blades forever.

Desire sprang up in his belly when Robert turned toward him, a smile on his lips, his cock semi-hard. “Do you know why I call you ‘lion,’ Sir William?”

“No.” The reminder of his new title startled him, and even though he'd heard it many times during the breakfast feast, heard it shouted to the very rafters of the great hall, hearing it from his lord's lips at this moment made it seem real.

Robert approached, and William shifted to the side to make room. He'd undressed completely before settling down to sleep in this bed, remembering well the pleasure his lord took in seeing him naked. Now, as their bare skin touched, body aligning to body, William thought it was the most delicious feeling in the world.

“Your eyes.” Robert touched William’s chin, turning his face to the candlelight. “When the sun catches them right, they’re the same colour as the eyes of a mountain lion. They hold the same ferocity, the same pride...the same lust for life.”

William believed him. Robert had seen lions in the Holy Land, had hunted them, but it seemed strange to be complimented like this. He wasn’t a lady who needed to be won with sweet words. Maybe Robert was only telling him these things because this was to be their last time together. “I just...want to thank you, my lord. For everything.”

Robert studied him for a while, then gently touched his lips to William’s. “Nothing that wasn’t deserved.”

“And your patience with me...”

Robert chuckled. “As we already agreed, you’re not a bathhouse whore. I prefer to court my lovers.”

*Lovers.* William swallowed hard, his heart already racing. *Courting.* Was that even possible between two men? The priests always talked about the friendship and loyalty that bound men together, but that never seemed to mean this kind of touch, and the other words they used were sneered and whispered with disdain. But here, like this—was there anything about it that was truly evil and sinful?

William moved to kiss Robert’s throat, suddenly brave again, and the warm smell of his body, with a memory of some exotic fragrance, aroused William further. Robert lay back and pulled him closer until William lay on top, skin on skin from the chest down to the knees. He felt Robert’s cock brush his, felt his strength underneath, and his lord’s fingers twisting into his hair to pull him into a rough kiss.

William ground against him, making them both gasp with the pleasure of it, and he loved that, loved the expression on Robert's face when he did something his lord enjoyed. He remembered taking Robert's cock in his mouth and wondered if he should do it again now.

William broke the kiss, studied the quicksilver eyes that watched him closely, and was unspeakably glad to finally be in Robert's bed, alone with him, with the whole night ahead of them.

"Half of love is restraint." Robert touched his cheek. "Patience and respect. Don't waste your time on the unworthy, William."

William smiled and kissed him again, feeling like he could never kiss and touch enough, not in a hundred years. He wanted all of it, every breath rising in Robert's chest, every heartbeat against his. He wasn't sure what to say. The emotions were just too big, trapped in his chest, and he couldn't possibly speak them aloud.

Robert stroked rough hands down William's sides to cup his arse cheeks. William shuddered with pleasure when his lord pulled him closer, strong fingers first digging into hard muscles, then sliding between his cheeks. William moved up a little, grinding his cock against Robert's belly as a couple of fingers found his opening and rubbed it. He spread his legs and Robert's other hand rubbed the place between his balls and his arsehole. A groan broke from his throat, and he kissed Robert again, hungrier now, open-mouthed, tasting him, fighting his tongue.

Robert withdrew his fingers and pushed William over, then kicked away the coverings. Despite the chill of the autumn night, William had no time to feel cold. His master's naked skin warmed him.

Robert only paused to reach for something he'd placed near the candle. "Lie on your side with your back to me."

William obeyed, watching over his shoulder. His lord poured something into his hand, and then oily fingers touched him in that secret place again, pushing beyond the barrier of his body. Surprised, William grunted, then opened his legs further, one foot on the mattress, when a searing pleasure raced through him, a dozen times more intense than anything he'd ever felt. He gasped, hands closing into fists, and he thrust against it.

"Patience, young lion." Robert rubbed his hand over his own cock, coating it with glistening oil, and William felt sudden hunger for that thick, hard shaft. He'd kiss and lick it again—he wanted to taste it, feel its weight on his tongue. He wanted to touch Robert like that, feel the silky hardness and bring his lord pleasure.

On instinct, William curved his back when Robert pressed against him, guiding his cock with one hand. The pressure against him turned to yielding, while Robert suppressed a groan and kept pushing, slowly. William closed his eyes, concentrating on the sensation of being breached and taken. He'd do anything for Robert, including this, which the priests said was unnatural and against God's will. Worse, it made a man less of a man—and yet William felt more aware of his masculinity than before, because it was his body that Robert desired.

Robert slid deeper into him, struggling a little to make William's flesh surrender to him, but William didn't pull away, as intense and not altogether pleasant as it was. Then he felt Robert's skin against him again, the rough hair around his cock, and knew his lord was fully inside him. This act seemed enormous, but not wrong.

"William."

Robert kissed his neck, shoulder, his lips when William turned his head, and the roughness and emotion in his lord's voice made him tremble. He reached for Robert's hand where it lay flat on his belly in a possessive gesture, and the caress made Robert slide that hand down to William's cock. It had softened in his surprise at being entered and claimed so thoroughly, but within moments of Robert cupping William's balls in his palm and squeezing them gently, William began to grow hard again.

The bolster muffled his groans as Robert pulled and stroked William's balls. William's arsehole clenched around his lord's cock, the discomfort fading and soon forgotten as William's prick grew harder. Only then did Robert touch his cock, the hand so skilful around him, moving slow and tender, but firm. The thrusts of Robert's hips caused an overwhelming desire that William couldn't name. Deeper, more intense than a hand or lips, he felt the sensations down to the core of his being. William still wasn't sure if this feeling was just pleasure or if there was some pain to it. Maybe this was what too much pleasure felt like—this sense of fullness, of teetering on the edge of the unknown. It was beyond William's experience; he couldn't know and didn't want to think about it, and instead watched and felt how Robert stroked him.

The thrusts increased, the pleasure-pain making William rock back against his lord. He had never run from a challenge. He pushed himself hard onto Robert's cock, gasping a little, then laughed with joy at Robert's answering moan. He squeezed his eyes shut, concentrating on the sensations, feeling his climax build. Before he could lose himself and spill his seed, Robert circled his thumb and forefinger at the base of William's cock, pressing hard.



William gave a cry of dismay. He ground back against Robert, hearing the slick sounds of their damp flesh, his body trembling as he fought to regain control. The pressure in his cock and balls seemed unbearable, and he snarled at the denial.

“Patience,” Robert gasped, then with a shout spilled himself inside William’s arse, hot seed jetting from him again and again until he lay against William, chest heaving. His grip loosened around William’s cock.

“My lord?” Puzzled by why his orgasm had been thwarted, William twisted onto his back and looked at his lover. He closed a hand around his prick, working it back to full strength, then paused. “Can I—Do you want to watch me touch myself again?”

The question seemed to revive Robert. He laughed, warmth in his satiated expression, and drew him closer, running a hand over his belly. “Didn’t I bid you to patience, young lion?” he murmured. “I made you wait for a reason. We are equals now.”

Not sure what Robert meant, William smiled.

“Equals,” Robert said again. His oily palm slipped over William’s cock again, caressing circles over the leaking tip. “In case the lectures of the priests on this particular sin have made you feel emasculated by what we’ve done, I am giving you the opportunity to reclaim your manhood.”

William made a sound of disbelief. “You want me to—”

Robert laughed and kissed him. “Don’t be so shocked, Sir Knight. As you enjoyed it, so do I. The Greek way of love is remarkably liberating, I find.” He withdrew his hand and rolled onto his back, flat on the mattress, and stared at him with a gleam of amusement in his eyes.

For a moment William didn't know how to respond. The thought of fucking Robert made his cock surge and his balls ache. William licked his lips and moved closer, staring at his lord's hard, naked body, taking in every inch of tanned, hair-roughened skin. Robert's cock lay quiescent against his thigh, and William wanted to see it erect again.

He arranged himself alongside his lord, tracing a hand through the hair on his chest, following the trail down to Robert's prick. Instead of touching it, William ran his fingers back up Robert's body to explore. He stroked his thumb over Robert's flat nipples, feeling him tense and murmur. Thinking that his touch was too light, William pinched them, at first with the pads of his fingers, then with the added bite of his nails.

Robert growled, his eyes glinting. He remained still, his breathing shallow and rapid as William climbed on top of him. Aware of his lord's hungry stare, William lowered his head and licked at Robert's nipples, then used his teeth. He remembered John bragging that this technique worked wonders on the village girls, but it seemed to have less effect on a nobleman.

William scratched a line up the inside of one thigh and Robert spread his legs wider. They locked gazes as William explored, his fingertips brushing through thick curls of pubic hair and over the heavy sac of Robert's balls. He found that patch of skin behind and stroked across it, and felt his lord jerk up, his hips canting, his cock rising. William burrowed further, worming a finger into heat, probing within the cleft of Robert's buttocks.

"Very good," Robert murmured. "You learn quickly."

William pressed a finger against the ring of his anus. "Now who is the one in need of patience?"

Robert laughed. "I will surrender gladly to you. Perhaps, as it's your first time this way, I can make it easier for you." He eased away from William's hand and rolled onto his front, taking one of the bolsters and placing it beneath him. Supporting himself on the bolster, Robert raised himself onto his hands and knees, arse lifted high, his weight tilted forward through his arms. "Use the oil. It's as much for your pleasure as it is for my comfort."

William swallowed. Anticipation and arousal beat within him. His cock pulsed, hard and thick and hot. He fumbled with the stopper on the little vial, then poured a generous handful of oil into his hand and slathered it along the full length of his prick, gasping a little at the slippery feel of it. Keeping a firm grip around the base of his cock, he positioned himself behind his lord. He focused his gaze on the tight muscled buttocks in front of him, at the dark hair in the cleft. With oiled fingers he traced the seam, found Robert's hole, and pushed against the resistance of muscle.

Robert gave a low, satisfied groan and eased back. William's fingers slid inside, and the feel and heat of touching within his lord's body made him bite back a sound of surprise. Following his instinct and Robert's guiding movements, William thrust a few times, stretching Robert's hole. Only when Robert started driving back onto his fingers did William stop. He scrambled upright, guided his greased cock into position, and leaned forward, his heart hammering with excitement and awe.

Robert groaned and accepted William into his body.

William almost came. He shut his eyes on the sensation, on the tight heat that grasped his cock and squeezed. He sank deeper, forgetting rhythm, forgetting

everything but the splintering pleasure that seized him, starting at the base of his spine and wrapping around him, drugging him with need.

“William,” Robert gasped. “Move. Fuck me.”

William pulled back then drove into him to the hilt. Robert cried out, his body jerking forward. He growled and thrust back, impaling himself on William’s cock, and William ground deeper into him.

William fucked Robert, or perhaps Robert fucked him—William couldn’t tell. He knew only that he wasn’t controlling this, that it was nothing more than instinct and feeling and emotion, and that it felt good—and Robert was shaking and crying out, heat pouring off him. William found a rhythm, taking Robert with him. They stopped the struggle for dominance and moved together as one, perfect and harmonious.

Robert glanced back over his shoulder, his eyes shining, and William felt the sudden tightening of orgasm approach. He tried to hold back, tried to last longer, but then Robert laughed and squeezed again, and William snarled and shuddered and came in a glorious rush.

Robert pulled away from him, the wet sound of their bodies disengaging making William shudder again. Turning onto his back, Robert put a hand down and grasped his erect cock. He jerked at it, bringing himself off again with frantic haste, his head tilted back and his body shaking as he reached climax.

Exhausted by their battle, William sat back and breathed deeply. Robert used a corner of the woollen blanket across the foot of the bed to clean them both of seed, then tugged the bolster up to pillow his head. He indicated the space beside him, and William lay down.

The scent of sweat and sex surrounded them, and the candle had burned low.

William chuckled as he drew the fine linen sheets up over their bodies. "Never did I suspect that I would end the day as weary as I started it." He flashed a look at Robert. "I hope you don't do this with all your new knights."

A rumble of laughter answered him. "Truly, you are the first English knight I've bedded."

Teasing again, William widened his eyes. "But my lord, between Kent and the Holy Land there are many countries, all of them filled with knights..."

"Fool," Robert said, smiling. "But this talk reminds me of something serious."

"Ulric." William went still, his gaze fixed on his lord. "What will become of him? Your brother wants him hanged."

Robert shook his head and stared at the canopied roof of the bed. "He won't hang. If he'd succeeded in murdering Stephen, I would have had him killed without compunction. The law is clear on that. But for an attempted murder? Some lords would condemn Ulric to death in any case, but I believe it will be punishment enough for him to leave my manor. Ulric and his daughters are to be banished from here, never again to return."

William settled his cheek against the bolster. "He will take it hard. His kin all live in this part of the country."

"He teaches a valuable trade. Ulric will be able to find work elsewhere, and perhaps this time he will put aside the dice for good." Robert looked at William. "But that was not what I wanted to discuss with you."

"Then what?"

Robert hesitated, and William thought he saw a flicker of anxiety in his lord's expression. "This morning," Robert began slowly, "at the breakfast feast, the Viscomte de Murat told me he'd offered for your service. I believe he expects an answer by morning...and I would like to know what answer you plan on giving."

"My lord." Ice gripped William's heart and panic strangled his words. He tried again, his heart racing and all the pleasure of the last hour turned to ashes. "Must I join him?"

"He is a *viscomte*." Robert's mouth curved in a wry smile. "A *viscomte* in high standing with Raymond of Toulouse, no less. He has more wealth than I, more connections, and—"

"He is not you." William stared at Robert, willing him to understand his reasoning. "Please don't think me ungrateful. I'm aware of the honour the *viscomte* offers, and I would accept in an instant if—if..."

"If what?" Robert prompted softly, his eyes gleaming.

William sighed. "If we had not done this. If we were just squire and knight, servant and lord. If I did not...love you." He gripped the linen sheet in his hands, wondering if he'd assumed too much from this relationship. He had to know. "You never did answer me that question I asked in the stables. Why did you choose me?"

Robert was silent for a long moment, and then he said, "When I left Constantinople, I thought I would never find love again. I didn't look for it, didn't expect it, and yet after years of fighting and hardship and endless travel, when I rode into the castle yard and saw you bareheaded in the sunlight, with that look of furious concentration on your face as you fought...I thought, 'Here is a worthy opponent. Here is a man you can teach.'"

William groaned at the praise. "And yet I was angry and arrogant, and made a fool of myself every time I tried to impress you."

"I know." Robert smiled and touched William's cheek, brushed the damp hair from his eyes. "I asked Ulric about you, and Philip and Ranulf, and I heard the whispers... I needed to know if you would accept my courtship, unorthodox though it was. And the more you permitted, the more I wanted to take."

"I wanted it, too," William blurted. "I've never wanted anything more than I want you."

Robert's smile became a laugh. "Except a knighthood."

William ducked his head, an embarrassed grin spreading across his face. "But now I am a knight, I am free to choose my master—and I choose you."

"Are you sure of your decision?" Robert touched William again, drawing him closer. "A knight may choose his master, but he must also gain his own place in the world, and wealthy sponsors don't come along very often..."

William lifted his chin. "They will for me. They'll queue up and beg me to fight for them. I'll be the best knight in Christendom."

"And the most humble," Robert said, chuckling.

"I still have much to learn." William grinned and kissed his lord, murmuring against his mouth. "And you still have so much to teach me."

Robert's laughter filled the room as he leaned across to blow out the candle. "Sleep," he said, "for tomorrow your training will begin anew."

## About the Authors

Aleksandr Voinov is an emigrant German author living near London. Originally, he studied medieval history with a focus on military history, but he then moved to London, where he works as a financial journalist, dealing daily with the feudal lords of the modern age. His professor would be proud—or horrified—if he knew.

His genres range from horror, science fiction, cyberpunk and fantasy to contemporary, thriller and historical erotic gay novels. In his spare time, he goes weight lifting, explores historical sites or meets other writers. He single-handedly sustains three London bookstores with his ever-changing research projects and interests. His current interests include bonsai, tailored suits, chess competitions, World War II, Afghan history, Roman emperors and Russian oligarchs. He loves traveling, action movies, spy novels and ponders taking up boxing.

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Kate Cotoner lives in the north of England with her OH and a demanding bonsai named Mr. M. She has a fondness for Asian men tempered with a love of hunky Germanic and Mediterranean types, and she manages to combine love for all three types whilst watching Formula



One motorsport. She loves history, needlepoint, reading, watching brainless blockbusters and meaningful foreign films, staring at U.S. crime shows, and baking French-style bread. She likes strong, plot-driven stories and charismatic characters set against a sweeping, romantic backdrop of history, suspense, international locations and whatever else happens to take her fancy at the time. Kate's stories include historicals, paranormals, contemporaries and the occasional dabble into sci-fi, and she's published by Torquere Press, Noble Romance, Dreamspinner Press and Uei-Shiang.



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