

SPY IN THE HOUSE OF FITZWALTER: A Lost Crusader Saga

By D. Cullen Nolan

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

[Character List](#)

[Map](#)

[Chapter 1- The Embassy & St. George](#)

[Chapter 2- The Caliph & the Cleric](#)

[Chapter 3- The Cleric & the King](#)

[Chapter 4- The King's Rules](#)

[Chapter 5- The Secret Master](#)

[Chapter 6- The Nun from Fontrevault](#)

[Chapter 7- An Absence of Polite Conversation](#)

[Chapter 8- Onward to Nottingham](#)

[Chapter 9- The Herald's Burden](#)
[Chapter 10- The Secret of Maud's Escape](#)
[Chapter 11- Fall of the House of Fitzwalter](#)
[Chapter 12- Between Two Kings](#)
[Chapter 13- The Mandeville Tragedies](#)
[Chapter 14- Robert of St. Albans](#)
[Chapter 15- Rise of the House of Fitzwalter](#)
[Chapter 16- Oaths & Ultimatums](#)
[Chapter 17- London Calling](#)
[Chapter 18- Rise & Fall of Magna Carta](#)
[Chapter 19- The Baron's War Begins](#)
[Chapter 20- An Unexpected Christmas](#)
[Chapter 21- Winter's Bitter End](#)
[Chapter 22- England Unbound](#)
[Chapter 23- The Price of Revenge](#)
[Chapter 24- My Barony for a Chamberlain](#)
[Chapter 25- All Hail the King](#)
[Chapter 26- Unexpected Expectations](#)
[Chapter 27- Reunion](#)
[Chapter 28- The Price of Life](#)
[Glossary](#)
[Author's Note](#)

[CHARACTER LIST:](#)

[Main Characters](#)

Robert de London: Royal Cleric

Peter de Roches: Chancellor of the Exchequer, Treasurer of the Chancery, Bishop of Winchester

John Plantagenet: King of England, Duke of Aquitaine; Overlord of Wales, Scotland, & Ireland

Robert Fitzwalter: Baron of Dunmow

[House of Fitzwalter](#)

Gannora Valognes: Baroness of Bennington, wife of Robert Fitzwalter

Matilda Fitzwalter: Daughter of Robert Fitzwalter & Gannora Valognes

Walter Fitzwalter: Knight, son & heir of Robert Fitzwalter & Gannora Valognes

Ida Longsword: Wife of Walter, daughter of William Longsword

Robin Fitzwalter: Knight, 2nd son of Robert Fitzwalter & Gannora Valognes, son Walt, daughter Genny

Anne de Braose: Wife of Robin, niece of Gilbert de Braose, son Walt, daughter Genny

Christiana Fitzwalter: 2nd daughter of Robert Fitzwalter & Gannora Valognes, plight-trothed to Will Mandeville

William Fitzwalter: Archdeacon of Hereford, brother of Baron Robert Fitzwalter

Adam Fitzwilliam: Knight of the House of Fitzwalter, bastard son of William Fitzwalter
Alfred Fitzadam: Page of Baron Fitzwalter, son of Adam Fitzwilliam
Joseph of Bennington: Knight of the House of Fitzwalter, Castellán of Bennington Castle
Richard Bumpstead: Ranger of the House of Fitzwalter
Parsival Bumpstead: Archer of the House of Fitzwalter, son of Richard
Desmond Chamberlain: Chamberlain of Robert Fitzwalter
Agatha Chamberlain: Chef of Robert Fitzwalter, wife of Desmond
Arthur Chamberlain: Sergeant of the House of Fitzwalter, son of Desmond & Agatha
Elsibet Chamberlain: Nursemaid of the House of Fitzwalter, son of Desmond & Agatha
Nevil of Great Dunmow: Knight of the House of Fitzwalter, son Nev squire to George
George of Hamlin: Knight of the House of Fitzwalter, son Ham squire to Emeric, daughter Sissy handmaiden to Gannora
Sax Mashbury: Man-at-Arms of the House of Fitzwalter
Franklin Miller: Man-at-arms of the House of Fitzwalter
Christopher Reeve: Sergeant-at-Arms of the House of Fitzwalter
Emeric of Thaxted: Knight of the House of Fitzwalter; son Em squire to Nevil, daughter Jessy handmaiden to Gannora

English Barony

Geoffrey Fitzpeter: Justiciar of the Realm, Earl of Essex
Aveline de Clare: Wife of Geoffrey Fitzpeter, sister of Richard de Clare, step-mother of Geoff & Will Mandeville
Geoff Mandeville: Baron of Saffron Waldon, son & heir of Geoffrey Fitzpeter
Will Mandeville: Baron of Pleshey, 2nd son of Geoffrey Fitzpeter
Roger Bigod: Earl of Norfolk & Suffolk
Hugh Bigod: Son & heir of Roger
Henry Bohun: Earl of Hereford
Gilbert de Braose: Bishop of Hereford, uncle of Anne
Reginald de Braose: Baron of the Welsh March, brother of Gilbert, eldest brother of Anne
Richard de Clare: Earl of Hertford
Gilbert de Clare: Son & heir of Richard
Gilbert de Gant: Baron of Stamford
Richard Montfichet: Baron of Stansted
William Mowbray: Baron of Axeholm
Sayer de Quincey: Earl of Winchester
David le Scot: Earl of Huntingdon
John le Scot: Son & heir of David, nephew & heir of Ranulf Blunville
Aubrey de Vere: Earl of Oxford
Robert de Vere: Brother & heir of Aubrey
Eustace de Vescy: Baron of Alnwick
William de Vescy: Son & heir of Eustace

ENGLISH ROYALISTS

Isabelle le Angeloume: Queen of England
Henry Plantagenet: Son & heir of King John & Queen Isabelle
William Longsword: Earl of Salisbury, half-brother of King John, Captain in the King's Army

Oliver Fitzroy: Knight, bastard-son of King John
William Marshal: Earl of Pembroke, Marshal of the King's Army
Isabel de Clare: Wife of William Marshal, cousin to Richard de Clare
Bill Marshal the Younger: Squire to the King, son of William Marshal
William de Albiny: Baron of Belvoir
Ranulf de Blunville: Count-Palatine of Cheshire
Fawkes de Breaute: Captain in the King's Army
Hubert de Burgh: Seneschal of Poitou
Falmouth: Sergeant in the King's Army
Ferrers: Earl of Derby
Ralph Fitznicholas: Envoy & knight of King John
Guillame: Earl of Arundel
Thomas Hardington: Envoy & knight of King John
Harry: Cleric of the Exchequer
Nichola de la Haye: Lady Sheriff of Lincoln
Jeffrey: Cleric of the Exchequer
Maud: Envoy & nun of Fontrevault Abbey
Samwell: Cleric of the Royal Court
Savaric de Mauleon: Seneschal of Aquitaine
Stephen Segrave: Sheriff of Bedford, Hertfordshire, & Leicestershire
Tom: Cleric of the Royal Court
Warren: Earl of Surrey

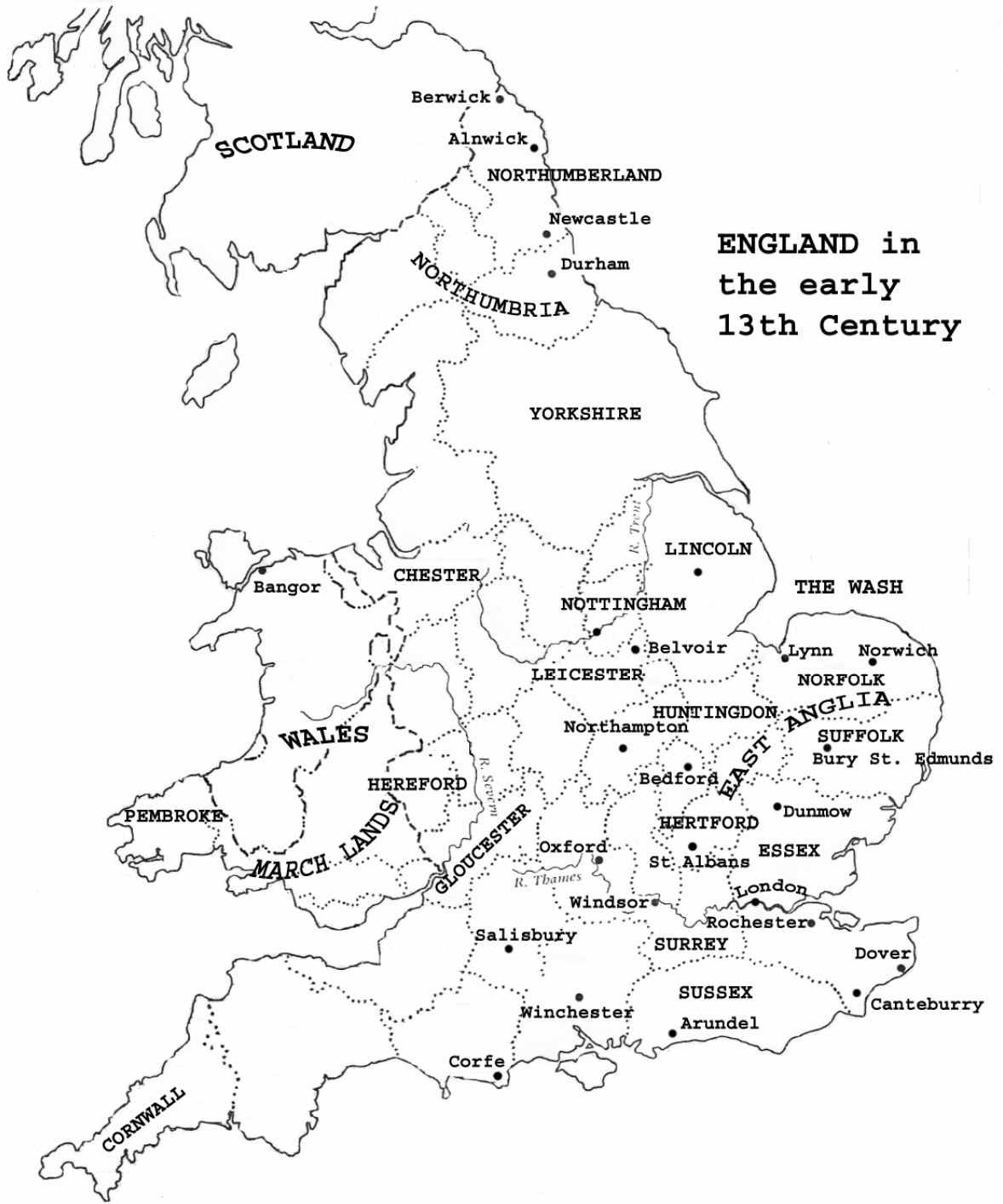
OTHERS

Al Nasir: Caliph of Morocco & southern Spain
Aymeric: Master of the English Temple
Berengar of Bordeaux: French Engineer
Philip Augustus Capet: King of France
Louis Capet: Prince of France
Blanche of Castille: Wife of Louis Capet, niece of King John
John de Cell: Abbot of St. Albans
William de Trumpington: Prior of St. Albans
Dumas: Count of Perche
Edward: Captain of the Temple ship *St. George*
Hardell: Mayor of London
Henri: Count of Melun
Innocent III: Pope of the Catholic Church
Gaulo: Papal Legate to England
Pandulf: Papal Legate to England
Pierre: Count of Brittany
Stephen Langton: Archbishop of Canterbury
Llewellyn: Prince of Wales, son-in-law to King John
Osric of Thaxted: Commander of Cressing Temple, uncle of Emeric of Thaxted
Otto: Holy Roman Emperor of Germany & northern Italy
Renaud: Count of Bolougne
Welton: Bishop of London

William: King of Scotland

Alexander: Son & heir of William King of Scots

MAP of ENGLAND



ENGLAND in
the early
13th Century

Scale 0 50 Miles

CHAPTER 1- The Embassy & St. George

Off the coast of Portugal: April, 1212

“Infidels! Infidels!” The shout spread across the galley shortly after the mid-morning prayer. Templars scrambled to the fore deck, engulfing Robert and the other two envoys. While they cursed, Robert and the Templars prayed. *I shall fear no evil as I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, for thy rod and thy staff shall comfort me . . .* The words came unbidden, they did every time.

Three sleek dhows sliced through the waves. “Allahu Ahkbar!” hurtled from the Moorish pirates. The dhows, with their wind-fattened triangular sails, surrounded the bellicose St. George and came within bow range.

“Allahu Ahkbar!” A torrent of arrows flew at them like some possessed murder of crows; furious, pecking and clawing everywhere all at once.

The Templars raised their shields, forming a protective dome cracked with blinding light. Robert huddled between the Templars with his fellow envoys. The thudding, thwacking rain of steel and wood descended from all sides. The sail was ripped and several sailors were hit in the open hold. They groaned and fell, bleeding.

Two more volleys fell, and the Templars, stubborn as pin-cushions, absorbed each one. The knights were bristling for a fight, but Captain Edward was resolute and they did not return fire. Finally, the Moors paused; they knew the reputation of the Templars well.

The Moorish captain scolded his men in a tongue Robert found strangely fluid and melodious. Then, an uncertain calm besieged them all as the dhow on St. George’s starboard side washed dangerously closer. A darkly handsome man with swept-back hair and bold cheek bones shouted to the Templars in a different but more familiar tongue.

“Brother Emilio,” Captain Edward called out, “Where’s my Spaniard?”

“Here, Captain Edward,” Brother Emilio responded and stepped towards the rail.

The Templars kept their hair shorn close, leaving their beards long and scraggly. While their hauberks were fine double looped coats of chain mail, they were all covered in dirty and ragged surcoats once bleached white. The red cross fought through the dirt valiantly. Their scabbards were plain leather and the swords of a simple and practical design, even if they were of the finest German steel.

Brother Emilio looked out at the cutter and perked his ear to the Moor shouting at them. “Madre de Dios! Mother of God!” He cursed in shock.

The Templars all said a Hail Mary on the spot. Robert joined in out of habit.

“What? Is it bad?” Captain Edward asked.

“Si, tis the worst Spanish I’ve ever heard,” He said.

“Shut it!” Captain Edward barked at the brothers chuckling and groaning at Emilio.

Robert craned his neck and wriggled to get a better view of the Moor, but the armor clad Templars weren’t budging. He was one of three reasons they were risking their lives on this perilous journey. Only yesterday did the crew learn the Kingdom of Portugal was not their true purpose. From their stares, he supposed they weren’t pleased with the news.

“Brother, ask him why they pester us so! Do they not know our banner?” Captain Edward ordered his Spanish interpreter.

“Captain,” Sir Thomas Hardington interjected, but Edward waved the title away as if it was a fly. Thomas ground his teeth in impotent frustration. He was the head envoy of the royal

embassy and simmered at the disrespect. However, Edward was lord of the ship. Beyond the three envoys, Edward was the only one that knew why they were heading so far south. At least he thought he did.

“Ask him,” Edward ordered again.

Brother Emilio started shouting at the Moor and the two took up a hoarse interchange. When he turned to Captain Edward, everyone turned with him, “Captain, sire. The treacherous Moor thought you were joking. ‘You’re alone!’ he laughed, ‘Who cares!’ he said. He thought it very funny and saluted you for it. Then I told him you were not joking and he said that was an insult to both of you. Madre de Dios, he has his pride.”

“And three ships! Don’t forget his three ships!” Sir Thomas Hardington vented accusingly in an attempt to assert some authority.

Among the Templars the two royal knights seemed like peacocks. Sir Thomas Hardington and Sir Ralph Fitznicholas wore their hair long with one thick braid descending down past their shoulder blades. Their beards were full but close cropped and manicured. Ears, neck and fingers were covered in gold or silver rings and chains. While the hauberks were similar, their surcoats were blue and red satins richly embroidered with golden lions. The hilts of their swords were inlaid with silver and inscribed with Latin.

“Three of them!” Sir Ralph Fitznicholas stuck three fingers up in support of Sir Thomas.

The Templars grimaced at the two royal sirs and Robert rolled his eyes.

Captain Edward sucked his moustache into his mouth and squinted. “Brother Emilio, tell the heathen Moor of our precious cargo.”

The interpreter shouted back and forth with the Moorish captain again. “Sire, I told the infidel dog we carry an embassy from the King of England to their Caliph Al Nasir, and that we intend no war with them.”

Captain Edward sucked up his moustache. His bushy eyebrows dropped, “And?”

Brother Emilio looked back to the dhow hesitantly and the Moor nodded, “Captain sire, he believes it because we did not attack, nor reply in kind. He says even Templars aren’t stupid enough to raid with but one galley.”

The ship grunted all at once.

Brother Emilio continued, “Indeed, the dirty Muslim sand pigs would just as soon sink our hated vessel and all aboard, but their rotten infidel captain is intrigued by the request for an embassy to the caliph. They are willing to escort us all the way to Tangier, but on one condition.”

Captain Edwards’ lower lip consumed his mouth; his eyebrows blocking the sun from his eyes, “Name it.”

Brother Emilio sighed as he said the words, “They wish to board *St. George* and inspect it. Their commander feels he is owed some debt for not sinking us anyway.”

Swords screeched out of scabbards and cursing oaths filled the air. It seemed to Robert all was going to end in a futile battle then and there. Templars were soldiers of Christ, defenders of the faith. Their duty was to protect the Holy Land and all Christendom’s pilgrims, especially royal envoys, but Robert knew it was no pious desire to protect him or his companions that riled these brothers so.

Yet again Captain Edward reigned in his troop with a bark to silence kings. “Tell the cursed stinking heathen five of his pathetic excuses for a crew may board, and that we have little in the way of booty for his grubby, God forsaken hands.”

Brother Emilio shouted the essentials to his swarthy doppelganger in a rough trading Spanish. The Moor nodded and the dhow inched closer. One of Edward's crew dropped a hempen rope ladder, but the Templars presented a wall of shields as the Moorish crew peered up at the bulky side of the St. George.

The first infidel on board was the Moorish captain, who squeezed through Templars fearlessly in order to communicate with the other boats. He shouted confidently and assuredly to the other dhows as he stood beside Robert, but the cleric detected no deception in the Moor's tone.

Done, the Moor faced down Captain Edward as his bodyguards climbed aboard. He wore only an armless shirt of loose chain mail over simple cloth robes and baggy pantaloons. Though dressed simply he had a jewel encrusted, gold inlaid kinjal dagger tucked in his sash.

"Captain Edward, Al Fazil the Moor," Brother Emilio announced.

The two nodded, and Al Fazil walked to the center of the aft deck, while Brother Emilio helped them work out the conditions. The Templars and the embassy remained above as Al Fazil, two hefty bodyguards, Captain Edward and Brother Emilio went below. They emerged several tense minutes later with a small chest of oak ingrained with the Templar cross and a few Biblical verses in Latin. Two bull-like Africans put the chest down with a thud, it being heavy even for their massive bulk.

Al Fazil seemed perturbed, despite the chest, and spoke curtly to Brother Emilio. With lowered eyes and clinched fists, the interpreting Templar leaned in and spoke hushed words to Captain Edward, who simply cast his gaze upon the men. The Moor eyed them over slowly as well.

Captain Edward locked eyes with Sir Thomas Hardington, and in passable French said, "The treacherous heathen wishes to know why you haven't any gifts for the caliph."

Sir Thomas and Sir Ralph stepped forward haughtily, chests thrust out and fists defiant against their hips. Robert de London politely sidestepped a wide Templar, stumbled anyway, and shuffled beside the royal knights.

His plain brown wool robe was as impressive as a wet log. A rosary girded his waist, and a cherry wood cross hung from it at his hip. Bushy brown hair curved around his head in a thick band, the top shaved bald in a tonsure. Robert's cheeks had a bit of stubble. His stature was neither tall nor short, and he did not bear himself boldly. He was obviously a cleric out of his element.

"Oh, we bring gifts," Sir Thomas said with pride tinged in a mockery of the Moor's request, then reached for the purse next to his sword. The four African bodyguards drew their scimitars without hesitation. The Templars gripped their hilts tighter. Eyes slashed right and left as everyone tensed for the bloodletting.

Sir Thomas stretched his fingers wide and slowly laid them on the purse. Carefully, he opened the purse and pulled out a wax sealed parchment folded into a neat little square. He waved it at the infidels. "Tell the ugly, dog-breathed Saracen pirate that the gifts this embassy bare are listed on this parchment and will enrich his satanic caliph a hundred fold!" he berated in his most demeaning English.

Edward nodded at Emilio, who replied the essential meaning to Al Fazil. The Moor's reply was equally curse filled, and Brother Emilio grimaced. Finally, the Spanish Templar explained Al Fazil's demand. "He will provide us safe passage to the Caliph's harbor in return for the Temple's chest."

A stunned silence shocked them all.

“God wills it,” Captain Edward cursed, and the men grumbled.

Then Brother Emilio looked at Sir Thomas and everyone’s attention shifted to the royal knight. With evident pleasure the Templar announced, “The Moor will also accept three rings as a token of the royal envoy’s safe passage to Caliph Muhammed al Nasir.”

The royal knight flushed with anger, turning darker with each smile spreading across the faces of everyone crowded onto the deck. He nearly balled up the letter still resting in his hand and noticed the glint in the rings on his fingers. Thomas’s nostrils flared, and he shot a glance at Ralph, who had clenched his hands into tight fists. “If yield we must in the name of the king then so be it.” he said through clenched teeth and pulled a gold ring from his finger.

“Bugger,” Ralph grumbled and did the same.

As if on cue everyone turned to Robert, looking him up and down. The cleric burned with embarrassment. He had no ring to offer; he was not that wealthy, not by far.

“Well scribbler?” Sir Thomas demanded.

“Aye, what of it?” Sir Ralph agreed.

Robert turned out his palms reluctantly. “I’m just a cleric . . . a scribe of the Court.” He tried to explain further but his voice failed him.

“Fine then!” Thomas cursed, “If three rings it must be, then three rings it is. Ralph, give me another ring.”

“Give you another ring?” Ralph shot back incredulously and balled his fists again.

“Indeed, give me another ring so that we can pay this ransom and do as the king intended. Do you not think the king will remember our deeds and reward us well? He will give you a better ring, you craven fool.”

“He will?” Ralph asked.

“For certes,” Thomas concluded. “Now give me another ring,” He demanded once more, sliding a contemptuous glance at Robert’s backside.

“He will pay for this in his own way,” Ralph grumbled and squinted at Robert.

“Indeed,” Thomas agreed. He accepted the third ring and chucked them one at a time at the Moor.

Al Fazil fit them onto his fingers and smiled confidently, “Inshallah, Tangier!”

“Wait! By God’s blood I’m going to have my say!” Sir Thomas shouted. As he saw that he had everyone’s full attention he asked, “What guarantee do we have that this sandpig doesn’t sink us now that he has what he wants?”

Captain Edward grunted, “I agree.”

Brother Emilio asked Al Fazil, who immediately ordered his bodyguards to remove the chest from the boat. Everyone tensed but Al Fazil began to speak as he took a proud stance on the deck of the St. George.

“He says his life will serve as guarantee, if his word is not good enough,” Brother Emilio explained. The entire crew seemed to flinch at the idea of him staying on board. The brother knights looked to Edward, eager for his reaction.

“God wills it,” Captain Edward muttered again.

Thomas shook with anger at the Moor, and finally Ralph had to intervene. “We demand the infidel remain on the aft deck with the captain. We have important matters to discuss here!”

Captain Edward squinted dourly at the envoys but finally ordered the brother knights to stand down. Al Fazil instructed him to follow the lead ship and not to stray in the least or they’d be cut down from all sides like grain at the harvest. When the bodyguards were onboard their

own ship with the chest and Al Fazil had found his way to the aft deck, Captain Edward turned to Sir Thomas and said, "The embassy owes the Temple fifteen hundred pounds."

"Jesu wept blood! What for?" Sir Thomas spat indignantly, his face flushing a violent crimson. Fifteen hundred pounds was a sum to make an earl blush, much less a knight.

"The chest," The captain said calmly then climbed down into the hold.

"Little in the way of booty, my arse!" Sir Thomas spat. "What was in that chest, the True Cross?"

Edward ignored him as he bent to calm the sailor tugging on the arrow pierced high in the chest of his mate. The wounded sailor's horror stricken eyes were going dim. "Tis okay son. Leave it be. God wills it," Captain Edward consoled his crewman.

"God wills it," The trembling sailor started to cry as he let go his friend's mortality. "God wills it."

The arrow was deep, but the stricken sailor relaxed now that his friend wasn't tugging on it. Then he gasped and coughed up blood. He stared at the arrow as he visibly paled, then collapsed.

Captain Edward shoved the other sailor aside and bent in close, listening to his mouth. He stayed like that and waved for quiet. "He breathes still. God wills it."

"God wills it," The sailors crowding around them chanted. It proved too much for Robert, the rolling undulation of the boat, the attack, the blood, the confined reek of them all. Robert lunged for the rail and lost his stomach overboard. In time, it seemed the worst of the retching was over.

"Have the heavens passed, Robert?" Sir Thomas Hardington asked in English. Sailors sewing up the torn sail snickered down in the open hold in the center of the galley. Robert was used to it.

Robert de London kept his eyes closed and listened to the galley sails flapping in the morning breeze. Down in the open hold the wounded groaned and spat blood. The nausea overwhelmed Robert one final time, but there was nothing left to heave. Still, he made a wretched sound.

"I guess not," Sir Ralph Fitznicholas chuckled dryly and dug under his fingernail with a dagger.

"He's worse than the wounded," Thomas laughed and the sailors chuckled along.

With the sun bearing down on his head, Robert white knuckled the rail and prayed to God to ease his stomach. He focused on the sails again.

"He's not the sort of scribbler to travel across the sea much. What can you expect?" Sir Thomas shrugged. The sailors chuckled their assent.

"Nary a thing," Sir Ralph chimed in, "He's an impoverished monk. Useless righteousness, that's what he is."

Thomas burst out in laughter. "Indeed, I couldn't have said it better." Then Thomas turned thoughtful, "Seriously, who is he really?" He'd switched to Norman French for privacy. "He's no bishop or cannon, just some minor scribbler. If his title or name carries no weight, what purpose does he serve?"

French was the tongue of the English Court ever since William, the Bastard of Normandy, conquered England and made himself king. The English nobility spoke several different dialects of it, but Norman French was a tongue beyond the common Englishman. Unable to understand the royal envoys, the sailor's eyes wandered and they started talking amongst themselves.

Robert's back was to them and he was utterly taken with nausea.

Ralph switched tongues and moved his dagger to another fingernail but shrugged off Thomas's concern. "He'll do as we say. He owes us his life and he knows it. I say pay him no mind unless its abuse," Ralph mocked and then cursed the pale bands of skin ringing his finger.

Thomas was bored and angry. There was nothing else to do. "So why does the king want a cleric with us? Is he to be our scribbler and nothing more? What say you Ralph?"

Ralph smiled, "Perhaps he's here to keep us from sin."

"Don't be daft Ralph. This is King John we're talking about!" Thomas reminded him. They both burst into laughter.

"Oui, yes, you have a point there," Ralph said and scratched his neck with the tip of his dagger, "I'm at a loss. What are you getting at Thomas?"

Thomas shook his head in disappointment, "Don't you see Ralph! If we are the king's tongue for the caliph, then this cleric must be his eye upon us! He's a spy! A royal spy sent to watch over us." he said then stared distastefully at Robert's back, "Look at him. He's as green as a toad."

Sir Ralph chuckled up some phlegm and spat overboard, "Hold on now Thomas, you go too far. Too far, I say!"

"How so?" Thomas demanded curiously.

"He may be the king's spy but toads are at home on both land and water," Ralph replied.

Sir Thomas huffed and heartily agreed, "Oui, he is worse than a toad, Ralph. A leech! That's what he is. He's here to suck us dry!" They both had a great good laugh at Robert then.

"If the king's so concerned, why send a spineless, green skinned, base born cleric?" Sir Ralph wondered after he'd contained himself to chuckles and moved on to another fingernail.

Thomas shrugged, "Well, the king has nary a bishop to do his bidding, such bidding as this." He spat disgustedly.

"Fie!" Ralph cursed, "Not even Bishop Peter of Winchester would stoop to this."

"Oui, he's far too busy tax farming," Thomas chuckled. "Everyone knows he has more skill with a sword than a bible." The two men laughed briefly at the irony of Peter's holy office, but slowly grew silent.

They looked at each other with a sliver of discomfort. Peter de Roches was bishop of Winchester, chancellor of the Exchequer, and one of King John's closest, most trusted friends. He performed his duties ruthlessly. Peter was not a man to be taken lightly, even in his absence.

Robert opened his hazel eyes to see the majestic azure of the sea, cresting and foaming, swelling and undulating as the galley sailed south towards unseen lands of Islam. The morning sun shone brilliantly before him, casting a hopeful glaze on everything it touched. He turned to face his fellow envoys sitting under the shade of the square sail and politely announced in English, "I think the heaves have passed, Sir Thomas. For now; I thank thee for thy concern." He made every effort to be polite to the envoys of rank.

"He's worse than a maggot," Sir Ralph sniped in gutter French. Sir Thomas turned a smile to his fellow knight then eyed the cleric looking on blankly.

"Indeed, he's English," Sir Thomas cut back. They were a mutt people as far as he was concerned; part Celt, Anglian, Saxon, Viking, and Norman. They were the conquered, and as a Norman knight in King John's household Thomas thought them a disgrace. The only thing more shameful was the fact that King John had lost Normandy to King Phillip of France, leaving Thomas exiled from his own homeland.

"England makes them all soft," He muttered in his Norman tongue.

In truth Robert was an orphan. He had no idea who his parents were, or what his lineage was. A child of the Church, of St. Bartholomew's Abbey in London, he was raised to be obedient to God and king, to read and write, to serve and be grateful, to endure. Yet he'd discovered a talent at St. Bartholomew's, one he was determined to use for his benefit. He would always serve someone, but he was determined to make something of himself, to rise above simple servility.

And so now, he remained quiet and waited.

Robert marveled at the galley and the sailors who controlled it with disciplined ease. The bleached square sail was marked with a magnificent red cross and the banner of the Templars insured their safety or their doom. Nearly all who knew the Order of the Temple of the Poor Knights of Christ thought them the finest soldiers in Christendom. They prayed, they fought, and they died for the greater glory of God.

However, pirates were notorious for ganging up on any vessel they came across in the open sea. The Temple Cross was sure to attract their attention, and the envoys had been counting on an attack or encounter of some kind since leaving Lisbon. Indeed it was the discipline of the Templars and King John's trust of their English Master, Aymeric, that convinced him no one else could transport his envoys safely so far abroad.

The embassy from King John of England to Caliph Al Nasir of Morocco was unannounced, unexpected, and highly unusual. Secretly, Robert found himself wondering if this was such a good idea. What if the embassy was a failure? What if it was a success? What would the Church think? What about the people of England?

Robert pulled on his rosary beads and began to pray. It helped clear his mind. He prayed for God to keep them safe, to return them home, and to shine some light over the shadow that was their excommunicated king. Robert hoped God had not yet abandoned their king, even if the pope had. "Please let him see the light that we may live at peace again," Robert whispered in Latin.

"What did you say?" Thomas asked, unable to understand the tongue of the Church.

"I was praying for the embassy is all," Robert explained humbly.

CHAPTER 2- The Caliph and the Cleric

Tangier, Morocco

They smelled Africa before they saw it: soil, mint, and wood.

A golden expanse of mountains, shaded by clouds of purest white, rose up from the blue sea. Gradually, the coast emerged. Morocco was green, and the air became sweeter, more succulent.

It was covered with orchards of almond, date, fig, and olive trees; strangely bright fruit, gardens, and forests of cypress and cork oak. The coastal plain stretched green, but further inland it became more arid. In the background stood that majestic mountain chain guarding the coast from the sandy Sahara to the south.

Tangier was another world.

Undulating cries erupted from myriad sea vessels in the harbor, spreading quickly to the wharf and then into the city itself. The sounds were alien to the naive travelers from England.

Robert was vexed, enchanted, and hypnotized by this human, yet otherworldly kaleidoscope of sound.

Tangier thrust itself into the sky, into the worshiping arms of the sun. Gleaming white minarets stood like spears piercing the sky all over the city. Smaller towers craned upward as high as they dared. Massive golden domes crowned monumental mosques and palaces like miniature suns. They spread light across the maze of white-washed houses and warehouses, archways and gardens, gates and walls. The glare off the city hurt Robert's eyes, but he stared all the more for it.

Coiled about the walled city was Caliph Al Nasir's army like some bloated serpent feasting on golden apples off the Tree of Life. An army of archers practiced short and long range arcs, a vast cohort of cavalry stirred dust in the back plains, and the infantry swarmed like a disturbed anthill through the city of tents on the plains of Tangier. There were thousands, upon thousands, upon thousands, of infidel warriors, all preparing for the invasion of the Spanish kingdoms and beyond.

"Tis the largest army I've ever seen," Sir Thomas muttered in awe.

"God help the Spaniards," Captain Edward whispered to himself as he committed everything he saw to memory. The Master of the Portugal Temple was going to get an earful upon their return to Lisbon. Such were Edward's orders from Master Aymeric of the English Temple.

"Los bastardos," Brother Emilio cursed.

Captain Edward chuckled and passed a glance at the envoys. "How does King John expect to stop the Moors from invading the Spanish Kingdoms when he is on the verge of war with France and the pope? Hasn't he enough coals in the fire?" He asked in English.

The Templar sailors and knights chuckled along with their captain. Ralph frowned and Thomas grimaced. Robert eyed his fellow envoys.

"That's his concern, now isn't it?" Thomas replied.

"Tis not your place to question the king, eh?" Ralph backed up his friend.

Robert cleared his throat and spoke up, "If King John can negotiate a peace here, then God is with him; for the Spanish will have lost nothing and the Moors will have gained nothing. If God is with our king, then perhaps the pope will join him too."

Thomas and Ralph looked at him in annoyance. Captain Edward smiled with amusement. "Mayhap, miracles do happen."

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Al-Fazil the Moor kept the galley surrounded with his dhows. After the ships docked, Al-Fazil made it clear to all that the St. George was under his protection. Then he left to seek counsel with the Amir of Tangier.

As the sun peaked overhead, a wailing song filled the air; the city's teeming life paused. Boisterous Tangier became silent and the streets all deserted; the city was frozen in the heat of the day. The silence reminded Robert of Sext, but the Templars had all retreated down into the aft quarters for their private mass.

Robert led a prayer with the wounded down in the open hold. No one on board knew how to deal with the arrows other than to break them off and try to pull them out; it was a shrieking bloody failure. The arrows usually wouldn't come out, and the pulling only did more damage. Even Richard the Lion Heart had succumbed to an arrow's fate. So the wounded were left to wait for the inevitable infection calling them to God.

Robert had been squeamish before, but these men needed consolation. Despite the stench and horrible state of the men, the prayers comforted him as much, if not more than, the men wheezing and groaning under every painful breath. While he prayed over the men, Robert wondered if there wasn't something, anything, to help them other than one of God's rare miracles.

Al Fazil returned to the wharf accompanied by throngs of shouting admirers. The docks were already filled with curious and belligerent onlookers. Some of them heaped praises on Al Fazil, hailing him as a hero. Al Fazil brought a few carts of supplies with him, and they were hauled onto the St. George to the great shock of the spectators. They were mostly bags of a round fruit with bright flaming skin and a tangy-sweet scent. Al Fazil peeled one himself and ate it with delight to prove they were not poisoned.

"Tis called a naranj. They are gifts from the amir," Brother Emilio delighted.

As Robert peeled one Al Fazil informed Sir Thomas that Allah blessed his embassy, for Caliph Al-Nasir was in his residential palace within Tangier, so they did not have to travel to his mountain capitol of Marakesh. Robert tried to imagine Marakesh but his mind boggled and the fruit was so delicious it distracted him.

"The Moor says the Caliph is making final preparations for the jihad. However, he is willing to accept the embassy of King John of England," The Temple interpreter informed Sir Thomas.

"Then off we go," Sir Thomas grunted and smacked the naranj out of Robert's hand.

In an hour, the envoys found themselves secluded within a private three-room apartment in the caliph's palace. The rooms were large, bright, and airy. The tops of the walls were bordered with gold paint and inscribed with fluid black script. The floor was a smooth and shiny collection of oddly shaped blue tiles, cool to the touch, but much of it was covered in colorfully intricate rugs. There were ornately crafted tables and chairs, polished silver trays and goblets. A small tree with bright yellow fruit and a heavenly scent was potted in one corner. A pleasant sea breeze wafted in from open door frames covered in white cotton sheets. Outside, a balcony overlooking fountains and the central garden had stuffed cushions lying all about.

Robert was the first to find the private bath with a fountain of running water. There was even a spigot in the shape of a fish, that when pressed, spewed a fragrant oil. Running water in a palace! A private bath! Their chambers surpassed anything any of them had ever seen.

There was a knock on the antechamber door, then it opened from the outside. A tall thin man with a thick manicured beard, dressed in a baggy white linen robe and black skull cap entered. He spoke in Arab tinted French, saying, "I am Ilius of Cordoba, Chief Interpreter of the most gracious and enlightened Caliph Muhammed Al Nasir ibn Almohad, Magnificent Ruler of the Maghrib and Spain. You must be very tired from the long journey so the caliph will allow three days respite. He will then see the embassy from the Ingliz sultan. Walk freely through the palace except where guards are posted. Caliph Al Nasir's every indulgence is at thy beck and call. If there is anything thee might want or need, just ask and it will be done."

Sir Thomas was momentarily stunned to hear French, though mangled by the Moor's tongue. He smiled and nodded his head, "I thank thee and thy lord for this kindness. However, our embassy is of the most urgent portence, could we not have an audience with him sooner?"

Ilius' face remained open and kind, he even smiled. Inside he sneered at the infidel barbarians' insolence and impropriety. By his dress he was a warrior who aspired to more. His manner told Ilius these men were even more pathetic than the Spanish; worse still, they thought they were civilized. Conversation and the manners of an enlightened embassy were obviously subtle arts looked down upon in their heathen domain.

“Alas, the caliph is quite taken with final preparations for the jihad. T’would serve the embassy of Sultan Djon well to appear at the appointed time. . . and no sooner.” Ilius then clapped his hands.

Half a dozen girls clad in sheer garments of rich yellows, reds, blues, greens, and pinks entered from the hallway. The flowing clothes let the eye wander all over their bodies and the Normans were taken aback. They could see thighs, buttocks, and breasts lasciviously displayed under the gauzy material.

The girls bore trays of dates and almonds, flat bread, spiced and sweet meats, roast lamb in a honey sauce, hardy olives, sweet onions, a pile of grain called cous cous, and tangy yellow and green fruits similar to the flaming naranj. The embassy feasted and gorged. Some of the girls took empty trays and filled wine cups while others played strange sounding stringed instruments, drums, and a tambourine. Still others danced before them, hypnotically swaying their hips, bellies, and breasts. Several of the slave girls yielded to Thomas and Ralph's pawing demands. They were soft, pliant, and full of wicked ideas.

Robert retired to the balcony and prayed for God to remove the lust from his mind. Concubines were common enough among the clergy, yet Robert deigned to remain true to the tenants of priesthood. After the years at St. Bartholomew's touching wasn't something he cared for too much.

He fell asleep on the breezy tranquility of the balcony and awoke in the middle of the night to the most intense sensation bursting from his crotch. The girl giggled and joked in her strange fluid tongue. The darkness inside burst into gales of laughter. Thomas and Ralph were rolling on the carpet and braying like lunatics!

Robert pushed the girl away, screamed at her, and crawled into the corner. He prayed for forgiveness. He felt angry enough to kill but remained bundled in the corner, petrified to move lest they harass him further. He wasn't sure whether or not to put it in his report.

Thomas Hardington's impatience evaporated, and the following three days were spent indulging. The Normans gluttoned themselves with carnal pleasures. Robert found that wandering through the gardens and praying by the fountains eased his sinful thoughts.

He took a bath for the first time since Christmas. Usually Robert washed his face and hands, underarms and privateness. Captivated by the large bath, he submerged himself in the oily water and scrubbed his whole body clean. He felt blissful and pure for the first time in his life. He prayed God intended him to find this sublime sense of being among the infidel.

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As they waited in the antechamber to the Caliph's Court, all three envoys found themselves regretting this was going to pass away. Thomas paced back and forth. Ralph sat silently on a stone bench built into the wall. Robert sat opposite Ralph, reciting his Terce prayer.

Hardington stopped and pointed his finger at Robert with an accompanying sneer. “Stay out of the way scribbler. I want to hear not a word from you, not even a fart. When tis done, I will tell you what to write and you will read the words back to me. If tis not to my humor, then there will be an accident and you'll be lost at sea. Is my tongue base enough for you to understand Saxon cur!?” He said in his most sarcastic English.

“You're tongue is quite base,” Robert answered, but it came out cracked.

Sir Thomas lunged forward and Robert curled back against the wall. “Hah, just what I thought,” He chuckled and cracked another joke with Sir Ralph. The Muslim guards watching over them thought his antics were funny too.

Robert turned his head in anger and humiliation. Gazing down the hall, he tried to calm himself by remembering how he’d come to be here. A fortnight ago Robert finished his evening prayer in the church at St. Bartholomew’s Abbey in London, and was looking forward to a rare night in a warm room with a bed of his own. The orphaned monks of St. Bartholomew’s were prized clerics serving the king’s household, royal Court, and Exchequer, so the halls were constantly busy with tidings of important events.

He’d just returned from an arduous campaign into Scotland, where he’d served as scribe to Fawkes de Breaute. The tough Norman captain, leading a handful of knights and a company of sergeants, had hunted down a Celtic usurper to King William’s throne, who’d requested help from King John. Fawkes caught the proud Scot of course, and hung him. Robert wrote the proclamation claiming the lands of the dead man and all his followers for King William of Scotland, loyal vassal of King John of England.

Robert left the church with Brothers Harry and Jeffrey, two of his closest friends. He wanted to share the details of his latest journey, but Harry started talking about King John’s current plans, or at least the most recent rumors he’d heard. “The stocks for the war with France are enormous, Robert, and growing every day.” Harry liked to talk with his hands. “Tom has a friend, who is a scribe down at Portsmouth, who says the king is fortifying every single ship he can buy!”

“He’s spending a fortune,” Jeffrey piped in. As a clerk of the Treasury, he was one to know, “Everywhere.”

“Aye, but re-conquering Normandy, not to mention Anjou and all the other lost lands, will be much more difficult than assembling a well equipped host,” Robert countered. “Hunting in Scotland with King William’s blessing is one thing. Invading France is another.”

“Well that’s not my point at all,” Harry smiled, “We’ve got a great opportunity here to meet French girls. If our king invades France, that is.”

“Oui, Oui,” Jeffrey smiled.

“And they’ll be so happy to see us,” Robert grinned ironically. “I hear French girls are really like tonsures.”

Harry rubbed his half-bald head, “Look, you always get to go to interesting places serving the Court. Surely you can put in a good word for me with the justiciar?” Harry pleaded playfully. “If King John invades France, I want to be there. I can’t stand recording tax rolls anymore. Do you have any idea how droll taxes are Robert?”

“How now!” Jeffrey interrupted his fellows, “Those taxes pay our salary.” Brother Jeffrey was keen with numbers and a favorite of Chancellor Peter de Roches, who was also the royal treasurer. The bishop of Winchester liked his titles.

“I’ll trust your word on it, Harry,” Robert avoided the issue.

They were making their way in to the dormitory when a young novice monk appeared from behind the last pillar of the covered walk. “Are you Robert de London, scribe of the Court?”

“Aye,” Robert answered curiously.

“The deacon wishes to see you,” The boy stated simply.

“Now?” Robert asked. It was an odd and late hour for the aging deacon.

“Aye,” The boy novice responded and stared up at Robert.

Robert glanced at Harry and Jeffrey.

“Well you’ve done it now Robert. They’ve found you out,” Jeffrey said slyly.

“If we don’t see you in the morning we’ll catch you later. Remember, a good word with the justiciar,” Harry interjected.

“Right,” Robert nodded at Harry. He then waved the younger boy to walk him back towards the deacon’s offices. Outside the dark wooden doors, Robert knocked, and it opened. He went in and noticed a royal sergeant holding the door for him. Another royal sergeant was standing beside the fireplace, while the venerable old deacon was trying hard to stay awake sitting before the fire.

“You wished to see me Master Reginald?” Robert asked in Latin, dreadfully curious about the grim looking men wearing swords and the lion badge of the king on their worn, leather jerkins.

“Non, I did not wish to see you brother Robert, but someone does,” Deacon Reginald yawned, waving an opened letter absently at the soldier hovering about him.

“Robert de London, scribe of the Court?” The sergeant asked with a thick Cornish accent.

“Aye, tis me,” Robert agreed who he was.

“Come with us,” Sergeant Falmouth commanded simply.

It was pouring down outside, adding wet misery to the cloistering dark. Robert stared down at the bulking shadows of the Aldersgate tower and wondered where he was going. Instead of heading into the city though, the sergeant rode him down past Watling Street and the Newgate. Passing under the eternal shadow of St. Paul’s cathedral, they turned right onto Fleet Street, and Robert began to understand. They were heading for Westminster.

“What is this all about? Have I done wrong? Can you not tell me that?” Robert asked his armed escort.

Sergeant Falmouth grunted.

Robert had been to Westminster Abbey, the home of England’s Exchequer and one of its treasuries, many times in service to the Court. However, those trips had always been during the day when the Exchequer was chaotic and busy and crowded. Now in the middle of the night the halls took on an empty desolate character, making a strong impression on Robert’s mood.

Still dripping wet, Robert was made to stand beside a door in a dark hall for what seemed an eternity. Those that passed by kept their eyes to themselves, leaving Robert only his fears to keep him company. I shall fear no evil as I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, for thy rod and thy staff shall comfort me . . . The words came unbidden, they did every time.

The door finally opened and a young man in scarlet velvet beckoned Robert in. By the fireplace sat the bishop of Winchester, who was also the chancellor of the Exchequer, Peter de Roches.

Like Fawkes de Breaute, Peter de Roches was a continental, a foreigner, a Frenchman from Poitou. At least, that was where he’d earned his way into the graces of the Angevins serving Richard’s household, back when Poitou was the center of the Angevin empire. He was no mere bookish cleric and coin counter though; he’d spent as much time fighting and whoring beside Richard and John Plantagenet as anybody else. He was a big man despite his years, and his reputation only made him bolder.

Bishop Peter glanced at the meek and wet cleric shaking by the door.

“Robert de London,” He stated simply, offering his ringed hand for the kiss of obeisance. Robert stepped forward and kissed the ring obediently. Peter stared into the fire a moment longer and tapped his ring on the wooden chair.

“Go, warm yourself by the fire,” Peter offered in thick French and a wave of his hand.

Robert nodded and smiled, "I thank thee, thy holiness, um sire, uh . . ." Robert wasn't sure what to call him as he shuffled towards the crackling fire.

"Cut the niceties, Robert. They're irrelevant here," Peter waved away the words with distaste and stretched out long legs with popping knees. "I hear from Fawkes de Breaute you handled yourself well on the expedition to Scotland," Peter complimented Robert in his thick French.

"I tried not to get in the way," Robert smiled as he rubbed his hands together like a hot prayer.

"That's good," Peter agreed, then delved deeper into Robert's history. "Tis true you were the scribe who wrote the charter between King John and Prince Llewellyn of Wales last year?"

Robert smiled proudly but shrugged modestly, "I simply wrote what I was told."

"Oui, but I also heard you were able to translate a few passages into Celtic for the prince, who wanted to confirm what was written was what he'd agreed upon. Is that true?"

"I picked up some Celtic on the king's expedition to Ireland the summer before, your grace," Robert explained. "There were many Irish princes to be dealt with, and we were there all summer. I was pleasantly surprised to find the little I learned similar to the Welsh tongue."

"Good," Peter agreed again, "Tis a miserable evening, Robert, so I will be abrupt. King John has need of you."

"Of . . . of me?" Robert stammered. He didn't think King John knew he existed.

"Of a man with your . . . skills," Bishop Peter emphasized, "There is a task we want you to perform for us." He paused to let the idea sink in.

Robert caught the royal "we" immediately. Peter de Roches was being serious, but Robert was confused. He was not a scribe of the Exchequer, the treasury, or the bishopric of Winchester. If the king wanted Robert de London why wasn't he before his own master, Lord Geoffrey Fitzpeter of Essex, justiciar of the realm?

"It shall be long and dangerous, Robert, and you shall have to take note of all you hear and see," Peter de Roches told him, "Especially of those that go with you. And most assuredly if anything is written down, it must be your own hand composing the words. Of this our king is quite particular." Peter de Roches grew quiet again and began tapping the ring once more.

Robert was ecstatic. He wasn't being sent to the dungeon! The king needed him!

Yet he was also curious. "Is the justiciar . . ." Robert began to ask.

"Fitzpeter does not need concern himself with this matter," Peter de Roches insisted emphatically. "It is the king's matter after all, and we shall see to it as we see fit."

"For certes . . ." Robert stammered. He wasn't sure what all this meant.

"Have you ever left the islands Robert?" Bishop Peter asked.

Robert nodded negatively, wondering where it was the king needed him.

"Would you like to?" Bishop Peter dangled the fruit of travel freely.

Robert was stunned. He was still exhausted from Scotland.

"What say you de London? Are you King John's man?" Peter asked decisively.

One of the logs on the fire broke open. Sparks and embers shot up as the fire crackled, sending a wave of heat up Robert's backside. Robert swallowed hard and bowed, "I am the king's most humble and faithful servant, your grace." What else could he say?

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Robert's vision returned to the hallway in Tangier, to Thomas and Ralph pacing as they waited to treat with Caliph Al Nasir. "Good lord. What have I gotten myself into?" Robert whispered to himself.

He looked down and noticed he was working the rosary beads through his thumb and forefinger. This was not where he'd expected to end up at all. Calais? Paris? Rome? Bordeaux? Non.

Tangier.

"I shall fear no evil as I walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death. For thee are with me and comfort me," Robert recited the prayer in Latin, "Thy rod and staff protect me." It came to Robert easily.

"Quit your squeaking, scribbler," Ralph barked at him. He hated it when people spoke a tongue he didn't understand. Ralph always suspected they were talking about him.

After Caliph Al Nasir finished his mid-morning prayer to Mecca the embassy of King John was admitted to his vaulted sanctum. It was surprising how cool it was inside the vast space. The floor, the columns, the ceiling, even the dome was covered in white marble. Arabic script intertwined the soft curving lines of the architecture everywhere. The throne room of Windsor did not compare.

Every dozen paces along the walls armed guards stared at the heathen Embassy with scimitar and spear at the ready as they walked by. As they passed under the arch of the dome Robert couldn't help but look up and feel awe, amazement, and awfully inconsequential all at the same time. Ahead of them, at the far side of the chamber sat the caliph and his Court.

They were spread out on a mammoth collection of thick, beautifully intricate rugs. Hukkahs were spread out amongst the men and a heady smoke rose up, swirling in the beams of sunlight slanting into the room from the east. Muhammed Al Nasir was seated on an enormous pile of giant silk pillows colored in rich reds, blues, and purples.

There were another dozen or so amirs, imams, and mullahs set about him on lesser piles. They too were all dressed in fine silks. As they sucked on their hukkahs, the caliph's Court stared at the three strangers warily.

Dressed in flowing silk robes of green and gold, the Caliph of the Almohad Empire was a swarthy, portly man. Robert noticed right away he was running beads through his fingers, just as Robert had a few moments ago. He thought it strange, considering he'd been told the Moors were devil worshipers.

He'd heard so many awful things about the infidels: the Saracens, the Moors, the sand pigs. Yet everything he'd seen and heard so far was unlike any of it. Somehow he felt betrayed. The world was different than what he'd been told.

Ilius stood to the caliph's right, and behind the caliph two young boys fanned him with palm leaves. Ilius announced the three envoys and they each bowed. Thomas and Ralph bowed a short, disrespectful genuflection, while Robert bowed slowly and folded his hands in prayer.

Sir Thomas presented King John's letter to Ilius.

He then spoke word for word what King John instructed him to say, "Greetings to the Lord Al Nasir, great king of Morocco and Spain, on behalf of King John of England, lord of Ireland, count of Anjou, duke of Normandy and Aquitaine, I offer thee best wishes on the coming campaign. It should please the great Mohammedan King that word of his desires have reached as far as the English Isles, where King John rules a strong brood of warriors loyal to his command."

Thomas paused to catch his thoughts and compose himself for the unthinkable, “All of Christendom know of your great desire to plant the banner of Islam as far away as Rome, and my lord sends me here to offer you a great boon on your campaign. Between the kingdoms of Spain and Italia lie the lands of the Franks. Half of these lands are guided by the benevolence of my King John, but the other half suffer from the cruel indulgences of King Phillip of France.”

Thomas, Ralph, and Robert silently wondered if the caliph knew the truth. “In his wisdom King John will offer the great Mohammedan King the armies of England to help subdue the brutish Franks. My king offers to hold these lands safely and peacefully while the most powerful Al Nasir marches into Italia.”

Caliph Al Nasir stared at Thomas, nothing betrayed by his neutral gaze. The Norman knight swallowed and continued. “If this alliance should prove desirable King John is prepared to offer up a daughter for marriage whose dowry would be the duchy of Aquitaine, that great land north of the Pyrenees which King John is lord over. In return, King John would gladly hold the lands of the French in the name of the caliph, so that he may not burden himself with their governance. All of this, John offers for the greater glory of Al Nasir and Islam.” Thomas slumped in self-resignation, lowering his eyes to the floor.

The slump spoke surrahs to Caliph Al Nasir.

Ilius had been whispering translations into the caliph’s ear. Now he opened the sealed parchment and read it aloud twice. As Ilius read, the Court of Caliph Al Nasir gasped, frowned, and balked at what they heard. It was unheard of! Several heated discussions broke out amongst them. Soon, the vizier began referring their questions to Al Nasir.

To Robert’s trained eye, they were not expecting an offer of alliance. The proposal shocked him too, but he’d learned to subdue his emotions. He was a man of God first, but still the king’s man. He had to play his part.

King John had already damned himself in the eyes of Pope Innocent. He was already excommunicated from the Church. It seemed to Robert, he wanted to take all of England with him now. Damn them all. Robert wished the lie they’d told the Templars was the truth instead. But why should my thoughts matter, I’m just some orphan cleric.

The caliph slipped both hands under his beard and sank penetrating eyes into Sir Thomas. At length Caliph Al Nasir came to a decision and spoke with a soft, modest voice, looking directly at Sir Thomas though he spoke in Arabic. Sir Thomas’ gaze drifted rudely from the caliph to Ilius, who was translating into French as Al Nasir paused.

“It distresses me to hear of such treachery in a powerful Christian like Amir Djon. I am compelled to ask why he wants to stab his own Christian brothers in the back? Is it not better to join your family against a stranger, than a stranger against your family?”

Al Nasir’s mullahs and amirs were nodding in agreement and the vizier smiled. They wanted nothing to do with some Christian barbarian mercenary king. Jihad forbids it, they decreed with each puff off the hukkah and surrah spoken to Allah.

Sir Thomas stood there, mouth agape, unsure of what to say or how to react. Surely he had not expected to be rebuked in such a manner. It irked him even more that he agreed. He looked to Sir Ralph, who was staring at the floor.

“You’re as worthless as the cleric!” Thomas whispered. He turned back to the caliph, “I believe, wise ruler, that my king has recognized the great strength and righteousness of your own kingdom, and wishes above all else, to ally himself with Mohammed’s noblest king.”

Thomas hoped that didn’t sound as pathetic aloud as it did in his head.

“Tell me this then, Ingliz,” Al Nasir said, now simply teasing this poor excuse for an envoy, “Why should I trust Amir Djon if he is too weak to fight the amir of Franz? Why should I trust an amir who offers land he does not possess? I cannot buy a one hundred dinar horse with one coin, now can I?”

Al Nasir’s Court erupted in mocking agreement.

“Sire, please, think of the advantage to having a Christian king on your side as you advance into . . .” Thomas tried weakly but the caliph cut him off mid-sentence.

“La! No!” Al Nasir said as he pointed his finger to the sky. His eyes slit instantly as Ilius translated the words and all the vehemence in that tone, that finger. The eyes told Thomas he’d gone too far.

“Why do I need your Christian amir, when Allah is by my side? Answer me that! Well? Answer me!” Al Nasir demanded. He stood up as if ready to launch himself at Thomas, who took a quick step back.

He had nothing.

“Bah!” The caliph shouted and waved at the embassy dismissively, “I would not wish your amir’s affections on my enemies! Go! Tell Amir Djon I refuse his offer with the assuredness that it is cowardly and would damn us both. Tell him he may even join with the doomed amirs of Spain. God willing, we shall meet on the field of battle.” Ilius shouted as he translated the caliph’s curse.

Never before in all his life had Sir Thomas heard such words spoken about himself or his king. What galled him most was that the caliph was right! Sir Thomas swallowed the urge to plunge a dagger into the Moors’ throat. Self-loathing secreted its bile throughout Thomas’ body.

He turned pompously and nodded for Sir Ralph to follow him. Robert stepped aside for the other two envoys to advance or retreat as it were. His unassuming looks and plain garb intrigued Al Nasir. The caliph even smiled when the meek little man bowed with prayerful hands again, then turned to follow his fellows. From behind, Robert heard the caliph call out something and then Ilius called out in French, “You there! Stop!”

All three stopped and turned, but Ilius commanded the two Normans to wait outside the antechamber for their fellow envoy. Both men scowled at Robert, who looked somewhat confused. They left grumbling in French the miserable maggot priest would ruin it all. The last thing they heard was Robert identifying himself in Latin, the language of the Church.

Robert’s knees and hands shook and his stomach clung to his spine. A serving boy brought him a silver cup filled with cool water. Once another translator was brought in, Robert de London began again. “The Caliph Al Nasir does the Christian faith, and myself, an honor in requesting a private audience. I am Robert de London, a clerical priest of the Catholic Church in service to the King of England. How may I serve thee?”

Caliph Al Nasir spoke through Ilius, who spoke through a Tuscan slave, whose Italian was very close to Latin, “Honor your faith and vocation by speaking the truth of your amir. What sort of ruler is this Djon, brother of the Lion Heart? Why does he turn his back on his faith so easily? Is he at one with his God and his people, as a wise ruler should be?”

Robert stood there transposed. His whole body felt like a taut string. He served God and King John but he had to make a choice. Above all else he wanted to speak the truth. The caliph’s decision was made, and Robert felt it was the right choice. The truth only reinforced the decree.

Of course the truth was treason, punishable by death. When Robert sinned though, he confessed and was always forgiven. Wasn’t this a kind of confession? Did not even a king need a judge on this earth? Who would know but Robert and his confessor?

Robert swallowed hard, prayed God to guide his words wisely and began, “Most wise and noble caliph, I regret to say that my king is a tyrant.” There, he said it, never mind his own duplicity. “I say John is a lion to his subjects and a lamb to his enemies.”

Al Nasir blinked at the phrase and his councilors murmured amongst themselves. Robert hit the nerve and pressed on, “Since he was crowned, John has lost half his French holdings to King Phillip, including his ancestral home of Anjou. All that is left him in France is the Duchy of Aquitaine and the County of Poitou. Many call him John the Softsword, but not to his face.”

Robert stopped to catch his breath. He’d let loose a flood. A wave of chuckles and conversations washed over the Caliph’s Court. The vizier asked a question of the caliph. Al Nasir nodded while others of the council furthered their assent for the question. Al Nasir asked Robert, “Why doesn’t Amir Djon join with the Spanish kingdoms against me? Is his sister not Queen Djoana of Castile?”

Robert was impressed by their familiarity with King John’s family. “John’s loyalty to his sister is somewhat dampened by her daughter, Princess Blanche.”

Now the Court burst out, and the hukkahs glowed as the elders conversed about such a strange place as England. “Women,” The caliph repeated aloud several times to the repeated and growing amusement of his councilors.

Al Nasir simply looked to Robert astonishingly and the strange English cleric continued, “Princess Blanche is wife to Prince Louis of France, and therefore King Phillip’s feudal claim for replacing King John with his son. He has assembled an army on the coast of Normandy to do just that. So long as Pope Innocent supports him, King Phillip may succeed as well.”

Robert took a deep breath and rubbed wet palms against his robe. He kept expecting Hardington or Fitznicholas to appear and assault him. They had not. They were gone. There was no one to defend King John’s honor, to cry treason. Robert felt free, relieved to speak his mind without fear of intervention or recrimination. Such freedom!

The council of elders offered up another question, which the caliph thought was excellent. Al Nasir felt his own reputation growing amongst his men as they feasted on strange tales of Christian amirs. Imam Rabat only strengthened Al Nasir’s call for jihad, so he prodded the Ingliz on. “And what does your Christian caliph, your pope, have against Djon?”

Robert was schooled in humility and venerable service, but just now he was basking in the hubris of respect shining on him at the infidel Court of Morocco. Robert wasn’t sure if this was sin, but it felt too good not to be.

The caliph’s question concerning the papal interdiction reminded Robert of that and he snapped back to attention, “This time it is a man, your grace. John does not want the archbishop of Canterbury chosen by Pope Innocent. He claims that traditional right as the king of England. Unfortunately, the pope chose Stephen Langton, who was in Rome as part of the embassy to settle the matter. When King John found out, he rejected Stephen Langton, who then fled to Paris. Now the pope has excommunicated King John, and is requesting King Phillip restore Stephen Langton to the archbishop of Canterbury.”

“And this archbishop of Canterbury is the caliph of England?” Al Nasir asked through Ilius.

“Indeed,” Robert agreed and hoped he was right.

Caliph Al Nasir burst out laughing, “If I had troubles such as your Djon, my people would not suffer to have me.” The Court burst out into long gales of laughter, leaving Robert feeling awkward and guilty somehow. “I pray you and your kin well, Ingliz. You are a strange lot. Still, I admire your sincerity imam Rabat; tis a brave man that speaks the truth in his heart.”

“Thank you, sire,” Robert smiled and bowed. He’d never been called brave before.

...

The double doors to the caliph's chamber opened slowly. Robert left the Court with a meaty servant carrying a small chest in tow. He found Sir Thomas and Sir Ralph next to hysterics in the hallway. They pounced on him immediately, blocking his path.

"If your miserable incompetence has hindered this mission in any way cleric, the punishment inflicted upon your wretched hide shall overcome any conception of Hell your feeble brain has ever imagined!" Thomas spat venomously in the simple English Robert understood.

"What damage have you brought upon us Saxon dog!" Sir Ralph raged down at the smiling cleric.

Robert wasn't fazed. He stated simply, if not with a touch of sarcasm, "Neither of thee noble lords hath anything to fear. Thy country remains England, thy faith remains Christian, and thy king remains John. We are to depart with the next available wind."

Both Norman jaws fell open in shock. Impotent understanding dawned across their horrified faces as Robert walked through the wall of muscle and velvet, his servant carrying the chest close behind. He had not spoken in the English they found vulgar and ugly. No, he spoke in perfect Norman French. As if the orphan cleric from London was born and bred a cultured Norman Prince!

"Why didn't you tell me he knew French, you worthless excuse for an envoy! He heard all that passed between us!" Thomas raged at Ralph.

"Me? You're the head of the embassy! You should have known!" Ralph snapped back.

As the two Normans argued, Robert walked on down the hall, smiling at his minor victory. The mission was a failure but Robert felt good about it. He was ready to return home. Even as he drew further away the Normans kept bickering. Their curses grew louder, then there was the sound of a scuffle.

"It's time to leave," Robert whispered under his breath.

CHAPTER 3- The Cleric and the King

Windsor, England: May

Outside, the shutters banged against the tower while the banners atop the roof snapped in the Thames wind. The embassy to the Caliph Al Nasir stood in the center of the drawing room to the king's quarters. John was seated in a padded wooden chair before the fire, with his gout-ridden ankle resting on plush purple pillows. He was drinking wine and playing chess with Bishop Peter de Roches, sitting beside him. John's half brother, Earl William Longsword of Salisbury, was brooding in a window seat quietly.

The embassy was exhausted from the journey home. Yesterday, just before sunset, the St. George docked at the Temple. Robert was shocked at the sight of London.

While they were gone, a fire broke out on the recently completed London Bridge. The stone bridge was not destroyed, but the tightly packed houses and shops strewn across it were

engulfed. The fire spread north and south, into London and the Southwark suburbs. Gone were some of London's finest goldsmiths, locksmiths, glovers, and bowyers, with all their families and anyone else unlucky enough to be near the bridge that fiery day.

The smell of ash hung in the air; a bad omen, Robert felt.

Aymeric, Master of the English Temple, requested their immediate presence. Over Thomas's protestations, they appeared to give him their report of the king's 'peace' mission to Morocco. Thomas remained true to the king's command and told Master Aymeric they had failed to dissuade the Caliph Al Nasir from launching his jihad against the Spanish kingdoms.

Captain Edward then repeated his report on the state of the infidel army, and gave Aymeric a sealed letter from the master of Portugal. Finally satisfied, Master Aymeric bid them sleep in the Temple, as John was in Windsor, a full day's ride to the west. Tired and weary, sick to death of the two drunken braggarts he'd fended off for three weeks, Robert was sad to learn they weren't traveling to Windsor Castle.

As they rode towards Charring Cross the next morning, Robert threw a glance back at London. Grey Roman walls marched inland from the river as far as he could see. Baynard's Castle, Montfichet Tower, and St. Paul's cathedral dominated the cityscape on the west end. To the north, where the wall turned east at New Gate, sat St. Bartholomew's. The abbey and hospital was proudly a part of London, though just beyond its walls. Robert felt just the same way.

Arriving at Windsor Castle after sunset, they were forced to wait in St. George's chapel while the dinner guests finished their evening in the Round Tower. Thomas and Ralph cursed, as was their way, grumbling over everything they could think of. Robert found a monk and asked him what the celebration was for.

"Have you been locked in a cloister?" The monk asked Robert.

"I've been away," Robert explained.

"Aye, well the king is celebrating his new alliance with Count Renaud of Bolougne and Count Ferrand of Flanders," The monk told Robert, "Our lord is quite pleased to have friends on the continent once again."

It was well into night when they were admitted into the royal presence. King John acknowledged them with a gaze and a nod. His gray and black hair was thinning, his skin pale, his paunch stout, and his gouty foot swollen at the ankle. His eyes were red rimmed, and dark patches sunk beneath them. He seemed to brood as he smiled.

Sir Thomas described their trip, the incident at sea, the size of Al Nasir's army, their treatment in the apartments. . . "Enough, Sir Thomas, tell us of the alliance," King John broke in coldly. Sir Thomas dared a glance at Sir Ralph.

"Sire . . . the infidel . . . he . . . it did not . . ."

"You failed us," King John replied and calmly took a sip of hot wine.

"My lord, I beg your leave!" Sir Thomas whined.

"Sire, this alliance would have come to naught but trouble even if the infidel had agreed!" Sir Ralph joined in their common defense, "Surely tis for the best?"

King John sat up straight in his chair and stretched out his gouty foot. "We see," he whispered and the room fell silent, "We see now. We did not send two faithful servants. Rather, we sent two conniving politicians! What say you cleric!?" King John turned his royal gaze on the third envoy.

Robert opened his mouth but nothing came out.

The price of confession, echoed off his soul.

“My lord, the infidel gave him a chest of gifts!” Sir Thomas pointed an accusing finger. “He spoke with the infidel in private! He is a blasphemer! He would sell us all to those devils! He would have us . . . he would have us . . .” Thomas recoiled at the epiphany of his own treason. The finger dropped and he dared not look at King John.

John said nothing. He simply stared at Sir Thomas, hard.

No one moved or made a sound.

John relaxed and chuckled to himself. The whole room took a breath. John’s gaze fell back to his wine cup and he drained it. Bishop Peter refilled it for him. “Perchance you’re right, Sir Ralph,” John said and pointed a lazy finger at the other envoy. The switch startled the two. “Perchance it would have come to naught but trouble.”

Ralph and Thomas relaxed and nodded in uneasy agreement.

“Well, we must all make do with what we are given,” King John joked, “Right?”

“For certes, m’lord” Sir Thomas agreed.

“Good,” John snapped back to royalty, “Then as head of the embassy, Sir Thomas, you shall have no qualms paying the Temple back their lost chest.”

Sir Thomas gasped. 1500 Pounds!

“For certes, we see no reason why the royal household or Exchequer should pay!” John argued convincingly, he was the king in his tower, after all. “Do you!?”

“I . . . uh . . .” Sir Thomas dropped his head.

He was doomed. He’d have to turn over the manors, fiefs, and wards he held in royal custody. That might enable John to pay back a fourth, maybe a third, of the debt in the knight’s name. Sir Thomas would have to come up with the rest some other way. It was a debt for life, maybe even on into his children or grandchildren’s lives. Perchance there was some deal Thomas might strike with the Order of the Temple? God, but he was doomed.

“Sir Ralph,” King John said.

“M’lord,” Sir Ralph squeaked.

“We have need of you.”

“Of me?” Sir Ralph asked innocently.

“Oui. The Irish are at it again. We received word from Lord Gray not two days ago. One of his best knights was ambushed in Ulster. His entire entourage was decimated, and the entire countryside ransacked.”

John paused for the effect to drop onto Ralph’s shoulders, and once they slumped the king continued, “It seems the Irish have forgotten who holds the end of their leash, Sir Ralph. If your tongue is not sharp enough for the infidel, mayhap your sword is sharp enough for them.”

Now it was Ralph’s turn to drop his head. Ireland. They were a proud brood of Celts and Vikings who’d been at war with the English since John’s father invaded a generation ago. They were half barbarian, if he was to believe half the things he’d heard. God, he was doomed.

“Brother, you can inform Lord Gray he has a new knight,” John relished Ralph’s dismal face.

There was a moment of silence, but then, “Oui.” Longsword agreed stoically.

“And what of you cleric? Tell us of this chest and your private audience with the infidel.” King John said, finally turning his attention upon Robert de London.

Robert took a deep breath and prayed God to see him through this. His palms were wet, his tongue was dry, his mind was racing; he’d never been so scared in his life. What if God struck him down for lying to the king? God, he was doomed!

Robert stepped forward and knelt before his King, "My most eminent and wise King John, the Caliph Al Nasir and I conducted . . . a religious discussion, thy grace. It turns out there are some practices the two faiths share, for instance . . ."

"That's all well and good . . . de London is it?" King John interrupted smoothly, while shooting a confirmatory glance across the chess board. Peter de Roches nodded silently, while Robert remembered to close his mouth.

"We are rather more interested in this chest Sir Thomas speaks of, de London. Have you some trifle on you perhaps? We would be most impressed to see what Caliph Al Nasir gives in appreciation."

Robert de London stared up at King John, frozen.

"You may rise, cleric," King John added, then took a sip of his wine.

Robert stood, "I do . . . I do, ah, indeed have a trifle, thy grace," Robert returned oddly.

Robert pulled a gold coin from his purse. It bore the profile of Caliph Al Nasir on the head, a crescent moon and star on the tail. Robert offered the coin in the palm of his hand to the king.

"An infidel bezant?" King John sighed. "I have many of these from my brother's crusade. Did he perchance give you an entire chest of these?"

"Non," Robert said gladly, "Much of the chest was taken up by a book he gave me."

"This great infidel lord gave you some gold, a book, and nothing else?" King John prodded.

"Well . . ." Robert vacillated. Should he show the king?

He did not consider what was sewed into the lining of his purse very trifling. However, it just might impress the king. Robert slipped the gold coin back in the purse and pulled on the inner stitching. Out came an almond shaped ruby that pulsed in the palm of his hand as he offered it to King John.

John sat forward, hiding his smile with his goblet. He took the ruby carelessly from Robert, who flinched as the King's nails brushed his hand. John relished a brief smile upon Robert, then held the ruby up over the candle by the chessboard.

"My . . . What do you think?" King John shot a glance at his justiciar, then refocused on the ruby immediately.

"Tis a fine bauble, sire, an expensive one," Peter de Roches replied.

Robert's throat was drying up and now the backs of his knees were moist with sweat. He wondered if he'd ever hold the ruby again. King John leaned back in his soft padded chair and placed the ruby on the chessboard.

He gave Robert another curt smile. "We are impressed cleric de London. We are so impressed, we feel obliged to reward you with a token of your great worth and value to us."

Robert swallowed hard, knowing he wasn't going to see that ruby again.

"I am thy humble servant, my lord," Robert managed evenly.

King John managed a contended chuckle, "For certes. Peter what is the relief for a deacon of St. Paul's?"

"My lord?" Peter asked in feigned misunderstanding. Churchmen did not pay a relief to the king for their offices, at least not usually, but these were not usual times.

"All too right, we should make it something more canonical for the cleric. How about St. Albans?"

Peter nodded his head slowly, giving in to the fact that John was a strong-willed and stubborn King, "Such a relief is five hundred pounds, sire." He made up the amount. "However, as you well know, the abbot of St. Albans is not a vacant office," Peter answered, passing Robert a calculating glance. He judged the cleric not worth his jealousy, but easily worth his suspicion.

“Not yet,” King John agreed.

Robert jolted in shock. Was the king talking about making him abbot of St. Albans? He was a mere scribe. The thought of such an office made Robert’s heart pump faster and faster. Was such a thing possible? Peter de Roches had done it. From orphan to abbot! Abbot Robert of St. Albans!

“Sire, may I make a suggestion?” Peter dared.

He was one of the few who could.

John took a long gulp of wine and wiped his mouth on his sleeve. “For certes, Peter. What say you?”

Peter de Roches appraised Robert once again. It made no sense to reward him in such a manner. He was still young and unproven. He had no family to speak of and no real connections. Robert had a good reputation as a scribe, but beyond that he was unknown. Of course, that was Peter de Roches a lifetime ago; for this reason, and this reason alone, he allowed a modicum of sympathy for the poor fool trembling hopefully before them.

Indeed, it made little sense to reward Robert so well, but such was the mind of their king. For all his talk about the rule of law, King John enjoyed changing them at a whim to suit his needs. This and his paranoia were John’s downfalls, but Peter knew how to play off both. He’d made a successful living at it for quite some time now.

“I think Robert will make an excellent abbot of St. Albans,” Peter first agreed with John, “when the time is right.” He smiled at his lord and rocked his wine cup, as if it were a hanging scale. “For now, though, let us hold onto his gift and find something suitable to keep him busy. Let us prepare the table for the feast, as it were.”

King John smiled and spun the ruby around with his finger. “I see, and what might we have in mind?”

“Well, there is the unfinished business between St. Albans and Binham Priory,” Peter mentioned offhandedly. “There are quite a few opportunities for us there.”

“For certes,” King John nodded and agreed.

“Our man here is an excellent scribe, and it appears he is something of a diplomat. Why don’t we see what he can make of it?” Peter postulated. “With some help, for certes; then we can take it from there.”

“I like the way we think, Peter.” King John smiled at his trusted friend, then turned his gaze on Robert, “Well then, de London, what is your full name?” The king asked formally as he sat up from a slow slouch.

“Robert de London, my lord,” Robert said, bowing humbly.

“Robert de London, we see fit to keep you on as royal envoy, with the promise of St. Alban’s as recompense for the service you have shown us on this perilous journey,” King John said with slurry regality. “For now, your generous gift shall be noted and held in the royal household until such time as it is appropriate to take office. What say you, Master Robert de London?” King John leaned forward expectantly.

Robert stood there, too stunned to think. Master Robert de London! It sounded so good, especially out of King John’s mouth! He considered the fates meted out to Thomas and Ralph. Idiots.

“I am thy most humble and loyal servant my lord.” Robert smiled.

CHAPTER 4-The King's Rules

Binham Priory, Norfolk

The royal column crested the treeless hill and Binham Priory perched before them across the little valley. A grey stone church in the Norman style dominated the rolling skyline of hedged fields. The priory buildings were wrapped all around it. Even from here several people practicing their sword strokes were plainly visible.

The priory was under siege, though not an intense one. There were no siege machines; neither the giant crossbows called petreries, nor the stone-throwing hand-pulled catapults called ballistas, nor the tension and release stone-throwers called mangonels. The monks had been forced to seek safety and shelter in the church while Lord Dunmow and his men occupied the dormitory and refectory. Despite the clash of wills between King John and Pope Innocent, Abbot John de Cell of St. Albans had broken down and requested the king's justice.

"So there it is, and there they are," William de Mandeville said from his saddle.

"We can take them," Fawkes de Breaute surmised quickly in his glib Norman accent.

Behind them were half a dozen royal knights, including the king's bastard son Oliver Fitzroy. There were a score of mounted sergeants, one hundred men at arms, and fifty archers. It was reported Lord Dunmow had a similar number of men under his command, but that sort of thing rarely worried Fawkes de Breaute. The nobles might fight one another for the victor's right to hold the other hostage, but Fawkes fought for blood. The king paid him handsomely for it.

"Now, now, Fawkes, the honey before the bee, remember?" Will chastised his colleague.

Fawkes grunted then said, "Go and get it over with then."

Will gazed back in his saddle, "Robert, come now."

Robert rode up on a mild-mannered sorrel. The little horse wasn't much taller than a pony, but Robert had little experience with horsemanship. He felt like a boy beside the two well built knights on their tall and elegant palfreys. Will spurred his horse on, his young squire following close behind, and Robert kicked the sedate sorrel to follow as best he could.

This wasn't what Robert expected when Peter de Roches and King John talked of Binham Priory. He sighed and told himself to get used to it. Behind them, Robert heard Fawkes say, "Oliver, I want the royal banner, de Mandeville's, and mine planted here for the baron to see. Have the armor wagon brought up. We'll suit up and spar to show them we mean business."

Once they were well down the road, Will opened up to Robert for the first time. It wasn't that he'd been snubbing the cleric, just bad form to chat with a commoner when there were other knights about. "So Robert, you're the cleric Peter de Roches stole from my father for the embassy to Lisbon, oui?"

Peter had warned Robert he'd be working with the justiciar's son. The chancellor told him to stick to the Lisbon story and answer any questions about that portion of the venture truthfully. Still, Robert was surprised by Will's directness.

"I simply did as I was told, sire," Robert informed Will.

"For certes, as you should. But don't you find it strange the chancellor of the Exchequer was responsible for an embassy to a foreign kingdom?"

He did, but Robert wasn't about to get into a conversation forcing him to take sides. "Far be it from me to question the king's will, sire."

Robert's soul flinched at the memory of his confession to Caliph Al Nasir. Or was it at the lie he'd just told? It was the lie, for Robert believed everything he'd told the caliph. Perhaps

some day he'd be free to say the things he thought in England without being branded a traitor. Until then, he'd say what he was told.

Will chuckled and smiled at Robert. "You're good at this. I see why they chose you."

Robert nodded back at him, "Thank you, sire."

"How was the Court of Portugal?"

"Tense," Robert replied truthfully.

"They didn't want the help of an excommunicated king?" Will asked.

"I think they were more concerned for the alliance with Castile. I did not sense friendship between the Portuguese and Castilians at their Court," Robert opined.

"Ah!" Will nodded, understanding, "Castile is quite proud of their Princess Blanche are they not?"

"Just so, sire," Robert agreed.

"And it would not do for the Portuguese to side with the king her husband's father intends to overthrow," Will surmised.

"Indeed," Robert agreed once again, "I think they have decided Caliph Al Nasir is all the enemy they need, for now."

Will chuckled and glanced at Robert, "Perchance after a glorious victory against the infidel, oui?"

"I'll let you know," Robert dared a presumptuous joke.

Will burst out in laughter, smacking the wide pommel of his saddle, "Well said, Robert."

They were drawing up the hill now, getting close to the wall and gatehouse of the priory. Several of Lord Dunmow's sergeants and bowmen were guarding it. The badges they wore were the same as the banner flying above the gatehouse: two red chevrons separated by a red bar, all on a saffron yellow field.

A man on the parapet of the gatehouse with a pointy red beard and a jaunty feathered cap shouted something over his shoulder. A very tall and muscular man appeared. His light brown hair fluttered in the wind and he smiled as he leaned forward against the parapet. "Will, so good of you to join us! I was half worried the king might send your old man!" He shouted.

"Not just yet, Adam!" Will shouted back. "It depends on the baron!"

Adam Fitzwilliam laughed and nodded, "I'll tell them you're here!" Then he disappeared to the other side of the gatehouse.

Will turned to Robert again, "We'll stick to the plan. You handle the monks and I'll handle Baron Fitzwalter. I don't think we'll have to call on the Brute." Will said, nodding over his shoulder at Fawkes de Breaute. "I'm in pretty good with the baron," He smiled assuredly.

As they passed through the gatehouse into the priory grounds, the sergeants and bowmen all bowed respectfully. Adam Fitzwilliam exited the door of the gatehouse and walked beside Will. Two pairs of men out in front of the dormitory stopped sparring with wooden swords to wave at them. Their squires and the other soldiers around them waved as well.

An older man in his late forties appeared at the door of the dormitory. It was clear he'd been a stout man in his youth, but now the girth in his chest was moving to his belly. His once red hair was now gray and auburn. Cut at his shoulders, it seemed to meld with his bushy, yet well trimmed beard.

Of everyone present, he wore the most riches: a golden band clipped to his right ear, several gold and silver chains with various pendants around his neck, gold and silver bracelets on both wrists, and several jeweled rings on both hands.

He wore handsome leather riding boots over clean red trousers, and a finely stitched black velvet jerkin was girded by a thick leather belt with a golden buckle in the shape of a shield. Two chevrons separated by a bar were painted red on it. A gilded dagger, snuggled into a jewel encrusted scabbard, was strapped to his belt.

“Will, what a pleasant surprise! How’s my daughter?” Baron Robert Fitzwalter of Dunmow greeted his new guests.

“Christiana grows lovelier by the day m’lord! Mother will miss having her about once she’s my lady,” Will retorted.

The baron smiled, but the younger of the two men that bore a striking resemblance to him burst out laughing. The younger one mumbled something under his breath to the elder brother and another knight.

“That’s my sister you’re talking about Robin!” The elder brother defended Christiana, then smacked Robin on the arm with his wooden sword.

Robin eyed his brother competitively, drew back and took a swing at his torso, “Oui, she’s mine as well!”

Walter jumped back to avoid the strike, then pressed in again, stabbing and hacking. Robin caught his brother’s moves easily, and seemed to enjoy keeping his brother at bay.

“Boys!” Baron Fitzwalter shouted, “Walter! Robin! You’re grown men. Quit acting like squires at play!”

Robert noticed two monks up in the steeple observing them.

“Robin said Will can’t wait to bed her, Father,” Walter, the elder son in his mid-twenties explained.

“But she takes after Mama, Father! Tis a compliment!” Robin shouted as he deflected two more of his brother’s strikes, and chopped an attack at his brother’s head.

“That’s it! Get him Walter!” Baron Fitzwalter encouraged his eldest son as Walter pressed another attack. The men crowding around them laughed and started cheering them on. The brother’s started taking it more seriously, but their father decided they’d taken it far enough. He looked over at Adam Fitzwilliam and winked.

“I’ll take care of this,” Adam interjected and lunged towards the two.

Walter and Robin didn’t fail to take note of the behemoth walking towards them. With the slightest of nods they turned and charged him, rearing their swords back to swing at him. Adam leaned towards Walter, taking grip of the wooden sword with his left hand as the elder brother hacked at him.

At the same time, Adam ducked to the left, avoiding Robin’s swing. He kicked Robin in the right arse cheek, sending the young man down to the ground. He then gripped Walter’s right arm with his free hand and tumbled the elder brother over his shoulder.

“That was hardly fair, cousin! There were only two of us,” Robin said as he stood, rubbing his arse.

“You deserved it,” One of the baron’s other knights commented with a smile and folded arms.

“Thanks for the support, Emeric,” Robin replied.

Robert cleared his throat and said, “Sire, if it pleases you and the baron, I shall conduct the king’s business with the prior now.”

Baron Fitzwalter and his men turned a suspicious gaze on Robert.

“Gentlemen, this is Robert de London,” Will introduced the royal envoy. “He’s one of our most promising scribes at Court, I dare say.”

“Is that so?” The baron asked and gave Robert the slightest nod, then looked to Will Mandeville again, “How is your father?”

Will sighed, “He’s as stubborn as ever on good days.”

“As he should be,” Fitzwalter defended William’s father.

“Geoff and I do our part when necessary,” Will skirted the issue of his father’s failing health, “Which, as you know, is why I’ve hastened all the way from London.”

“For certes!” Fitzwalter nodded vigorously and slapped his stomach. “And I’m glad they sent you, son. You’re the right man for the job.”

“I thank your complement, m’lord.” Will smiled and glanced at Robert, “If it shant inconvenience you over much, I was thinking of sending Robert to parley with the prior while we discuss terms here?” Will informed his future father-in-law of their task most delicately.

The baron looked up at the church, ran a hand through his beard. He gazed back over his right shoulder at the three standards floating on the wind across the vale. Several knights were sparring up on the hill, while squires oiled down chain mail armor. The largest of them all was sharpening a battle axe.

“Ah, he sent the Brute with you, how terrible,” The baron gazed back at Will and smiled. “He’s not much of a talker, now is he?” Fitzwalter distracted the issue mildly.

Will guffawed and rolled his eyes, “Dreadful, he’s positively drole; quite the soldier, though. It seems to be his only interest. I dare say he’d make an excellent Templar.”

The baron burst into laughter, “Oui, I’d much prefer him off defending the Holy Land!”

Everyone burst into quick and easy laughter. Robert was completely surprised by the ease with which they mocked one of King John’s most feared henchmen. He was even more surprised at his own laughter, but it was all true. He felt the same way during his trip to Scotland with the Brute.

“Well, I’m off then,” Robert said.

Will shooed him on with a subtle wave of his fingers. As Robert kicked his sorrel, Baron Fitzwalter said, “Will, why don’t you come down and quench your thirst, I’ve got the finest wine from Poitou fresh from La Rochelle.”

Will chuckled, “It pays to have one’s own fleet, doesn’t it baron?”

“It has its perks,” Baron Fitzwalter agreed.

As their voices faded, Robert refused to wonder if they’d ever get to the king’s terms. He focused on the task at hand. He needed to do his job well to stay in good with King John and Peter de Roches.

The undated, unsealed receipt for the gift of the ruby was folded neatly into a tiny square, and tucked into a small leather pouch hanging from a thong around Robert’s neck. Tucked covertly under his cassock, robe, and undershirt, the receipt urged him hopefully on. Though it was blank now, he saw St. Albans written clearly on it in the bright light of tomorrow.

Master Robert de London, he kept saying it over and over again in his mind. It sounded too good to be true. Four years in the service and he was already a master. All that piece of paper needed was a name, a date, and the king’s wax seal; then he’d be abbot! Abbot Robert of St. Albans. It sounded even better.

Robert told himself the first step to St. Albans was through the door of Binham’s church of St. Mary. *So be it. I’ll be the king’s man if that’s what it takes.*

...

“King John has come to the defense of mother Church! God bless the king! Tis a miracle, a miracle I say!” Prior Richard proclaimed in Latin and several monks immediately set to praying for the soul of their excommunicated king. One of the literate monks from St. Albans then translated for the local young novices and they fell to prayer too.

Robert looked around the nave of the church, crowded with monks. Buckets of rain water were placed under all the leaky spots of the roof. Blankets and cooking utensils were strewn about here and there. It smelled of men’s musk and human waste. Several chickens clucked and wandered about, pecking between the stone slabs of the floor.

“Aye, I am here to see the king’s peace is enforced,” Robert responded in the common English for all to understand.

“How many men have you? When shall you attack? Slay them I say! They are blasphemers against the house of God! Slay them all!” Prior Richard admonished Robert.

“My orders are to attempt a peaceful solution first, your grace,” Robert explained.

“What?” Prior Richard reacted with astonishment, “Have you seen what they’ve done to our grounds? They’ve ransacked every outbuilding! The dormitory and refectory are ruined! They must pay for their insolence! God demands no less.” Prior Richard argued, working up a righteous rage in the process.

“That may be well and true, prior, but I am not here in the name of God. I am here in the name of King John, and he prefers a peaceful solution,” Robert stuck by his orders. “What exactly caused the baron to lay siege here in the first place?”

“You do not know?” Prior Richard asked, still astonished and growing more irate by the moment.

Robert sighed, “I was sent here to fix a problem. I was not informed of the cause.”

“Then I’ll enlighten you,” The prior said sarcastically, “Two summers ago the previous prior was dismissed by the abbot of St. Albans. I took his stead. Baron Fitzwalter claimed the abbot had no right to do so without his assent. He claims he has the right of patronage over the priory, which is a lie! His wife’s brother is our patron.”

“And did he assent to your placement?” Robert asked.

“Who?” Prior Richard asked.

“The baron’s brother-in-law,” Robert pointed out.

“Well, nay,” The prior admitted nervously. “He has abdicated his rights of patronage.”

“How?” Robert demanded.

“He’s the chamberlain of King William the Scot, but that’s beside the point,” Richard argued.

“I see. He’s a damned Scotsman!” Robert said and some of the monks covered their faces, fighting the giggles. Now he understood. “It just won’t do to have a bloody Scot, nor his English kin, lord over some wee Norfolk Priory, now will it?” Robert railed dramatically, rubbing at his stubble.

The local monks burst into laughter.

“You’re all bloody fools! Have I taught you nothing?” Prior Richard shushed the Norfolk monks. After wagging his finger sufficiently at the local boys, he turned his attention back to Robert. “The point is the baron had a false document drawn up, a deed he claimed was from St. Albans naming him the patron in place of his brother-in-law.”

That caught Robert’s attention, and his hand instinctively lifted up to the cross on his chest. His fingers pressed to feel the secret underneath.

“The deed claims the abbot must seek the assent of the patron before assigning a new prior, but Master John de Cell has authorized no such document. It is a forgery!” Richard said assuredly.

“And so?” Robert prodded.

“So the baron took the abbot to the king’s Court and was rightfully denied his claim. He was not satisfied, so here we are.” Richard explained as if he were speaking to a small child.

Who do you think you’re talking to? “So he’s besieging the priory because of you,” Robert turned the argument around, “because he doesn’t like you, but the abbot of St. Albans does.” Robert summarized it the way he saw it.

“We have been stuck in the church for weeks! We’ve been forced to live on rain water and stale bread! He’s destroyed half the priory! Now I ask you,” the prior demanded self-righteously, “where is the justice in a peaceful outcome? Where? Tell me that?”

Robert took a deep breath and exhaled through his nose. He stared at the prior for a moment, collecting his thoughts. Richard had grown so heated, his words still echoed off the stone walls. All the monks in the church were staring at them nervously.

“First of all, it is neither your place nor mine to determine the king’s justice,” Robert said calmly but firmly.

“He has already denied the baron’s claim!” Richard shouted.

“I am not the king of England!” Robert shouted back. He’d had enough of being talked down to. “I am his envoy, and you would do well to remember that! I am not here to bargain with you. I have no such power, and if you thought otherwise tis no one’s fault but your own!” That felt good.

Prior Richard paled a little, his hard eyes softened.

“I can leave here right now and withdraw with the company of royal soldiers.” Robert pointed to the door, “I can return to his majesty, and tell him you weren’t interested in the king’s peace after all. Then, you can work out your own solution with Baron Fitzwalter. Does that sound good to you? Is that what you want?” Robert drove in the questions like a stake into the prior’s heart.

Prior Richard stood there, stunned and silent. Robert had never felt more powerful and important. Well, once before, but that was a secret. “Answer me!” Robert demanded. Something dark inside him smiled at the sound of his voice bouncing off the walls.

“N . . . Nay. Tis not what I want,” Richard replied meekly, humbled.

“Then listen closely to the king’s offer, for I shant repeat it again.” Robert said with satisfaction, “The baron shall be removed from the priory peacefully or by force if necessary. He shall be induced never to assail Bingham again by force of arms. Now, in return for applying the king’s peace, his majesty expects a token of your esteem; a gift to defray the cost of sending a royal force out to the middle of nowhere to save you.”

Richard’s shoulder’s sagged and his eyes dropped.

“Is the king understood?” Robert asked.

The prior mumbled something.

“I said is the king understood?” Robert asked more forcefully.

“Aye,” Richard croaked up.

“Then collect what valuables you have to the value of fifty pounds.” Robert announced. The crowd of monks gasped at the demand.

“My horse is outside. Place the gifts in a strong sack and mount them on the horse. I will be down at the dormitory seeing to the negotiations with Baron Fitzwalter.” Robert turned and walked out of the church.

Outside the sky was darkening as low clouds rolled in from the Channel. Thunder rumbled in the distance. Robert sighed and dropped his head. He whispered the Lord’s Prayer to himself, but still felt a clawing hollowness inside. He realized his hands were balled into fists and his jaw was clenched tight. Robert took a deep breath and shook his hands free. The guilt did not fade, but the tension did.

He walked down to the dormitory, noticing a far larger crowd gathered there than before. They were shouting and hollering encouragement. “Oh! Aye! Oui! Fitzwalter!” They shouted in unison. Robert began to hear the sound of wood smacking together. He wormed his way through the crowd and finally caught a decent glimpse of the entertainment.

Baron Fitzwalter was sparring with Will de Mandeville.

Only, they weren’t sparring. They were slashing, hacking, and stabbing with everything they had, dueling with sparring swords. Will was roughly half the baron’s age; perhaps a little older than the baron’s eldest, Walter. It did not matter. What the baron lacked in vigor, he more than made up for with experience and sagacity. He did not press a risky attack, nor did he fluster while blocking a series of strong blows.

The justiciar’s son charged and stabbed, but the baron deflected the lunge, twisting away dramatically. Fitzwalter’s men roared, applauding the show. The two turned to face each other again.

“Well done, old man!” Will complimented the baron through deep breaths.

The baron was heaving too, but clearly enjoying himself to the hilt. “Let’s finish this, boy,” He said, and they advanced upon one another again.

Robert felt himself swept up in the excitement, though he was still confused. He cheered with all the others while Will slashed from the left, and Fitzwalter blocked him. Will slashed from the right, and was blocked again. He twisted around as the baron had, preparing another strike from the left. The baron saw it coming and stabbed, but Will dropped to his right knee and left hand unexpectedly. He leaned to the left, to avoid being hit between the eyes, then stabbed the baron in the crotch.

“Oh! Nay! Non! Low Blow! Bad form!” Came shouting from the crowd. Half the men winced, their hands flung to their crotches in sympathetic pain.

“Will! What are you doing?” Walter rushed forward to prop up his bent over father.

Robin was holding himself, laughing, and cringing at the same time. Sir Emeric kept his arms folded, but couldn’t help smirking in amusement. Adam, the giant, simply said, “He can take it. Watch.”

Robert was fascinated. Baron Fitzwalter held up his left hand. He stretched himself tall again, took a deep breath, leaning on the wooden sword. “All is well. Nary a worry.”

The uproar died down.

“Are you all right, m’lord?” Will asked in genuine concern.

“An inch lower and the answer would be non,” The baron replied and Robert found himself laughing with all the others. “Twas a tricky move there, Will, one I’ve not endured before.” The baron complimented his duelist and turned to his knights, “One you’d be wise to remember.”

“Or learn,” Adam grunted to further laughter.

“I hate to admit it, but I learned it from the Brute,” Will admitted.

“Did you now?” The baron exclaimed and took a tentative step forward, using the sword as a cane. “Then we should all acknowledge his swordsmanship,” Fitzwalter turned and waved to the men atop the hill.

The crowd joined in. The figure standing beside the three banners, resting an axe on his shoulder, leaned into the wind. The baron turned back to William and stood tall. “Well then. We’re even now, I believe. Shall we finish this?”

“Indeed, m’lord,” Will agreed.

They raised their sparring swords between their eyes and nodded to one another. Dropping the swords down, the baron and the justiciar’s son began circling one another.

“My mistake, really,” the baron explained. “I didn’t know we were dueling under the king’s rules.” The baron advanced, and they shared a terrific series of strikes, low and high, slashing and stabbing.

They drew off, and Will smiled, “Oh? Neither did I. And what, pray tell, are the king’s rules?”

Baron Fitzwalter’s eyes drooped devilishly. “What, the Brute didn’t tell you?” He charged, lunging and stabbing at Will, who deflected it to the right. Fitzwalter continued forward though, bringing up his right elbow into Will’s cheek. Will stumbled back, and the baron struck him with his left fist in the eye; then swept his sword up, smacking Will across the right side of his face.

Blood splattered on Robert’s chest, hitting his cherry wood cross.

The baron lunged forward with his left shoulder, bowling Will over and down to the ground. When Will caught his breath, and the void of pain left him, he opened his eyes. Baron Fitzwalter was standing over him, the tip of the sparring sword at his neck.

The baron smiled, “The king’s rules are simple, Will, there are none.”

Fitzwalter threw the sparring sword to the ground and offered Will his hand, “Come on up, son. Are you alright?”

...

“Can I ask a question?” Robert broke the silence as he and Will de Mandeville rode up the hill towards the Brute. The baggage of gilded plates and goblets clattered with each hoof fall. Will nodded. His face was swollen, but his heart apparently light.

“What just happened?” Robert asked.

“Why we were negotiating, of course,” Will answered.

“Negotiating?” Robert balked.

Will sucked in his breath, “What did you expect? I can’t treat him like that common English cleric you dealt with. He’s one of the richest and most powerful barons in the realm, and soon to be my father-in-law.”

“So what were the terms?” Robert wondered.

“They were simple. If I won, the baron departed peaceably on the morrow, and I escorted him home to Dunmow in Essex.” The king’s terms, thought Robert, without the threat of unleashing the Brute.

“But you did not,” Robert argued.

Will turned his red and swollen face on Robert. Blood was drying in his moustache, and his eyes were sunken under puffy cheeks. “I didn’t?” His squire chuckled.

“What were the baron’s terms, then?” Robert asked.

“They were simple too,” Will responded, “He’ll depart peaceably on the morrow. I’ll escort him home, and the king will provide the baron the privilege of hunting the king’s deer in the Great Essex Forest. Also, he won’t be held to account for repairs to the priory.”

“But those were not the king’s terms,” Robert pointed out, “How do you know John will agree to them?”

“I don’t,” Will sighed, “You still have much to learn, Robert. Father, or my brother Geoff, if he’s too ill, will not deny the terms. The royal Court will make its ruling. Once John hears of it, he can make his own decision. By then, the siege is long over and it becomes a matter between his majesty and the baron. However, I think the king will find Baron Fitzwalter’s continued loyalty well worth the price of a few deer.”

Thunder rumbled close now and the somber gray sky began pelting them with large, cold drops of water. The more Robert began to understand, the more cold he felt. How easily the system is manipulated. He raised his hand to his chest, placing it on the cross that hung over his robe and squeezed on the pouch underneath it.

Master Robert de London, what have you gotten yourself into?

They were soaked when they met Fawkes and Oliver Fitzroy.

“You lost,” The Brute said after one look at Will’s face.

“Apparently your gutter move displeased the baron,” Will pointed out.

Fawkes grunted and smiled, wet black hair clung to his face like devil’s locks. Oliver started to chuckle.

“For the price of a little embarrassment the baron shall depart for Essex on the morrow. We’re done here,” Will announced.

“I could have taken him,” Fawkes repeated his very first statement.

“More’s the pity we must have peace instead,” Will mocked him.

Fawkes hacked up some spit, eying Will unpleasantly. “I have business to attend to. The Welsh are up in arms again in Glamorgan.”

“Take your men and leave the king’s with me,” Will pointed out, “I see you’ve set up your tents for the night. I shall withdraw back to the priory to ensure the baron tries nothing this evening.”

“Of course you will,” Fawkes shot back sarcastically.

“Robert?” Will ignored the Brute as he turned his horse around, “Are you coming?”

Robert looked from Will to Fawkes as they stared one another down, hate etched on both their faces. He knew whose company he preferred, and pulled his horse’s reigns around, then silently followed Will.

CHAPTER 5 – The Secret Master

St. Albans, Hertfordshire

The column trudged into town on Watling Street; the inhabitants, in their modest clothing, stopping to stare at the procession. Three squires were at the lead, holding the king’s triple lion banner, the de Mandeville’s quadrants of yellow and red, and Fitzwalter’s chevrons and bar. Behind them rode Sir William de Mandeville and Baron Fitzwalter in all their noble finery.

Then rode Walter Fitzwalter and Adam Fitzwilliam, and behind them Robin and Robert de London. Most of Fitzwalter's men had turned off ten miles north of St. Albans, heading east towards the baron's Hundred of Bennington. Still, his bowmen, led by the ranger with the jaunty feathered cap, and the royal soldiers followed close behind with the baggage.

With each step, St. Albans cathedral stood taller over the shingled roofs of the burgh. Plastered and whitewashed to symbolize the purity of God, the cathedral seemed to glow, to radiate holiness. The town gave way to the walled-in gardens of the abbey on the left and a wide grassy field leading to the west front and gatehouse. The trip south was wet and bumpy, but it was also over.

"We're here," Robert whispered to himself and stared up at the magnificently tall Norman church.

Thunder rumbled far away, and a herd of sheep bleated in the field. The cross-shaped building dominated the skyline, the town, and the abbey dominated the very lives of everyone in the vicinity. The two towers of the west front were unfinished, however, the work having halted due to the king's conflict with the pope.

"Sir Laurence! We return with the king's peace!" William announced for all to hear once the seneschal of the abbey, its lone brother knight, came out to greet them from the three story, yellow stone gatehouse. It looked like a fortified manor with a throughway.

"Sir William, tis good news indeed. Baron Fitzwalter, I'll announce your arrival to Master John de Cell," Sir Laurence greeted them formally.

"We'll stay in the King's House, and send word to the abbot of our intentions shortly," Will took charge, using his power as son of the justiciar.

Laurence smiled obediently, "As you wish m'lord."

The knights and Robert funneled into the gateway, followed closely by the royal and baronial sergeants. The gatehouse opened onto a vast grassy square covered by a few trees and several different paths leading to the various buildings ringing them in. Monks, servants, and travelers were all about. Several noble children in colorfully expensive clothing were playing below the trees under the gaze a nursemaid. A pair of young couples, commoners by their modest dress, were picnicking a polite distance away from the noble children. A young squire was receiving riding lessons from his sire further across the Courtyard.

To the right were the long stables. To the left was the guest house made of yellow stone, which was connected to the bakery. Across the yard was a long row of servant's quarters, with a gatehouse leading to the southern grounds of the abbey.

Robert had stayed at St. Albans several times before, while a scribe of the Court. He'd stayed in the servant's quarters, in the guesthouse, and even at a tavern in town, but never in the King's House. It felt like Robert was entering the abbey anew for the first time. His heart beat against the secret pouch in excitement.

All this will be mine. Robert thought with selfish exhilaration, followed closely by an unsettling sense of guilt.

The column passed under the arched throughway of the guesthouse, entering the Abbot's Yard, which was a quarter the size of the main one. The abbot's lodging and offices, built into the southern side of the cathedral, were to their left. Ahead of them was the cellar and larder house, and to their right was the King's House.

Like the cathedral, the King's House was made of granite, plastered and whitewashed. Great care was taken to keep its walls free of grime, and it too glowed amidst the other buildings.

Inside the house, fresh rushes mixed with mint covered the hallway floors. Beautiful wall hangings depicting religious scenes and those of English history lined the halls.

While the baggage was unloaded, a gang of kitchen servants hauled in fresh food for their guests. Meanwhile, Robert personally oversaw the handling of his chest and baggage to the chaplain's room, which was beside the chapel on the first floor. A room to myself! What a luxury!

Once Robert was comfortable his things were secure, he left the room and found the nobles congregating in the solar room. It was furnished with the finest rugs, tapestries, and furniture royalty could buy. Walter, Adam and Emeric were playing dice, while pages and squires hustled about with slices of bread, cheese, and ham as well as silver goblets of wine. Will de Mandeville and the baron were sitting in large oak chairs cushioned with velvet. Between them was a heap of boiled eggs, which they were devouring with wine.

"Tis far too quiet in here," Fitzwalter was saying to Will, "surely there's a minstrel in the guesthouse or at the Swan Inn. I think I'll send someone to scavenge us some entertainment."

"Ah Robert, good of you to show yourself," Will said when he noticed the cleric. "There's still plenty of day left and I'm certain the abbot will want to hear the news of Binham Priory. I need you to see to it." The swelling was down, but his eyes were still black and blue.

"For certes," Robert smiled and bowed. *Now's my chance.* The secret master wanted to tour his domain.

Rather than simply cross the Abbot's Yard, Robert left the western door of the King's House. It opened onto another small bailey with the bakery and granary to the right, kitchens to the left and the laundry across the yard. The smell of fresh bread and boiling vegetables awakened a deep hunger in Robert, one not satisfied by mere food.

Since he was dressed in priestly robes and wore a tonsure, no one thought to question Robert as he went about the abbey grounds on his secret inspection. He was immensely impressed with the work the lay brothers performed in the animal farm, vegetable and herb gardens, orchards, and sheering pens. Robert was delighted at the diligence with which the monks of St. Albans produced the leather bound, illustrated, gilt lined religious works in the abbey's scriptorium. He saw the unfinished renovations of the dormitory and refectory, where the monks ate their meals, and understood there was much to do here.

All this will be mine.

He felt almost giddy at the prospect of so much authority and responsibility; so much freedom. Then a pang of guilt nipped at his conscious, and he felt himself reflexively reaching for his rosary beads. Robert entered the cathedral and marveled at the soaring roof painted with images of saints. The nave seemed to extend forever. The emptiness conferred an ethereal and holy serenity to him. There were a few pools of standing water from the recent heavy rains, but leaky roofs were nothing new to Robert.

Quietly, he found the shrine of St. Alban. Raised on a dais, housed in gold and silver plated oak, encrusted with jewels, the bones of the first English martyr to Christ were second in importance only to the shrine of Thomas Beckett at Canterbury.

Robert kneeled and made the sign of the cross. He took a deep breath and began to pray. *Holy Saint Alban, please forgive the treachery I must force on the Church in the name of the king. It pains me to do such things. It pains me to serve an excommunicated king. I wish to serve God without serving John, but I am torn between two masters.*

For now, I am forced to hide the truth that I am the next abbot. For now, I am forced to do as King John bids, but someday I will declare myself the way you did. When that day arrives, I will give myself solely to God, through you St. Alban.

When that day arrives, I will be free.

For a heartbeat Robert questioned whether he was up to the task, but then he thought of Thomas and Ralph. He had to be, he had to be strong.

Robert was saying the Lord's Prayer when he heard small steps working their way up to him. "Are you Robert de London?" A child's voice asked. It seemed weary and tired, as if the boy had asked that question a thousand times only to hear non.

Robert opened his eyes and realized his right hand had taken hold of the secret pouch under his robe, and the cross hanging over it. He let go with a sudden jerk. The boy noticed but didn't understand. "I am indeed Robert de London, and who are you, novice?" Robert asked.

The boy was already in the drab robe of a Benedictine monk, but he had years to go before he'd be accepted into the Order. "I am Matthew, your grace," The boy said, "Abbot John wishes to see you. I've been looking everywhere, I started at the . . ."

Robert nodded and put his hand on the boy's shoulder. "Shall we see the abbot then?"

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Abbot John de Cell was sifting through a pile of papers on a table against the wall of his office. Another table was covered in gold and silver goblets, wine flagons, and plates filled with half-eaten bread, apples, and cheese. Candelabras interspersed throughout the room kept the light soft and the air warm. A golden cross hung from one wall, and a tapestry depicting the story of St. Alban hung from another.

All of it was Robert's. Everything he'd seen, just not yet. He took a deep breath and basked in his secret mastery.

John de Cell wore a comfortable black velvet, fur-lined robe, and had a full head of graying hair, since it was an abbot's privilege to give up the tonsure. A middle aged monk in similar attire was ranting at him in Latin, "Tis a sign of the brethren's disrespect is all! They will adjust! As prior of Belvoir, I am entitled to spend funds as I see fit. They are still fed and clothed and housed. What have they to complain about, honestly?"

"Roger, I agree there must be some time to adjust from . . . the last prior to you. Mayhap they're just startled by the suddenness of the change. Perchance they find it strange you lavish such feasts on guests you ravage in your commentaries," John de Cell commented dryly.

He turned around, and his mouth curled slightly at sight of Robert. "But for now we shall let things rest, Roger. We have spoken as the brothers at Belvoir requested, and I trust you shall find a way to ease their fears. Now, I must speak with the king's envoy about Binham, if you don't mind?"

Roger Wendover smirked, "I'll deal with them, alright." Then he turned and stalked out without so much as acknowledging Robert.

"Robert de London, I haven't had the pleasure of your acquaintance. I'm Abbot John de Cell. I must say, when the king's men left here a fortnight ago I did not expect such immediate results. Thank you for providing the king's justice. One might be tempted to hope this is a step in the direction of reconciliation," The abbot said as he poured two silver goblets full of wine, offering one to Robert.

“Indeed, the matter was solved more smoothly than I expected,” Robert replied diplomatically.

“So tell me,” John de Cell said as he leaned his backside against the table, “what is to happen to Fitzwalter?”

Robert took a good sip of the strong wine to fashion a suitable answer. “Baron Fitzwalter was offered the carrot or the stick, in a manner of speaking, your grace;” he replied, “and the king’s peace was achieved with the carrot, as it were.”

John de Cell’s brows furrowed and his eyes narrowed. “Are you telling me the baron hasn’t been chastened?”

“He’s left Binham Priory and vows not to return again, your grace,” Robert offered the best possible version of events he could think of.

“Aye, that is all well and good,” John said, his voice growing harder as he took in Robert’s interpretation, “But certainly the king saw fit to punish Baron Fitzwalter for denying the king’s ruling at Court in such a violent way? Such was the nature of the request I sent to his majesty.”

Robert took another leisurely gulp of wine, deciding it was time to lie. “I am not entirely certain how Sir William de Mandeville deemed it best to punish the baron, your grace. He did promise me that if the king was discontent with the peace, it would be dealt with anew.” He felt better having layered it with some truth.

John de Cell took a sip of wine and nodded his head in ironic amusement, “The king sent William Mandeville to deal with Baron Fitzwalter. I shouldn’t be surprised if the baron walks away with a profit.”

Robert swallowed hard.

“At least tell me the baron must pay for the damage,” John de Cell demanded calmly.

Robert took another long gulp of wine, and the abbot nodded knowingly.

“Non, he does not,” John de Cell said. The abbot put the goblet of wine down on the table and gave Robert an analytical eye. He decided Robert was clearly an intelligent and well-spoken cleric, perhaps someone’s new favorite. Archbishop Stephen Langton would hear of this. Pope Innocent would hear too. This was not over. Not with the baron. Not with the king.

“Robert, as a religious man I am certain you know the risks King John takes with all our souls, indeed our very lives, in this confrontation with Pope Innocent,” John de Cell said. He’d decided to test the cleric and the king at the same time. “Does his majesty think the Church so weak, so timid, so stupid, as not to recognize an affront to its rights, honors, and privileges?”

“I cannot imagine that to be true of our king, your grace,” Robert defended King John, “And certainly the pope’s interdict weighs as heavily on my soul as it does yours.” *I’ll not speak for King John’s.*

“Certainly,” John de Cell quipped, “Please inform his majesty that the abbot of St. Albans does not recognize the king’s justice.”

“But the king’s peace . . .” Robert began and was cut off.

“The king’s peace is not the same as the king’s justice, Robert. Don’t play me for a back country prior. It demeans the both of us,” John de Cell cut Robert down calmly.

“I . . . uh,” Robert stammered. No, this was nothing like dealing with some back country prior, “Twas not my intention your grace.”

“For certes,” The abbot was so sarcastic as to render the phrase moot.

“Your grace, there is still . . . ah, there is still the issue of the gift pledged to the king,” Robert said and noticed the wine rippling in his shaking hand.

“Indeed, there is,” John de Cell agreed, “And please inform the king he will receive said pledge when justice has actually been done. . . and not a day before!” The abbot finally shouted. Robert’s hand shook, and he spilled wine down his arm.

The abbot sighed and gave Robert a reproachful eye. “Mayhap you should spend more time contemplating God, Robert. I fear the Church is harming herself by raising clerics to serve worldly men. Tis only natural the weaker of you will succumb to the temptations of the Court. You would do well to learn that.”

...

Robert heard the revelry upstairs. Fitzwalter had found his minstrel. It sounded like he’d found several of them. Servants were transporting more trays of food and a cask of wine upstairs. It seemed Will and Fitzwalter had invited most of the guesthouse over.

Robert felt the sudden urge to check his chest. He made his way down the hall towards the chapel and paused. There was heavy breathing coming from within the chapel, a moan, the sound of flesh slapping. Robert tip toed to the door beside the open chapel. He dared not look over his shoulder and opened the door as quietly as possible. There was another couple in there despoiling his bed. His small chest of treasures was underneath the bed. Robert ground his teeth and clenched his fist.

“Hey! What are you doing?” The woman on her back screamed as she locked eyes with Robert.

“I’m almost there!” Her man moaned, oblivious.

Robert backed out of the room and closed the door. He took a deep breath and told himself they were there for one reason, and it was not to steal his treasure. It was tucked into the corner, and his bag was lying on top of it. *It’ll be fine.*

He went upstairs to find a crowded celebration in the solar room. There was a band of minstrels beating the tambor, strumming the gitern, bowing the viol and blowing several different lutes and recorders. It was a gusty, festive song and a dozen or so young men and women in fine and bright attire were dancing and laughing blissfully.

In the left corner, a small crowd of young sirs and ladies were sipping and flirting and chatting. Other small congregations seemed to orbit around the solar room at will. Will de Mandeville, Fitzwalter, and several other older men sat around the fire, telling stories to one another.

Pages and squires skittered about, getting their ladies and sires whatever they wished. Many of them were running around and playing as young ones do. A tan and white beagle was running around, barking, and being chased by some of the young kids who were also being chased by an irate nursemaid. It was all so different.

A large strong hand fell on Robert’s left shoulder, and he shrunk back.

“Easy there, cleric, I mean no harm!” Adam Fitzwilliam laughed and slugged back half his goblet of wine. “Robert de London, isn’t it?”

Robert nodded, “And you’re Sir Adam Fitzwilliam.” Robert acknowledged the man who was so much taller and broader than he.

“I’m looking for someone to play dice with,” Adam said as he swayed, squeezing Robert’s shoulder. “Do you see those cowards over there?” Adam pointed to a clutch of young men conversing with several young ladies and their handmaidens. Robert recognized Walter Fitzwalter alone among them all.

"I don't know that they're necessarily cowards, sire," Robert replied.

"Non, they are. They've all retreated from the dice. Come, we'll bully them into another round."

"But sir, I must inform Sir William of my meeting with the abbot," Robert evaded.

"Trust me. You don't want to interrupt the old men with business when they're well in their cups," Adam said. Robert wasn't sure what to do. He'd never been in a situation like this before.

"This is important," Robert protested.

Adam squeezed his shoulder gently and winked. "Robert those men sitting with the baron and Sir William are Baron Eustace de Vescy of Alnwick and Earl Richard de Clare of Hertfordshire. As you might guess, Richard is still brooding over his lost daughter. In fact, this is the first time he's left Clare Castle since hearing the news."

"Lady Madilyn," Robert gasped and made the sign of the cross. She had the bad taste to tell the truth of what happened to Duke Arthur, King John's nephew and rival for the throne. Her husband was Arthur's jailer, and so she refused to give the king hostages as security for family debts; having told a hall of noble guests she'd never hand over her children to a king who killed his own nephew to secure the crown.

When John finally caught her, Lady Madilyn and her son were thrown into a dungeon and forgotten. They died of hunger. Her husband fled to France and died among the exiled bishops of England. Madilyn de Clare's fate came to light a few weeks before Robert went to Morocco.

"May God have mercy on her soul," Robert whispered.

"And may He spare none for John," Adam added, then wisely moved on, "Eustace's boy just married Isabelle Longsword a few days ago, but it was a rather dull affair with the pope's interdict now wasn't it?" Adam pointed out.

"William Longsword's daughter?" Robert asked.

"Aye, she's over there with her sister, Lady Ida," Adam nodded. "Have a thing for Salisbury do you?" He spoke in the half and half Anglo-Norman tongue of the shire nobility.

"What? Nay!" Robert stammered, confused briefly by all the noise and frolicking.

Adam laughed. "Whatever you have can wait until morning. Now let's dice, shall we?"

"I don't know how to play," Robert resisted, "And it's a sin."

"Life is a sin Robert, and I can teach you," Adam slurred.

"I'm only an envoy, little better than a scribe. The king doesn't pay me well enough to afford losing my supper," Robert offered his last defense.

"Nonsense. If you have a silver pence you have enough," Adam laughed and wrapped his arm around Robert, pulling him over to the corner where the other young sirs and ladies were chatting and flirting.

"Robert the scribbler's going to dice with me!" Adam announced to the little corner. The small crowd stopped and gave Robert the briefest once-over.

"Are you boys too cowardly to go where the scribbler dares?" Adam taunted them.

"If we play one more round will you leave us be, Adam?" One of the young men Robert had not seen before asked. He spoke with a thick Northumbrian accent, "You have the devil's fingers when it comes to dice, and I want to spend some time with my lady."

"There's plenty of time for that later tonight, young William," Adam said as he smiled and bowed at the Longsword sisters.

William Vescy took the younger sister's hand into his own and kissed her fingers. She smiled and blushed, "Go on then William, have your fun with the bear."

“We shall be right here,” Ida Salisbury said primly to Baron Fitzwalter’s eldest son, Walter. He nodded slightly.

“Excellent! Another round!” Adam roared and pulled the dice from his purse. “Now boys, our new friend hasn’t the foggiest idea how to play.”

“All the better!” The Northumbrian William de Vescy decided.

“Gilbert, why don’t you start the round and mayhap Robert will have the hang of it before his turn comes up,” Adam said and handed Gilbert de Clare the dice.

They all kneeled down by the wall and settled into dicing. Adam explained the rules to Robert while Gilbert cursed after rolling snake eyes. Adam’s squire came up bearing a plate loaded with goblets of wine. Several pages appeared simultaneously with silver plated flagons of wine, plates of fruits and cheeses, and pastries and sweetmeats.

“Say Reggy, where’s my son?” Adam asked his page.

Reggy nodded over towards the fire, “Page to the baron, sire. He’s keeping the lord’s cups filled.”

Adam smiled as Reggy filled his cup, “Ah, the cup bearer. Now, when do you two become squires again?”

Reggy rolled his eyes, “Next summer. It’ll never come fast enough.”

“Oh, it’ll come sooner than you think,” Adam reassured him, then noticed Robert seemed a little out of sorts. “Here, this isn’t a sin too is it?” Adam asked as he offered the full cup to Robert.

Robert took the cup, looked down at the wine, then smiled and shrugged, “If it is, I suppose I’m only a man.” He took a good haul.

“That’s the spirit Robert!” Adam laughed, smacking his back. He shot Reggy a glance, who knew to go get him another cup.

When it was Robert’s turn Walter asked, “Alright cleric, what have you to wager? We shant disparage you a half pence if you must.” The other young nobles laughed, but Robert was feeling pleasantly warm in his stomach and lightheaded as well.

“A half pence?” Robert said, “That I have, but perchance one of you fine sirs will change this out?” He asked in Anglo-Norman and pulled out his gold coin.

“What’s that?” Gilbert de Clare asked.

“A gold mark, you clod,” Walter Fitzwalter said.

“Watch who you’re calling a clod, I’ll be your lord someday!” Gilbert laughed and shoved Walter.

“Only over Bennington,” Walter laughed and shoved back.

“I know it’s a gold mark, but where from? Is it a bezant from the Holy Land?” Gilbert asked.

“Tis like no gold mark I’ve seen before,” Adam said as Robert flipped it.

“Tis a gold mark from the caliph of Morocco,” Robert said proudly.

“An infidel bezant? Where did you get it?” Walter asked.

“Portugal,” Robert lied, flipping it slowly several times.

“I’ll give you a shilling for it,” William de Vescy offered.

“Cheapskate!” Walter declared, “Don’t listen to him Robert. Two shillings is the going rate. Look here, I’ve the coinage in this purse, easy.” Walter dangled his purse and dropped it into his left hand, the bulge of coins clanged together.

“I’ll take you one further Robert,” Adam said and burped, “Three shillings. Thirty six pence are yours for the taking. Hell, most of them are Walter’s anyway.”

Adam burped again and weighed both of the purses hanging from his belt. He untied the lighter one and dropped it on the floor in front of Robert. It made a loud metallic thud. Thirty six silver pence for one gold Caliph al Nasir. It was three years wage for a royal cleric of the Court.

“How can I refuse?” Robert shrugged.

“That a boy!” Adam laughed and smacked Robert’s back again, nearly bowling him over. It was the most money Robert had ever possessed. After several rounds of dice and as many glasses of wine, he’d lost half of it to all of them. They were much pleased by the new dice mate.

Walter’s younger brother, Robin, came up to the crowd with his wife Lady Anne. They were both red cheeked, breathless, and sweating from dancing the night away. “What’s so fascinating about this dark corner, gentlemen?” Robin asked. “I fear you’re boring the ladies to death.”

Robert looked up and forgot to blink as he stared at Lady Anne. She was radiant: as tall as her husband, neither too skinny nor too fat, her bosoms heaving from the dance. Her light green dress flattered the long blond hair tied into a tight braid, with wisps and tendrils of hair floated and glowed in the soft light. Her smile was perfect and her laugh a delight to his ears.

“Ladies, shall I drum up some fine champions for you if your husbands won’t dance?” Lady Anne offered. The several young ladies-in-waiting about them burst into a chorus of giggles.

Isabelle Longsword, the younger of the two sisters, stood. “Non, I don’t think that shall be necessary. William I desire a dance with my new husband.” She batted her long dark eyelashes, and the heir of Lord Alnwick was done for.

Gilbert offered his hand to one of the prettier ladies-in-waiting, who smiled and followed eagerly. Ida looked to Walter with a hopeful gaze, but he drained his wine and frowned at her.

“I’m going to see what father’s all about,” Walter stood and wandered through the crowd. Ida sighed as she watched her husband cross the crowded solar room.

“Another round of dice?” Adam asked Robert.

Robert’s head was swimming. “I think I’m off to bed.”

“Another drink then!” Adam roared and emptied the remains of his cup into Robert’s.

“I’ve never drunk this much before.” Robert took yet another gulp.

“Then tonight is a night of firsts, isn’t it?” Adam chuckled and called for more wine.

When Robert finally said goodnight he made his way downstairs again. At the foot of the stairs he bumped into someone heading up from the dark hallway. “Watch it, Robert,” The man said and shot up the stairs.

Robert swiveled in his buzzy haze, “Sir Walter?” The figure did not respond.

This time the chapel was silent. Robert unlatched his door and nearly fell over as his weight threw it open. In the dim light of a nearly finished candle, he just made out the shadowy form sitting on his bed.

“You can knock can’t you?” A young woman gasped and pulled a sheet up over her breasts.

“What?” Robert was terribly confused and the wine wasn’t helping. “What are you still doing here? This is my room.”

“Trying to make a living, no thanks to you, love,” She quipped.

“What?” Robert repeated as his mind adjusted to the swimming sensation engulfing him. “Here? This is an abbey. This is the King’s House!” He declared and almost fell over.

“I know where I am,” She replied, dropping the sheet to slip an undershirt over her head. Robert felt a powerful urge overcoming him at the sight of her nakedness.

“I . . .” Robert didn’t know what to say. “I . . .” He felt weak and powerless as his body declared its long subdued need.

She sighed and stared at him. Her undershirt was clumped around her thighs and the dark shadow between beckoned.

“I’m Robert de London,” He finally remembered his name, “I . . . uh.”

“I’m Delilah,” The young woman replied and pulled her loose hair out from under the shirt. She shook it out, yawned, stretched and then smiled at him. “Well, close the door Robert. I suppose you want me to pay rent for the use of your room?”

“This is wrong,” Robert declared as he shut the door behind him.

CHAPTER 6-The Nun from Fontrevault

London: July

Robert gazed southwards, taking in the St. George mooring at the dock of the English Temple. The grey Thames swirled by, and the green fields of Kent crept right up to the river. Robert smiled at the sound of Captain Edward berating his crew for rushing their final chores. Three cloaked figures walked down the planks and headed for Robert and Peter de Roches.

“Just do as I told and all will be well,” Peter whispered to Robert. Robert nodded. He was to handle the guest from Fontrevault Abbey, while the bishop greeted King John’s seneschal of Aquitaine.

“Peter,” Robert called under his breathe as the three figures came close, “the guest from Fontrevault is a . . .”

“They aren’t called the brides of Christ for nothing, Robert.” Peter smiled.

The guest pulled back the hood of her cloak. The sisters of the Order of Fontrevault wore a white tunic with a black waist belt. A white wimple covered her head and a black veil hung before her face. Robert could just barely make the outline of her face. She was smiling.

“Peter, I think this bishopric is going to your head,” the seneschal of Aquitaine cracked as he lifted his head. He had a familiar smile for the bishop of Winchester, “Either that or the chancellorship. Are you not master of the whole place yet?” The tall well dressed figure asked in Peter’s Poitevan French.

Peter laughed, and the two men hugged, kissing on both cheeks in the Frankish fashion. “Savaric de Mauleon, you look marvelous, as usual, you good for nothing troubadour. I can’t wait to hear your latest lies. They’ll have us all in tears, for certes.”

The two men turned and walked down the docks, arms over shoulders and laughing about the old days with King Richard the Lion Heart. Robert smiled at the bride of Christ and at the monk in black hovering behind her. Fontrevault was one of the few orders for both nuns and monks.

“We should follow them,” Robert said curtly in Latin. The nun took up a step beside Robert and walked down the dock. “Forgive me, I’m Robert de London, secretary of the chancellor; and you must be . . .” Robert started.

“I am Sister Maud of Fontrevault,” The nun replied back in Poitevan. She hooked her arm and waited for Robert to scoop it. He was taken aback. He’d not expected it, but took her arm nonetheless. It felt odd walking with a bride of Christ hanging on his arm; like he was about to wed God.

“The king does not deign to greet us?” The nun asked in Poitevan.

“His majesty is taken with the knighting and betrothal of Prince Alexander of Scotland,” Robert explained in clear French.

“So the boy becomes a man,” Sister Maud replied.

“Of a sort,” Robert said, “It’s not every fourteen year old that gets knighted, but his father King William is quite old and quite ill.”

“And it will not do to have a squire for a king, should the father die,” Sister Maud reasoned, “Will the young knightly prince be paying homage to our King John as well?”

“Just so,” Robert agreed, pleasantly surprised at her worldly grasp of life.

“And you mentioned betrothal?” Maud asked.

“Oui, he is to marry John’s daughter, Joana,” Robert said.

“It’s not every man that gets to marry a princess,” Sister Maud commented with an odd passion.

“Well, she is only two. It will be some time before they’re wed,” Robert explained.

“Tell me about this Peter Wakefield that’s been causing the king so much fret,” Sister Maud requested, and rubbed at Robert’s hand. His mind boggled. Had a nun just rubbed his hand?

“Oh, there’s nothing much to say,” he stalled while his mind struggled from her caress.

“He’s just a hermit from Yorkshire, that believes God told him King John will die before Ascension Day next May,” He finally managed in his best French.

“Scandalous,” Sister Maud said and squeezed Roberts arm. “It’s traitorous, sinful, and quaint all at once. Tell me more,” She urged Robert.

Who is this nun? “Well, the king’s men locked him up as soon as they heard him preaching at a fair,” Robert explained.

“Naturally,” Maud justified the king’s decision.

“And now the common folk are rumbling over the king’s sheriffs and their cruel ways; nothing new,” Robert fed her all the gossip.

“For certes, this hermit’s a rustic after all,” She seemed unsurprised by any of it.

“Apparently, Peter has his faith, if he hasn’t much else,” Robert went on, “He’s declared King John may do with him as he wishes if the prediction is false.” The hermit was the choice gossip at Court lately; that and who intended to invade whom first, King John or King Phillip.

“Good for him, it shows character,” Sister Maud said, intrigued, “Yet, one should beware offering the king free reign in a matter. He just may find the necessity to act accordingly, especially our lord King John. Don’t you agree?”

“That may be so,” Robert indulged the nun uneasily. “Have you news of the Spanish crusade, perchance?” Robert asked, curious for news before they got down to the more urgent matters for which King John called home two of his most trusted agents on the Continent.

“They have won a miraculous victory! God bless us all,” Sister Maud waxed, “They stopped the infidel advance at a place called Las Navas de Tolosa. The Moors’ great caliph was so horrified he died not long after. The southern lands of Iberia await our Spanish brothers, yet I fear the kings of Castile and Aragon have let the victory go to their heads. There has been no word of further victories despite the caliph’s death.”

“The victory is a miracle, indeed,” Robert agreed and kept his mouth shut.

He was deeply impressed and utterly boggled with Maud. “Sister Maud, I must confess, I thought Fontrevault was a monastery.”

“Oh, it is,” Sister Maud nodded, patting his hand sympathetically, “But the hens run the roost, so to speak.” She went on to tell him the Order of Fontrevault was made up largely of

noble daughters, sisters, and wives of England and France. The monks were largely those nobles who had openly displayed their preference for their own kind. The abbey was on the Poitevan border with Anjou, occupied by King Phillip. Set between the royal Houses of Plantagenet and Capet, Maud was attached to a spider's web of gossip.

As they walked up the docks, the little group passed the river terrace where Templar knights were sparring. Sister Maud mumbled something under her breath. Robert decided not to pry, but he thought he heard her say, 'the perfect ones are always untouchable.'

Peter led them past the cloistered dorms, refectory, and chapter house to the beautifully round nave of the Temple church. It was designed as a miniature replica of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, from which the Templars received their name. The bishop of Winchester, turned chancellor of the Exchequer, had no designs on prayer though. He led them to a side chapel where two brother knights were standing before the entrance. The guard's eyes bulged at sight of Sister Maud, but said nothing. They nodded acknowledgment to Peter and let the five pass in.

"You have courage, Peter!" Savaric chuckled as he admired the beauty of the chapel, "A nun in the Temple. Oh, how they must be angry with you."

"For certes, Savaric, but they'll keep it a secret," Peter waved the potential crisis away. "That's why I like them."

"A fact worth remembering," Sister Maud said as she pulled back her veil. Robert was shocked. She was no more than a teenager, a young woman. Something about her was familiar though. Robert wasn't sure if it was the angle of her cheeks, her grey eyes, or raven black hair.

"So, I'm not good enough for our lord and king to be seen in Court now? What is this Peter?" Savaric cut sarcastically once they'd settled down.

"You're better mannered than Fawkes de Breaute, for certes, but the lords at Court will have a field day if you bear bad news," Peter explained, "The Welsh have risen up in full revolt once more. I will not have you feed the Court more wine before a bear baiting, Savaric."

"Am I to lie, then?" Savaric asked straight.

"Well, what news have you that needs lying about?" Peter asked, and they both chuckled.

"Simon de Montfort, that magnificent bastard, has occupied Agenais," Savaric said plainly.

"He wouldn't. That's grounds for war. Raymond of Toulouse holds Agenais in the name of King John," Peter de Roches protested.

"Not anymore. Simon de Montfort holds it for King Phillip with the blessing of Pope Innocent," Savaric pointed out, "Simon has Toulouse almost completely surrounded now, Peter. If the House of Toulouse falls there will be no one else in Languedoc between Phillip and Aquitaine. If John has ever felt the need to rescue his nephew Raymond, now is the time."

Peter nodded his head as his eyes slit in thought, "Non, Raymond is on his own for now. It's his own fault for harboring those heretics, the Cathars. John will not take Phillip's bait, but Simon will pay for Agenais. I will see to that. He's the viscount of Leicester, after all," Peter relaxed and smiled at Savaric, "Either way, it's not Toulouse we are after, my friend."

"Normandy, then," Savaric assumed, "He'll invade Normandy if Phillip doesn't invade England first?"

"Sister Maud, I think that's where you come in," Robert interjected politely.

Maud smiled beautifully at him, and he blushed. She then looked from Savaric to Peter, "King Phillip may have paid an army of Franks to crusade with Simon in the south, but he is still focused on our lord and king. After hearing of the Count of Bolougne's change of loyalty, Phillip claimed his estates in Normandy and Mortain."

“That’s going to sting alright,” Savaric exclaimed, “Mortain was John’s barony in his youth.”

“That’s not all,” Maud continued, “The king’s chevaliers are raiding in Flanders, and Prince Louis has been fortifying Angevin castles on the border of Poitou.”

Peter began to chuckle and rubbed at his eyes, “Christ’s blood in my mouth, this is why we’re not at Court my friends.”

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Peter de Roches’ instructions were simple. Once they left the Temple, Robert was to see both Savaric and Sister Maud back to the docks. A barge was already loaded with their baggage and servants. Robert simply had to ride with them down to the Tower of London.

“The Tower is essentially the house de Mandeville,” Peter told Robert earlier, “However, the justiciar is at Westminster for Prince Alexander’s knighting. I’ll take a few Mandeville snoops to the entire Court any day. Keep them busy until we arrive.”

It made Robert uneasy that Peter viewed the Mandeville’s as enemies. Indeed, they had different styles of serving the king, but they were both high officers of the realm. Robert supposed it was simply Peter’s way. The self-made Poitevan was deeply suspicious of all English nobility, save perhaps William Longsword.

Robert’s heart was racing as fast as his mind. He was working his rosaries through his hand bead after bead. However, it was not the subdued feud between the chancellor and the justiciar that had him on edge.

He’d lost Savaric and Sister Maud after landing at the Tower. At the dock next to theirs, servants were loading several large chests onto a small barge. Savaric instructed his men to wait on the wharves, and then he and Sister Maud followed Robert to the Thames gate. They were right behind Robert as they walked through the riverside gate, entering the inner bailey of the royal fortress.

The sergeant nodded at their royal badges, and they made their way up towards the White Tower. It was a massive square keep with square corner towers and a semicircular protrusion on the right riverside corner.

The southern face of the keep displayed the dual military and palatial purposes of the Tower. Ensclosed within two separate walled Courtyards and a moat filled by the Thames, the stone edifice, which was a hundred feet tall and even wider, defied assault. At the same time each window and doorway was a collection of simple, yet elegant, Norman arches-within-arches, all bordered in whitewashed limestone. On the left-hand side of the keep, limestone steps led up to a stone fore building, which jutted out from the second floor and served as the main entrance.

Robert stopped at sight of the little procession by the base of the steps, certain the two envoys were standing right behind him. Baron Fitzwalter, his sons Walter and Robin, as well as Geoff and William Mandeville were out in the Courtyard with their families. Geoff pulled a woman in her late twenties to him, and she hugged him sadly.

When he let her go, a younger sister of the woman, with lighter hair, took her by the arm and led her to their mother. Fitzwalter let his wife’s hand go, and she clutched at both her girls. Lady Ida and Lady Anne moved in with soothing words. Geoffrey and Will’s step-mother said something but Robert was too far to hear any of it.

The Courtyard was a hive of activity. Gardeners were picking and trimming herbs and spices; others inspecting cherry and pear trees. There was a steady traffic of haulers and carriers

between the keep and the wharves. Along the eastern wall a collection of wooden buildings housed the king's bestiary, hawk's mews, and the animal keepers too.

"A sad day for the Fitzwalter's," A tall shadow coming up on Robert's left said somberly.

"Sir Adam!" Robert replied, and they shook arms. A young boy of eleven or twelve hung close to Adam.

"Hello there, young sir," Robert said respectfully to the boy who looked very much like both Adam and the Fitzwalters.

The boy smiled and nodded, "Good day to you, grace."

Adam chuckled. "This is my boy, Alfred. He thinks you're an archdeacon like his grandpapa."

"I'm the baron's page," Alfred stated proudly.

"Aye, and you'll be his finest knight someday," Adam smiled and patted his boy's head, then smiled at Robert, "Son, why don't you show Robert what you have?"

Alfred's smile frowned and his hand lifted to his chest defensively. Robert recognized the gesture, and resisted the urge to squeeze his secret pouch.

"Oh come now," Adam nudged him in the shoulder with elbow, "Who do you think papa got it from?"

Alfred looked up at Robert with new found respect. He pulled a ribbon from around his neck to reveal a gold coin. Two punctures fed the ribbon through the gold Caliph al Nasir.

Robert handled the coin in the pleasant warmth of the day's sun. He smiled at Alfred. "That was very kind of your father to give it to you," Robert said.

Alfred smiled as his dad rested his huge hand on the boy's head, giving it a good wag. Robert looked from Adam to the scene by the steps. "What's this?"

Adam frowned and sighed, "Geoff and Fitzwalter's eldest daughter, Matilda, were wed some years ago. They've not sired a child in all this time, and at Matilda's request both families sought a papal dispensation to annul the marriage."

"How terrible," Robert replied. Geoff was heir to his father, Lord Essex.

"Aye," Adam agreed, "The pope's letter arrived last week. Geoff is to find another wife, and Matilda is to take the veil of the Church."

Robert looked back at the scene as it slowly separated, between the Mandevilles returning to the Tower, and Fitzwalters walking down to their barge to return to Baynard's Castle.

"The families are close. I hope the bond shall remain so, what with William and Christiana plighted to marry. God forbid something should happen to Geoff, but without a son the lordship will be William's."

"Oh," Robert blurted. Geoff was losing a wife and Matilda a husband, but the Fitzwalters had not lost the chance to produce an heir for Essex. Still, Matilda looked positively miserable. Thinking of her becoming a nun reminded Robert of his two guests. He then realized his rudeness and turned to introduce Savaric and Sister Maud to Adam, but they weren't there.

Robert turned back to Adam with a confused look on his face. "Did you see the two behind me?"

"Two who?" Adam asked.

Robert turned all the way around, looking in every direction. "Bloody Hell," He cursed and turned back to Adam, "It was Savaric de Mauleon and a nun from Fontrevault Abbey."

"Savaric de Mauleon and a nun are missing? Together?" Adam covered his mouth as he burst into chuckles, "Sounds like the beginning of quite a story. I can't wait to hear the end when you get to it, Robert."

“Bloody hell!” Robert shouted and stomped his foot.

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Savaric de Mauleon and Sister Maud were making their way towards the steps with the river to their left. He’d slipped off with the flirtatious nun to tour the bestiary where King John kept his lion and other exotic animals. They were old and smelled and refused to wake.

The two saw the Mandevilles walking up the steps, the Fitzwalters heading down to the wharves, and the men were greeting Robert de London as they passed. He was standing beside a giant of a man and seemed distracted as he greeted the baron, Walter, and Robin.

“Now’s our chance,” Savaric conspired with the entrancing young nun. Robert was walking down to the wharves and speaking with Maud’s cleric, who clearly had no idea where she was. The usher at the fore building nodded at sight of Savaric’s gold Plantagenet Lion hanging from his neck, and let them pass.

Once inside, Savaric looked around. To their right, the Mandevilles were leaving the long hall which covered the western half of the main floor. The vast room was alive with the noise and bustle of servants working to maintain several hundred people in the castle.

“Hurry, we’ll blend in behind them. I’m certain I can get the countess to agree.” Savaric urged Maud on as they sauntered past scullery maids and cook’s helpers.

“I hope so,” she wished, “I am so tired of the convent.”

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Robert entered the solar room of the Tower. He was relieved to see Savaric de Mauleon by the western windows where the light was good. The troubadour soldier was plucking a harp and singing, accompanied by two of his men playing rebeck and gittern, harmonizing on the choruses.

They were playing passionately for Lady Aveline Clare, wife of Geoffrey Fitzpeter and therefore Countess of Essex. She was surrounded by several Mandeville knights, her handmaidens, ladies in waiting, and a small crowd of pages, squires, and butlers. Robert felt the tension tighten in him instantly. Nowhere did he see the white habit of the bride of Christ.

He made himself patient, if not calm, as he joined the crowd enjoying Savaric’s song. When Savaric was finished and the applause had died down, Robert stepped forward and bowed. “Sir Savaric, m’lord. I hate to interrupt such a fine gathering, but I must speak with you.”

“Speak then, we’re all friends here,” Savaric said as he smiled at the crowd. Half the girls giggled and blushed as he bowed to the countess, who was old enough to be most of their grandmothers.

“Perchance you know of the whereabouts of Sister Maud?” Robert asked delicately.

Savaric strummed a pleasant D, and nodded without concern, “Non. Have you tried St. John’s chapel? She is a nun after all.”

The crowd giggled and chuckled at Savaric’s amusing ease and Robert’s clear consternation. “I have. Her cleric Stephan is still there, praying she’ll be found without incident,” Robert said tersely. He’d also checked the wharves, the gardens, the bestiary and mews, and the entire main floor of the Tower.

The crowd burst into laughter and Robert was quickly growing tired of squirming for their amusement. “I’m going to search the outer ward. If you see her. . .”

“I will most certainly inform her you wish to see her,” Savaric cut him off and started strumming his harp. His fellow troubadours nodded. The rebeck player began to fiddle a merry melody and the gitern player strummed a strong sustaining rhythm.

The countess smiled, “I remember this one. I love this song.”

The crowd fell enraptured, and Robert stalked off. One of Aveline’s ladies-in-waiting looked up from her stitching as Savaric sung the last chorus, and the laughter and applause wound down, “Excellently played, m’lord.”

“Thank you, cousin,” He winked back at her.

“What do you think of Courtly life so far?” Belle Bigod whispered to the black-haired girl sitting in Christiana Fitzwalter’s place.

“The boys are far cuter,” She replied, “And they aren’t all flirting with each other.”

Lady Aveline’s young charges burst into a fresh round of giggles, and Maud knew her true calling.

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Robert felt he might vomit.

The royal barge was disgorging King John, Earl Geoffrey, Bishop Peter, Count Ranulf of Chester, William Longsword, Fawkes de Breaute, and Count Renaud of Bolougne. Peter wanted Robert waiting for them with Savaric and Sister Maud by his side. Through the press of influential men, Robert saw the chancellor scanning ahead with displeasure.

“My lord,” Geoff, his brother Will, Lady Aveline, Robert, and Savaric de Mauleon said as they bowed low to the king. John was genuinely glad to see Savaric, one of the very few men he trusted to run his kingdom. Everyone greeted one another, and the king urged them inside for Geoffrey Fitzpeter’s sake. He’d had a long day at Court and looked bone tired.

As the procession walked slowly up to the Tower, Robert fell back beside Peter. “Where is Maud?” Peter hissed quietly.

“She . . . uh . . . I . . .” Robert stammered.

“You lost the nun didn’t you?” Peter whispered with a whip’s sting.

“I can explain,” Robert stalled. I have nothing! I’m doomed!

Peter plucked at his dark beard, “Now is not the time. I thought I could trust you.”

“She is like no nun I’ve encountered before,” Robert explained.

Peter smiled at him facetiously, “Clearly. And I thought you had skills with the fairer sex, Robert.”

Robert drooped his head, “The King’s House?”

Peter’s smile transitioned to a devil’s grin.

“Of course you would know,” Robert sighed. He woke the day after the celebration at St. Albans to Delilah shouting at servants and Lady Ida, Walter Fitzwalter’s wife. She was on her way to the chapel with her ladies-in-waiting. Delilah was naked and hadn’t even bothered to cover herself with the sheet as she swore at them. It only got worse from there.

“How am I to tell his majesty?” Peter petitioned Robert, “Mayhap I’ll let you inform him our nun of Fontrevault is lost.”

Robert paled as he stared at Peter, who blinked at him seriously.

“I’ll find her,” Robert decided to look again.

“Exactly,” Peter agreed.

They were nearing the steps to the Tower, and Robert was trying to figure out how to get ahead of the king without actually running by him. Just then, the bride of Christ came running down the steps of the fore building.

“There she is! It’s the bride of Christ,” Robert shouted with relief, but perhaps too loud, for everyone looked up at the nun in white.

“Papa!” She screamed as she vaulted down the last steps and grabbed hold of King John.

“My little Maud?” John cried aloud and laughed as he hugged his illegitimate daughter. He pulled her from him and looked Maud up and down. “God’s teeth, but you’ve grown! When last we were together you were but a little sprite, and now look at you! You’re a young woman!”

Robert gasped and gaped.

Lady Aveline turned to Savaric and frowned at him, “Your cousin? Savaric, you’re old enough to be her father.”

Savaric just smiled innocently, “I never touched her. I swear.”

King John was the happy father then, basking in the attention of his daughter and the surprise of his guests. It was widely known John had many mistresses and female conquests. He’d sired many offspring out of wedlock. Princess Joan of Wales was one of his favorites, being the result of John’s conquest of lord Derby’s daughter.

It was hardly unexpected. He was a nobleman, a king, and a Plantagenet. John’s half-brother, William Longsword, was the son of King Henry and fair Rosamund Clifford. Still, it wasn’t everyday any of them saw a bride of Christ hang all over King John like a little girl trying to pull her father from his duties.

“Now our council can begin, my friends,” John explained to the crowd and laughed as his most secret daughter wrapped her arm around his. “Maud is straight from Fontrevault, and has the choicest gossip from all over the continent. If anyone knows what King Phillip intends for us this summer, it is her.” She smiled a beam of pure sunlight in the twilight and helped his gouty gait up the stairs.

“I knew I recognized her,” Robert said under his breath and then glanced at Peter. “Who’s the mother?” He whispered.

Peter grinned. “She’s a secret the king has wished kept so. One learns not to ask certain questions or believe fancy rumors,” Peter stared seriously at Robert, “A lesson I hope you have learned.”

CHAPTER 7- An Absence of Polite Conversation

London: July

Robert stared down at the pile of papers before him and whispered, “Finished.”

He stretched into the back of the cushioned chair and rubbed his aching red eyes. Beside him at the end of the table, Peter was slouched asleep in his own chair. Count Renaud had drunk himself into a stupor and was snoring in the cushioned window seat of the council room. The darkness of night was beginning to fade as twilight crept across the Channel.

Robert leaned over and shook Peter’s arm. The chancellor woke with a start and a crick in his neck. He rubbed at the stiffness as he yawned and looked around in the sickly grey-yellow

light filtered through the lambskin windows. The fire had died down and most of the candles and lamps burned out.

Peter reached for the flagon of wine sitting beside the low burning candles on the table. It was empty and he stared rudely at Robert. "Count Renaud," Robert explained.

"Show me what you have," Peter croaked then shouted, "Pages, wine and wood, now!"

The pair of boys asleep in the floor rushes by the door didn't even move, so Peter threw the empty flagon at them. The clay jar burst into shards over their heads as it struck the door, startling them awake. He shouted his demand again. This time, they rose quickly and stumbled half asleep to their chores. Count Renaud snored louder and rolled over.

Peter turned his grumpy gaze back to Robert. "Well?"

Robert handed him the first letter. "For King William of Scotland, demanding fifteen hundred men-at-arms. Also, reminding him of his two precious daughters, Margaret and Isabella, held hostage by our majesty."

Peter nodded as he rubbed his neck.

Robert handed him the next one. "For Count Ferrand of Flanders, requesting fifteen hundred Flemish men-at-arms and the generous price our majesty is willing to pay in silver."

Peter nodded again then hacked and spat on the floor.

Robert handed him the next one. "For Duke Henri of Brabant, trusted vassal of our dear ally Emperor Otto of the Holy Roman Empire, requesting he use the most recent funds provided by our majesty to conduct raids into Vermandois and Picardy, the trusted vassals of our mutual enemy, King Phillip of France."

Peter grunted then cleared his nose by pressing a finger to each nostril and blowing.

Robert continued, raising the next letter, "For the earls and high barons of England, demanding their feudal service or payment of a scutage tax to pay for the campaign."

Peter eyed Robert sourly.

"Also, explaining the reasons for the campaign henceforth."

"Next," Peter croaked.

"For the royal sheriffs and castellans, explaining their duties during the campaign." Robert passed it over and then waved the final letter. "For the score of towns specified: calling on carpenters, woodsmen, iron smiths, and volunteer laborers to report to their local sheriff or royal castellan."

"I will take care of these," Peter said putting the letters to King William, Count Ferrand, and Duke Henri on the table beside him. "I trust you can have the necessary copies of the rest before the end of the day? I want the king's seal on all of these before nightfall."

Robert yawned but nodded, "For certes."

Several young pages came in to the council chamber on the top floor of the Tower. Two set to piling wood in the fire while another laid a tray of cheese, bread, sliced pears, and small cuts of pickled herring on the table. A final young page came in with Peter's flagon of wine, but an early morning yawn caused him to pour some of it onto the table.

"You fool, watch what you're doing!" Peter barked and smacked the boy in the face with the back of his hand. The boy jumped back, almost dropping the flagon. "You almost ruined the king's letters. What were you thinking?"

The boy looked confused and scared. He was barely awake and now his nose was bleeding. Peter moved the papers away from the spill.

"What's your name, boy?" Peter demanded.

"D . . . Dickon . . . I mean Richard, sire," The page trembled.

“Richard what?” Peter demanded further.

“Richard Fitzwalter, sire,” The boy squeaked.

Peter glowered at him long and hard, “Just like a Fitzwalter, you’re nothing but a nuisance. I’ll remember you. Now give me that damn wine before Lord Bolougne wakes up.”

Little Dickon let Peter take it from him then backed away in a daze. It wasn’t until he stood shaking by the door that the young boy wiped the blood from his nose.

“What?” Peter asked Robert.

“Hmm? Nothing,” Robert said. He’d been staring in exhausted thought at the candles, having long since learned to tune out Peter when he was berating servants.

“Come now Robert, trust me with your thoughts,” Peter ordered.

Robert sighed. “I was just thinking about these,” He waved his hand at the papers.

The council went long into the evening. Maud provided her father with a letter she’d brought from France. It was an exact copy of the letter Prince Llewellyn of Wales sent to King Phillip of France. Once John read it, crumpled it, cursed, fumed, and threatened everyone he’d ever feared or hated, living or dead, they discussed what to do. John was unequivocally clear.

“This means war,” Robert said.

“And you’re just now realizing this?” Peter chuckled, pouring himself a cup of wine.

“Non,” Robert nodded his head, and poured himself one. “What I mean is we are not setting out on a show of force as we did in Ireland and Scotland, or even a punitive expedition as we did in Wales last summer, twice.” Robert patted the papers before him. “This is war. A war like William of Normandy delivered to the English of his day; a war of annihilation and conquest. There’s no turning back from this.”

Peter sucked on a pear slice before chomping on it. “And this upsets you?”

Robert nodded his head in exasperation. “I . . . I’m not one to judge. I do not desire the troubles that burden our king. I suppose what I’m getting at is . . .”

“Well, say it then,” Peter shrugged as he bit into some cheese.

Robert shook his head, “I don’t know what I’m getting at, forgive my rambling. I’ve been up all night writing these letters. My mind is gruel.”

Robert knew exactly what he was getting at, but he wasn’t going to say it to Peter de Roches. He thought the coming war would only make matters worse for both John and England. He saw no end to it. He saw it expanding in a torrent of blood and a flood of misery.

“Better gruel than drivel,” Peter warned Robert, popping pickled herring into his mouth.

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Robert trudged up to his friends eating breakfast in the refectory of St. Bart’s. His robe was caked with mud, his eyes were bloodshot and his skin pale as a clean sheet. He stopped and leaned over at the edge of the table, resting his weight on both hands.

“Robert, are you alright?” Harry asked.

“Where did you go yesterday?” Tom asked. “You tore out of Westminster like a horse at the Smithfield races.”

“Tom, clearly the chancellor’s secretary has been hard at work all night. Let’s hear what he has to say,” Jeffrey cut in.

Robert took a piece of bread from the plate in the center of the table. He dipped it in Harry’s gruel and took a bite. After he’d slaked his thirst with a cup of water, he looked back at them staring at him intently.

“I need your help, all of you,” He said, looking over the half dozen clerics at the table.

“We’re off to Westminster before long, you know that,” Tom said.

“What’s happened?” Jeffrey asked

Robert sighed and rubbed his hand across his brow. “I . . . I have some letters that need copying.”

Several of them humphed and hawed. Robert cut them off brusquely, uncharacteristically. “Shush! All of you. These letters will have the king’s seal on them by the end of the day, whether you help me or not. They will be sent throughout the realm and beyond, whether you help me or not, and they will change everything, whether you help me or not.”

“Oh come now, Robert,” Tom countered, “We know you’re in good with both the justiciar and the chancellor now, and that is quite a feat, but there’s no need to exaggerate your own importance.”

Robert chuckled dryly and nodded his head. “The invasion of France is off,” he announced over their heads. “King Phillip and Prince Llewellyn have formed an alliance. The French are funding the Welsh attacks into the March lands. King John is going to invade Wales, and he’s not going to leave until every last Welshman is dead or in chains.”

Robert paused, noticing the tables around him gone silent. “He intends to assemble the largest host in memory, and cut down the forests of Wales before destroying every Welsh village and town from the Severn River to the Irish Sea. He’s going to replace them with English castles and English settlers. A war is coming the realm hasn’t seen the likes of since William the Conqueror, and it starts in one month.”

He looked down at his friends, all staring at him in shock. Robert’s words carried far and the tables around them were spreading the message. Everyone was beginning to look at Robert as the gossip grew into a commotion and then a roar throughout the entire hall.

Robert felt powerful again, like he had before Caliph al Nasir and at Binham Priory. He felt the secret parchment about his neck like a lead weight dragging him down into the abyss. He questioned whether his dream was worth the price, deciding it was too late to wake up now.

Robert reached into his sleeve, pulling the purse out that Peter de Roches gave him before they left the Tower. He threw the purse on the table, and the jangle of coins caught everyone’s attention. In a tired, but clear, voice Robert declared, “A half Henry for every copy written before the wagons leave for Westminster.”

Clerics earned one King Henry a month, a shilling a year. The copies were finished before the wagons left for Westminster.

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The king’s seal was upon the letters by the end of the day, and within the week all of them were delivered. The entire kingdom was expected to contribute in some way. William Marshall, the exiled earl of Pembroke, collected scutage from the Irish barons. The sheriffs and their men roamed the shires claiming volunteers. The lords of the realm dug into their coffers and prepared themselves for war.

Many of the barons in Northumbria scoffed at the idea though, claiming Welsh attacks on the March lands were none of their concern. King John hadn’t called on them when he campaigned in Wales last summer, they argued to the Northumbrian sheriffs and in letters to the king’s Court. The border with Scotland was peaceful, and many of the Northumbrian lords pledged to keep it that way in lieu of service or payment.

Barons, city aldermen, even royal castellans and sheriffs grimaced at yet another campaign. This was to be the fifth royal military expedition in four years; the third into Wales since last May. While King John was slowly tightening his grip on the British Isles very few of them were gaining more land, lucrative trade charters, or higher royal office.

With the loss of Normandy and Anjou to King Phillip, and Pope Innocent's interdict on England, trade from the continent was dwindling. Everything was more expensive for everybody. The crops, goods, and weapons so recently collected to maintain a host against French invasion could not be easily moved. Much of the produce had already gone bad.

If John intended the Welsh campaign as a rehearsal for invading Normandy, the grumbling from the shires did not bode well. Tales of "John Softsword" circulated through the pubs, inns, and taverns anew. Not only was there a genuine doubt whether it was a good idea, but also whether or not John could pull it off.

Still, the king's plans were followed through. It was agreed the entire host should assemble in Chester, on the northern Welsh border. King John would gather the feudal levy as he marched north. The Flemish men-at-arms arrived in London, and the lords of southern England assembled there as well. Leaving Queen Isabelle in the safety of Windsor Castle, with his two young sons, Henry, and Richard, King John set out to conquer Wales.

In the first week of August, King John departed London with William Longsword, Peter de Roches, Geoffrey Fitzpeters, Baron Fitzwalter, Early Sayer of Winchester, and the lords of Arundel and Surrey by his side. Each lord brought with him his own banner of knights and men-at-arms. The earls also commanded the feudal levy of their entitled shire.

Count Renaud of Bolougne was in command of the Flemings.

As lord of Baynard's Castle, Robert Fitzwalter was the standard bearer of London. Will Mandeville was among the knights following him, along with a levy of the city militia, as well as carpenters, masons, and smiths from the London guilds.

King John commanded his own household knights and sergeants from Cornwall, Devon, Somerset, and Dorset, as well as a train of engineers to man the siege weapons he'd brought along. The host was already of considerable size and it was far from Chester.

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King John was relentless on the march. Those common sergeants, bowmen, and crossbowmen that couldn't make the daily twenty mile trek fell out. The king had equipped every siege engine with a team of six draught horses to keep up with the host. The first day's march wound through the green forests of Middlesex and ended at St. Albans in Hertfordshire, where the lords of East Anglia had agreed to join the king's expedition.

The procession wound through the streets of St. Albans and all the inhabitants turned out, many of them in their finest clothing. Still there were no great cheers for the king. The abbey town refused to cheer an excommunicated king.

"Do you see who I don't, Robert?" Peter asked as the column rode up to the abbey.

Robert scanned the crowd gathered before the cathedral steps, but they were still some distance away. A small vanguard of standard bearers was riding ahead of them as well.

"Non," Robert admitted. Just ahead of them, Will Longsword leaned over and spoke under his breath to his brother, who immediately scanned the crowd before the cathedral.

"Longsword noticed," Peter commented, "And so now the king has as well."

Robert stretched in the saddle and gazed again. Many nobles, ladies, and heirs were waiting by the doors of St. Albans, dressed in beautifully colorful silks and velvets. Robert had seen most of them at Court at one time or another. "I see the Clare's of Hertford, the Vere's of Oxford, the Bigod's of Norfolk, Sheriff Huntingfield of Suffolk, Geoff Mandeville, the Fitzwalter brothers, but I don't see. . ." Robert looked for someone missing, "Master John de Cell or anyone from the abbey, for that matter."

Peter smiled wolfishly. "St. Albans has no one to greet his majesty."

The king's host was already too large for the abbey and town. Many of the common soldiers made their camps in the nearby fields and woods. They'd hunt the farms and outlying villages for sheep and entertainment. The town overflowed with the retinues of nearly a dozen earls and scores of barons. Fights broke out over crawlspaces and attics on every block.

The siege train was parked in the field in front of the cathedral and proved a source of intense curiosity to the local children. The earls and high barons filled the Guest House and Old Hall of the abbey. Robert considered himself lucky to share the chaplain's room in the King's House with his friends from St. Barts.

"What's in the chest, Robert? You've never shown us," Tom asked as he jammed his luggage into a corner of the room. Robert had purchased a lock with the money he made from exchanging the Al Nasir coin. He'd been quite busy these last few months and did not have the means to take it with him everywhere he went.

"Aye, there's something heavy in there. I've heard it thunk," Jeffrey added.

"You'll see," Robert deflected the question, "But not now, the chancellor has a task for me." He always does.

Robert left the first floor and was halted in the solar room by an usher. The king had retired to his drawing room with Peter and several others, and was not to be disturbed. Robert convinced the usher to allow a page bringing in wine to deliver a message to the chancellor.

Peter stepped out to the solar room a few minutes later and gave Robert brief, clear, and direct orders as usual. He then poured himself some more wine from the flagon on the table and returned to the drawing room. Robert smiled. He was looking forward to this.

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Robert entered the abbot's inner office without being announced. John de Cell was going over some papers with the prior and the chamberlain. "Good afternoon, brothers," Robert greeted them in the pope's Latin.

"What do you think you are doing?" Prior William de Trumpington demanded to know.

Robert smiled and rested his hands on his hips. He stared straight at Master John and said, "The king will see you now."

"His majesty has been excommunicated from the Church," John de Cell scoffed. "I am forbidden by the pope from meeting with him," John de Cell renounced Robert's order hotly, while the other two glared at him.

Robert nodded. "We thought you might say that, so you have two options: I escort you to King John, or royal sergeants outside your door can."

"You wouldn't dare!" The prior stood from his chair. "This is a house of God!"

"William, calm down," John de Cell urged his companion back into his seat. He turned a weary, contemptible gaze on Robert, "I see you did not heed my advice, cleric. Have you gone deaf to God, standing so close to the king?"

Robert's smile smirked into a frown, "Sergeant Falmouth!"

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"This is an outrage, tis totally unnecessary!" John de Cell fumed in the drawing room.

Robert squeezed next to Peter against a wall. King John was sitting with his back to the light pouring through the multi colored Venetian glass window. William Longsword was sitting next to John. Over their shoulders Earl Warren of Surrey, the king's paternal cousin, was in the window seat with Count Renaud.

"Are you not an Englishman?" King John asked simply.

"I am a man of God," John de Cell declared proudly, standing stiff and haughty.

"I do not question your faith, man. By God's teeth, I question your blood. Are you an Englishman or not?" King John demanded irately.

John de Cell's shoulders slouched. "I'm an Englishman."

"Then you are my subject!" King John shouted, "Interdict be damned, I expect to be greeted by my subjects!" He let his words sink into silence. Then, as he shifted his gouty right ankle, he switched tempers, "As you are aware, we have planned a feast for the lords of the realm, but our solar room is simply too small. The Old Hall won't do, nor will the refectory, so prepare the cathedral in fine order."

"The cathedral?" John de Cell gasped.

"Indeed," King John nodded confirmation, "And we have not forgotten the gift pledge owed us for securing the king's peace at Binham Priory."

"There was no justice done," John de Cell argued, though his frail will was faltering.

"You did not seek justice from us," King John brushed the plea away. "You sought peace, which was delivered. If you have further issue with Lord Dunmow, I suggest you take it up with the pope. In the meantime, we require the gift of one hundred pounds."

"It was fifty pounds," John de Cell corrected the king.

"It was," King John agreed, then glanced across the room, "Our Chancellor's steward, Robert de London, will see to it we are recompensed."

Our chancellor's steward bolted through Robert. *My God, I've been promoted!* It sounded good coming from King John. It meant he was heading toward his goal. Robert bowed, grasping the cross about his neck to feel what lay underneath.

The king then smiled at John de Cell, "That is all. You are dismissed."

...

Sir Laurence, seneschal of St. Albans, personally escorted Robert back to the King's House with the chests of twenty four hundred silver pence, worth one hundred pounds. The abbey men-at-arms handed it over to Sergeant Falmouth and his men, then Laurence lightly gripped Robert's elbow.

"I need to have a word with you," Laurence explained.

"What is it?" Robert asked, "The gift will be marked in the Exchequer pipe rolls, I assure you."

Laurence squeezed Robert's elbow tighter, urging him away from the royal sergeants.

"Indeed. However, it seems the last time you stayed in the King's House a woman was discovered in your bed."

“I can explain that,” Robert started.

“See here, cleric,” Laurence hissed. He tightened his grip on Robert’s elbow and jerked hard, “Delilah works for silver. Keep that in mind the next time you think of paying with a cuddle.”

“But . . .” Robert was flummoxed. “But she . . .”

“I don’t give a damn what she said, cleric; tis shite to me. If I find you out again, and you haven’t got the coin, I’ll cut out your tongue,” Laurence warned him with a sharp poke from his dagger, hidden between the folds of his clothing.

Robert jolted at the point of pain in his belly.

Laurence smiled and nodded, “Good day to you, then.”

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Robert entered the King’s House looking over his shoulder. He turned towards the chaplain’s room and bumped into a soft curvaceous figure. He let go of the waist he’d instinctively grabbed to steady them, stepped back and bowed with embarrassment.

“My apologies, m’lady,” Robert bowed.

“Tis alright, Robert, you should watch where you’re going though, not where you’ve come from,” The voice was dreadfully familiar.

Robert gazed up slowly. She had forgone the habit of a bride of Christ and was wearing a red velvet gown with golden silk trim. Her long, straight black hair hung loose and lusciously in a bold declaration of her virginity. Maud looked every bit the young lady in the flowing dress, golden earrings, and ruby necklace. Robert’s eyes lingered on the necklace, a gold chain with a familiar almond-shaped ruby gripped in an eagle’s talon. Maud thought otherwise.

“Why Robert, you’re a man of God, tis unseemly to look at me so,” Maud smiled. The two other young ladies beside her smiled and blushed as well.

Robert lifted his eyes to hers, thinking himself a fool for not recognizing the raven hair and grey eyes of King John. “I might point out that is not the habit of Fontrevault, Sister Maud.”

“I’m reconsidering my vows,” Maud snapped back, “Forgive my rudeness, Robert. May I introduce Princesses Margaret and Bella of Scotland?”

Robert bowed again before the royal hostages, “Ladies.” They were roughly the same age as Maud, young women in their late teens. The older of the two, Margaret, had fiery red hair, and Bella’s was wheat blonde. The three of them made a striking image together.

King John took the princesses three years earlier, on Robert’s first journey with the Court. Their father, King William, laid claim to several counties in the north, and King John denied it by marching an army up to the border on the River Tweed. He took five Scottish castles, forced the boy Prince Alexander to pay homage for the first time, taking Margaret and Bella hostage as a guarantee of King William’s future good behavior.

It had worked thus far.

“Forgive me for asking, Maud, but I couldn’t help noticing that necklace of yours. It’s quite fetching,” Robert complimented her.

She smiled gloriously, twisting the ruby between her fingers. “Do you like it? Twas a present from Papa, all of this is,” She said and plucked at her dress. “This was the queen’s favorite, but she hasn’t been able to wear it since bearing little Joan. Papa gave me a chest full of the queen’s old clothes. He’s been so kind and generous to me, don’t you think?” She turned to the Scottish princesses for confirmation.

“You are his daughter,” Princess Margaret agreed with a sly, sad grin.

...

The cathedral was lit by what seemed a thousand candles, and shadows leapt all about the walls, ceiling, and columns in eerie shapeless forms. Trestle tables were laid out down the length of the nave. Several were placed on a raised dais for the king and his personal guests. Two perpendicular rows of tables extended from the dais for the lords and ladies of the realm. The inner space was left free for entertainers to perform and the lay brothers of the abbey to serve the guests efficiently.

Master John de Cell was conspicuously absent, so Peter de Roches took the seat on the right side of the king, the customary place for the king’s host. With Queen Isabelle at Windsor, John’s natural daughter, Maud, sat to his left. She was given the honor of initiating the dinner by pouring her father’s first goblet of wine.

Her cheeks flushed in the knowledge of so many eyes upon her.

Robert found himself at one of the last tables with the other clerics, but at least he was at the end closest to the king. As jugglers, mimes, and a jester performed for the lords of the realm, the feast was brought out and laid before them. The cathedral quickly echoed with gossip, boisterous laughter, shouts for more food and drink, barking dogs, and the jester’s incredibly loud farts.

Each guest was provided a stale, hollowed-out round loaf of bread to serve as their trencher. The first course consisted of sliced wedges of pears and apples, sugared cherries, grapes, plums, and several different types of cheese. Flagons of honey mead, ale, and dark red wine flowed freely. The meats were brought out one at a time to savor them all. There were steaks of beef, shanks of lamb, chops of ham, chunks of duck, bowls of stewed lamprey eels, and choice cuts of venison from the king’s Epping Forest.

Many of the lords present were required to provide for the feast, and the king had been quick to compliment his brother on the mead, Lord Arundel for the steaks, and so on. By the time the roast deer was brought out everyone was well into their cups. The conversation was growing more ribald and more than a few playful jibes had bantered about between the many nobles who did not get along.

“Lord Dunmow, the venison is most succulent. The price for peace at Binham Priory seems not overly expensive tonight,” King John announced loudly.

“I am glad you enjoy the juiciest morsels, your majesty. Be that as it may, I still maintain the right of patronage over Binham Priory,” Fitzwalter replied and swigged back another long haul of wine.

“Tis a shame you couldn’t take the church from a band of cowering monks,” Earl Warren of Surrey interjected, “It seems you are no more successful delivering a siege than defending one.”

The hall burst into cliques of laughter at the royal cousin’s jest.

“Now, now, Lord Surrey,” King John fretted with a mocking grin. “We have long since forgiven our lord Dunmow the treachery at Vaudreuil Castle.”

“As I recall, Warren, you fled back home to England when King Phillip attacked, rather than stay in Normandy,” Earl Sayer of Winchester came to Baron Fitzwalter’s defense. He, too, was involved with the surrender of Vaudreuil Castle when Phillip conquered the northern half of John’s French estates some ten years back.

“At least I did not sell out our king to the French whoresons!” Warren shot back angrily. He didn’t like being called a coward, even in unsaid words.

Fitzwalter slammed his goblet down on the table, "Do you wish to know the truth of it Lord Surrey? All of you?" He shouted, and the cacophony of conversations died down.

Lady Gannora gripped her husband's arm and whispered to him, but he was beyond the point of reason wine allowed.

"Non, I will sit on it no longer," Fitzwalter refused his wife's plea.

He pushed himself up from the table, addressing the entire cathedral, "I've endured barbs, jokes, and tavern songs long enough. If none of you cowards who swam back across the Channel believe the castle was under-provisioned, poorly garrisoned, and already taken with disease, then fie upon all of you!"

The collection of lords split into three distinct groups at Fitzwalter's words. There were his friends and relatives who supported him, those lords who merely thought this interesting dinner conversation, and then the noblemen stung by the truth of Fitzwalter's accusations against them. Through it all, King John and his peers on the dais remained tensely quiet.

"The heart of the matter lies not in swords or stones. Truth be told, the king did not pardon me out of love or even understanding." Fitzwalter threw a drunken malevolent stare at the king, who was staring at him with a cold intensity. "Non, he was purchasing my silence, as he has continued to do these long years, but I will remain silent no longer!"

"Lord Dunmow," King John warned calmly, but loud enough for the baron and those around him to hear.

"Non!" Fitzwalter shouted. "I have sat here all evening and endured what is most assuredly living proof of your insult."

"Lord Dunmow," King John commanded him to stop.

"Right there beside our majesty is proof of the wrong he has done my family!" Fitzwalter shouted, pointing at Maud.

"Lord Dunmow!" King John and Peter de Roches raised their voices in unison to no avail.

"Is she not the result of your raping my daughter?" Fitzwalter accused in a drunken rage. The cathedral erupted in shocked banter.

"That is quite enough, Baron Fitzwalter! Accusing the king of rape is beyond the pale! You tread close to treason!" Peter de Roches shouted and stood angrily.

King John was simmering to a boil. Maud looked confused and horrifically embarrassed. William Longsword looked like he had a headache.

"Is what he says true, Papa?" Maud asked under her breathe.

"Nonsense, child. He is a drunken buffoon, nothing more." King John patted her hand without taking his eyes off the baron.

"What other proof do I need, chancellor?" Fitzwalter shot back. "The young lady Maud Fitzroy, who appeared before us so suddenly, may have the king's hair and eyes, but she has my daughter's face and smile! While our majesty certainly plots her future marriage, my daughter Matilda has been left barren by his cursed seed!"

"How now!" Geoff de Mandeville roared and stood several seats down from Fitzwalter. The epiphany of his childless marriage was a terrible shock. His father, Geoffrey Fitzpeter, leaned into the royal table to peer past William Longsword at Maud. The look on his face said it all.

Warren was quelled into silence. He was the king's first cousin, the son of another of King Henry's bastards, and his sister had been forced into bed with John when he was prince of Ireland. After bearing Dickon Fitzroy, who was now a vassal of Lord Arundel and sitting further down the table, Warren's sister took the veil of the Church out of shame.

While several barons taunted Fitzwalter as a liar, Warren remained silent. If the king was capable of forcible incest, he was surely capable of conquering Fitzwalter's Matilda.

"We have heard enough, Lord Dunmow!" King John screamed shrilly and stood beside his chancellor. "We are amazed at the depths of cruelty you will sink to for your own ends after all we've done for you!"

"She was a child, my king; twelve, and as innocent as an angel!" Fitzwalter continued with righteous bravery, hot tears of long suppressed anguish and rage finally flowing free. "I invited you into my home at Bennington after a long day's march, and how did you repay me? You defiled my little Matilda on my very own bed!"

The cathedral erupted in uproar.

"How dare you!" King John shouted and smashed his fist into the table.

"Was it any different with Queen Isabelle?" Fitzwalter laughed bitterly.

John stole Isabelle of Angeloume from Hugh Lusingan, Count of La Marche. She, too, was twelve at the time. While the songs of Fitzwalter's surrender at Vaudreuil were derisive, they did not compare to the songs concerning John's lust filled nights with his child-wife, as Phillip conquered Normandy all around them.

"I should have you killed on the spot!" King John screamed. Royal sergeants began to move towards the baron from the shadows of the hall. Fitzwalter's sons Walter and Robin, Richard and Gilbert de Clare, Geoffrey and Will de Mandeville, Roger and Hugh Bigod, Aubrey and Robert de Vere, Richard Montfichet and Sayer de Quincy; they all rose to defend Fitzwalter.

"Stop!" Someone shouted from the darkness. "Majesty, I will not allow you to turn Baron Fitzwalter into another Beckett," Master John de Cell emerged. John's father, King Henry said similar things about the Archbishop Beckett of Canterbury in his day. Beckett was killed by two knights of the royal household in his very own church, and was now revered as a saint. "Have you all gone mad? This is a house of God! If you must attack one another, do it somewhere else. Otherwise I will personally see to it Pope Innocent levy's the entire might of the Church against you all!"

Everyone stood still. A commanding silence descended over the cathedral. King John looked possessed. The jester couldn't hold it in any longer and farted.

Lady Gannora slipped her hand into her husband's, visibly calming him. She stood, and the two of them left the table; followed shortly by all those who stood for the baron, as well as their wives, vassals, squires, pages, and clerics. In short order, a third of those present departed in silence.

Robert's friend Jeffrey had passed out earlier. He'd drunk far too much mead far too fast, but all the shouting took its toll. He raised his head to hear the abbot of St. Albans make his threat. "What's happened?" He slurred as the exodus left the cathedral.

"I think the king just lost the favor of East Anglia," Robert surmised.

Jeffrey looked around, noticing all the empty chairs, "I thought the food was good."

CHAPTER 8- Onward to Nottingham

St. Albans, Hertfordshire: August

The king and his hawking party were in a high meadow looking down on the army and the glinting River Lea. Marching beside the river, the host was crossing into Bedfordshire through the Luton gap of the Chiltern Hills. The lords of East Anglia were in the vanguard, well separated from the king's retinue in the rearguard.

From the craggy heights of Dunstable Downs, King John saw the spire of St. Albans cathedral to his south and the towers of Bedford Castle to the north. All around them were green rolling woodlands, where swineherds called after their pigs, patchwork fields filled with local villagers reaping the summer harvest of oats and barley, and meadows of pastureland with grazing sheep attended by their shepherds.

It was easy pickings for the scores of hungry men-at-arms roving the countryside with the royal host. King John demanded a steady horse's pace, and soldiers continued to fall out, especially when passing through the woods close to nearby villages. The smarter peasants locked up their herds and young girls.

"I see the Lords Hertford, Norfolk, and Dunmow have supplemented their levies," King John said to Geoffrey Fitzpeter, while resting his capped hawk on his gloved forearm.

Geoffrey looked down at the last crossroads they'd passed. The vibrant yellow and red banners of their womenfolk were heading eastwards to the Clare, Fitzwalter, and Bigod estates; where they'd wait anxiously for word of the campaign into Wales. Adam Fitzwilliam joined Fitzwalter with some twenty knights, a hundred mounted sergeants, and a like number of bowmen; all waiting by the crossroads leading to Bennington. The earls of Hertford and Suffolk added slightly more to their retinues as well.

"The royal host will be a mighty one, your majesty," Geoffrey replied.

While servants foraged ahead into a stand of beech trees, King John began recalling the previous evening with William Longsword, Geoffrey Fitzpeter, Earl Warren of Surrey, Peter de Roches, and Earl Guilleme of Arundel. The old justiciar remained quiet until John finally forced him into conversation.

"We are concerned, Lord Essex," The king said after laughing at one of Peter's jokes about Fitzwalter. "Your sons were quick to stand with the baron and the other lords of East Anglia. It seems they are confused as to who their loyalties lie with."

Geoffrey sighed. When the king was unhappy with him, John always used Geoffrey's noble title. "My lord, I assure you they are most loyal subjects. Everyone was in their cups last night."

A flock of pigeons flew up from the trees ahead. King John removed the cap from his hawk, Gibbun, and lifted his arm. The bird of prey vaulted into the air, flapping rapidly, flying higher and higher to pounce on a pigeon. Gibbun quickly overcame the pigeons, slamming into one with a violent burst of feathers and a shrill shriek. The men all cheered as the hawk circled slowly back down with the dead pigeon between its talons.

"Magnificent animals, hawks," King John smiled up at Gibbun, "Swift, efficient, and ruthless by design." He turned his eyes back to Geoffrey. "I admire them greatly."

Geoffrey understood. "Sire, consider my son Geoff's recent dispensation from Matilda Fitzwalter. It shocked him to hear such words."

"It shocked us to see him fall for them so easily," King John replied, "Of course your younger lad, Will, is betrothed to Fitzwalter's girl, Christiana, but that's no excuse to take a stand against us, don't you agree?"

"For certes, majesty," Geoffrey agreed, "Though I deign to call their actions taking a stand against you, sire. The night was ribald but hardly . . ." Geoffrey paused to find the right word.

"Tracherous?" King John asked.

“Seditious?” Peter de Roches asked.

“Rebellious?” Willem Warren asked.

“Beneficial for anyone,” Longsword declared.

Geoffrey agreed with William Longsword.

“I disagree, gentleman,” King John argued mildly, “At the very least we have seen the mood of our East Anglian lords.” King John smiled as Gibbun landed on his arm, the royal hawk master having already collected the pigeon. The king turned a wary eye on Geoffrey, “And though troubled by what we’ve seen, we shall overcome, shant we Lord Essex?”

“For certes,” He agreed because he had to.

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The host continued from Bedford to Northampton one day after the next. Here, Sheriff Stephen Segrave provided King John with a further levy of royal knights and men at arms, as well as foresters and carpenters. Stephen Segrave was the king’s sheriff of the entire region and he’d gained the royal prerogative over five shires by following John’s orders explicitly.

Prince Alexander of Scotland and his grandfatherly uncle, Earl David of Huntingdon, also joined the host at Northampton Castle with a mixed retinue of Scots and English soldiers. The host grew larger with every passing day. On the fourth day, they entered Leicester, and the entire host turned right onto the Fosse Way at the crossroads on High Cross hill.

The vanguard was greeted at Leicester Castle by the grandmotherly Lady Amice Beaumont and her daughter Countess Marjorie of Leicester, the wife of Earl Sayer of Winchester. Sayer gave his wife a warm kiss and hug, followed closely by her two grown sons, and Sayer’s familial nephew Robert Fitzwalter.

The king and his councilors, arriving with the rearguard, greeted them all with a guarded politeness. The following morning, as the lords assembled in the Courtyard for the short march to Nottingham, the reason became apparent. Mounted on his horse and surrounded by Longsword, Peter de Roches, Earl Warren of Surrey, and Oliver Fitzroy, King John bid his goodbye to the Beaumonts. “As always m’ladies, you proved most gracious hostesses.”

“Thank you kindly, majesty, you are always welcome,” Countess Marjorie replied appropriately.

King John smiled, “Unfortunately, your brother-in-law, Simon de Montfort, has been attacking our nephew, Count Raymond of Toulouse. Montfort even had the gall to claim Agenais for France, our sovereign territory on the border of Aquitaine.”

“Indeed,” Lady Amice agreed guardedly, while Marjorie glanced to her husband saddled over by the Fitzwalters, Clares, and Mandevilles.

“With Simon as viscount of Leicester, sharing revenue with you Countess Marjorie, we are compelled to question whether or not English silver is helping pay for Simon’s attacks on royal lands,” The king accused nonchalantly.

“I can assure you tis not the case, m’lord. Simon is . . .” Countess Marjorie began, but Peter de Roches cut her off.

“Simon is a traitor. As such, our majesty has seen the necessity of placing the shire, and all its revenues, in the hands of someone more sympathetic to the crown,” Peter explained with relish, “Tis necessary for the security of the kingdom.”

“What is this insult, majesty? Do you declare the entire family traitors for a Norman’s actions in Toulouse? Neither he nor Marjorie’s sister have been in the kingdom for half a dozen

years. My lord this is preposterous!” Earl Sayer argued vehemently, spurring his horse closer to the stone steps of the castle. In Simon’s perpetual absence, the king gave the traditional right of a third of the shire’s income to Marjorie and Sayer. Simon was viscount in name only.

“The king must take all the necessary precautions. Tis not personal, Sayer,” Peter smiled devilishly, “Until the king deems it appropriate to return the honor of Leicester to the House of Beaumont, the shire’s steward will be Oliver Fitzroy.”

King John sighed, “These are troubling times for all us, but we must endure the trifles, mustn’t we?”

“Sire, this is an outrage!” Sayer cursed. “With all due respect, your bastard son is an excellent knight and has learned the art of war well under Fawkes de Breaute, but he knows nothing of lordship. He’s never ruled anything more than a band of men-at-arms.”

King John’s eyes and mouth slit at Sayer, and the earl of Winchester realized he’d gone too far.

“Then now is the perfect opportunity for him to learn,” The king said coldly in the warm morning sunlight.

Robert was loading his chest onto one of the chancellor’s wagons, while King John claimed Leicester for his bastard son. Gripping the secret pouch under his robe, he instantly thought of the day at the Temple when he and Peter met with Savaric and Maud. ‘Simon will pay for Agenais. I will see to that,’ Peter said.

“Simon isn’t the only one,” Robert said to himself, as King John spoke of Oliver’s opportunity. Just then, the frail and elderly Lady Amice fainted. Her head knocked against one of the stone steps as she fell.

“Mother!” Countess Marjorie cried out. Sayer jumped from his horse to carry her back into the castle. Sayer’s sons and Robert Fitzwalter slipped from their horses and followed them up the steps. The king, his councilors, and the host left for Nottingham.

King John awoke with a startle. A summer storm was lingering over the shire. The cupboard shook as a roll of thunder rippled over Nottingham’s Black Tower.

John sat up and threw the linen sheets on his bed mate. He swung his legs over the edge of the high bed and stood on the plush wolf’s fur rug. His right ankle was stiff, and it hurt to put too much weight on it. His backside ached from the long days in the saddle. John’s throat was sore and his nose dripping from the day’s drenching ride.

Lightning cracked outside, lighting the room in a rainbow of colors as it flashed through the stained Venetian glass Isabelle installed several summers ago. Once king, John allowed Isabelle to furnish the castle as she pleased. Now, it was second only to Windsor in comfort and opulence.

She and the boys loved coming here. It was far from the intrigues of London, and the view was stunning from the rocky heights. John hated it, despite Nottingham being the most formidable fortress in all the Midlands. To him, it was a cold stone reminder of his first failure.

John poured himself some mead, staring down at the letter by the low burning candles on the cupboard. Duke Henri of Brabant was regrettably unable to raid Vermandois, on account of King Frederick of Sicily marching into the western German states of the Holy Roman Empire. Emperor Otto was quite taken with the civil war. John flinched as two tiny hands slipped up his back.

“Tis just me,” She whispered, hugging her naked body against his back. “Is something wrong?”

“Non,” John lied.

He’d dreamt of his brother and mother again. He was trapped inside the Black Tower as Richard laid siege. The catapults were shaking the walls of the fortress. Richard fought his way straight to his younger brother, slaying all those who crossed his path. John knelt before him and begged forgiveness for attempting to claim the kingdom in Richard’s absence.

While kneeling before Richard, his older brother began mocking John’s current plans for Wales, “It just might work if it weren’t you leading the way, brother. After all, you weren’t much against the Irish when father handed it over to you. Nor were you a match for Phillip, or even me for that matter. Stupid arse, you’ll never retake Normandy attacking Wales, now will you?”

“I must clear my backside first, brother!” He’d explained.

“Bah! Turning your back on your real enemy is no way to win a war,” Richard laughed in the dream.

“I’m surrounded by enemies. What else am I to do?” John asked.

“Stop making so many, you silly little twit,” Richard explained.

“They’ll never love me as they did you,” John cried in the dream.

“Non,” Richard agreed.

“You’ve always been everyone’s favorite,” John moped.

“Except for father,” Richard sneered, “You were his favorite, you little worm. John Lackland, the only son to stand beside him when everyone else attacked. Here, let me settle this for you.” In the dream, Richard pulled out a dagger and plunged it into John’s heart.

He fell over dead, yet somehow saw his elderly mother, Eleanor, walk up beside Richard. She inspected her youngest son’s body. “Tsk, tsk, such a shame, Dickon,” She said as she wrapped her arm around Richard’s. “He’d of made a good justiciar.”

“You seem tense,” John’s bed mate said in the dark.

“I have a lot on my mind, girl,” He replied irritably.

“I know a way to take your mind off things. Now turn around,” She said sweetly as she kneeled before the king.

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Robert was shaken awake by King John’s squire, Bill Marshal.

“What?” He asked with one eye half-opened.

Robert was sleeping in the cushioned window seat of the Queen’s Drawing Room. His small chest and bag of spare clothes were curled behind him. Robert felt special, though the early morning Compline bell had just tolled. He was sharing the room with his fellow clerics Jeffrey, Harry, and Tom.

While drying off from the soaked march, John spent an hour judiciously doling out rooms and wall towers to his companions. Lord Belvoir, Earl Ferrers of Derby, and Count Ranulf of Chester had greeted the king upon his arrival. All of them were loyal, and so the king found room for them, along with all the others in the massive three-ringed fortress.

Sheriff Phillip Mark graciously removed his entire family to the Barbican, the massive gate tower fortress at the bottom of the rock. He’d made sure to provision Nottingham with more than ample food, provisions, and men for the king’s visit. He’d also stored, and kept well-guarded, the Treasury filled with hundreds of barrels of silver to pay for the campaign.

The rest of the lords and their retinues were dispersed throughout the walled borough below. The royal host had swelled to well over eight thousand with the siege train and guildsmen. Tents

were laid out in every meadow, pasture, field, and wood between the River Leen and Sherwood Forest. The king gave Peter de Roches the Queen's Chambers, tucked away in the northeastern tower on the fourth floor of the keep.

"The chancellor . . ." Bill Marshal yawned and pointed.

Robert noticed the door to the Queens Room was open.

"I'll be right there," Robert groaned. He walked right in. Peter was pulling on a pair of loose woolen hose. The gold Plantagenet Lion necklace, seal of the chancellor, swayed around his neck. A woman was sleeping naked on her belly in the bed.

"We're leaving," Peter said as he hacked and sniffled.

"Now? The king said we rest here four days," Robert protested.

The horses and men were worn out from days of hard marching. The final leg to Nottingham took forever in the heavy rain and thick mud. Everyone agreed it was for the best. Besides, John had planned it that way without telling anyone.

"The host isn't going anywhere, we are," Peter said then slogged back a cup of dark wine.

"Where?" Robert asked as he stood by the warm coals in the fireplace. He'd been looking forward to drying his spare robe today.

"Our majesty has decided to take a hunting party into Sherwood Forest. He's invited a select few to join him there. We may need your penmanship," Peter surmised.

"In the woods?" Robert asked.

"Don't start with me," Peter growled. He was not pleasant in the mornings. The chancellor fell back on the bed and smacked the sleeping woman on her backside. "Wake up! Get out of bed or service the man who takes my place. The choice is yours."

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"Here they come," Longsword announced.

Across the grassy meadow, a dozen or so deer bolted from the woods, frightened by the drumming and horns coming from behind them. The ranger of Sherwood Forest had his men set up netting all along the southern half of the meadow to prevent the deer escaping.

The king and his companions stood tall on a wooden tower built for this sole purpose. King John took the first shot with a crossbow and hit the tallest buck with a bolt to the neck. The others let loose their arrows one at a time to comment and joke on each other's bowmanship.

"What's that still out there?" The king asked as something rooted around in the underbrush on the far side of the meadow.

"A boar," The ranger of Sherwood Forest said.

"I'll give you a pound if you can drop it with one shot," John dared the ranger.

"Very well," The ranger said and called for his bow.

"That's some bow," The boy Prince Alexander said as the Forest ranger strung it up. It was as tall as the man was.

"Tis Welsh," The king, Longsword, and Ranulf of Chester said in unison.

Without a word, the ranger wet his finger and raised it in the air. He pulled back the bow to his cheek and kept it there while waiting for a clean shot.

"A mark says he'll never make it," Ferrers of Derby offered.

"Taken," Warren of Surrey took the bet.

Robert's head swirled at the bet. It was more than he'd make in a dozen years as a simple scribe of the Court, mayhap eight now that he was Peter's steward. He was also amazed at the

ranger's strength keeping the string pulled back and the longbow steady. The ranger released his arrow. They all saw it rise, ark, and fall across the meadow. It struck the boar in the head and the animal fell instantly.

"What a shot!" The king roared. The nobles all agreed and clapped the ranger on the shoulder, boasting of similar shots made when they were younger.

Robert wondered what they'd soon face with every single Welshman said to be a master archer at birth. He'd noticed how the twenty eight Welsh boys held hostage at Nottingham were up at dawn when the party was leaving for Sherwood. They were all practicing their archery and none of them had stopped or even bowed to the king as he passed. Such was the will of the Welsh.

"Robert, write this man a receipt for one pound, payable from the Treasury at Nottingham," King John shot an order.

"Of course, your majesty," Robert agreed, thankful he'd brought writing board, ink, pen, and parchment into the woods after all. He dug into his hempen satchel to begin his task.

"And who taught you to make such a fantastic shot?" King John asked the ranger.

"My father," He replied quietly.

"And who might that be?" King John asked with a broad smile.

"Robert of Sherwood," The ranger replied.

John's smile turned wooden, "I see. Is he still alive?"

"Non," Robin of Clipstone, ranger of Sherwood Forest and caretaker of the king's hunting lodge replied.

"God rest his soul," King John smiled.

"And that of your brother, the late King Richard." Robin answered.

His father, Robert of Sherwood, had gone on crusade with King Richard as captain of the royal archers. Unable to retake Jerusalem, King Richard and his army sailed homewards, having re-established a crusader kingdom based at the port of Acre and extending along the coastline north to Antioch and south to Ascalon.

Hungry for the throne, Prince John declared Richard dead and proclaimed himself king when his brother was captured by Duke Leopold of Austria and handed over to the Holy Roman emperor. Neither Queen Mother Eleanor, Richard's justiciars of the realm, nor his nephew and heir, Arthur of Brittany, concurred.

Sherwood and the rest of the army returned to England dumbfounded. Prince John's sheriff was in control of Nottingham and refused to grant Robert his family office as ranger of the Forest. He'd already taken possession of Clipstone manor, the family home deep in the heart of Sherwood. The sheriff's cousin evicted Robert's family by force then took residence himself.

The sheriff then tried to arrest Robert but he escaped to the Forest. In Sherwood he proved a devilish adversary, alongside his old foresters and the hoods Little John and Will Scarlet, whose vagabonds controlled vast stretches of the Forest.

When King Richard finally returned to England, he laid siege to Nottingham castle and Robert of Sherwood emerged from the forest. It was a joyous reunion between the king and his old captain of archers. With the old Earl of Chester and Geoffrey Fitzpeter, they bashed down the walls of the outer bailey and took the Barbican.

The next day, King Richard hanged his prisoners before the rest of the garrison's eyes, and the sheriff surrendered. Prince John's first bid for the kingdom ended on his brother's gallows in Nottingham that day. He'd returned to Nottingham many times since then, but never inquired about the fate of Robert Sherwood.

Sheriff Phillip Mark always paid the revenues from the shire Court. Sherwood Forest had no more of a problem harboring brigands than any other royal wood. Why should John care who managed the deer in Sherwood?

“Steward, the receipt,” King John ordered tightly. For some reason it mattered today.

Robert de London was dabbing the quill in the ink pot, which was resting in its indentation next to the parchment groove on his wooden writing tablet. “Coming, sire.”

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With the beasts killed, John and his companions retired under a giant, ancient oak tree to drink wine and discuss the matters of the realm. “Ranulf, how goes it against Llewellyn in Gwynedd?” King John asked.

“He’s retaken all but two castles, sire. The fighting is fierce. No prisoners taken on either side. I’d put his head on a pike if you’d but give me the men,” Ranulf said bluntly, which was his way.

“And how does Fawkes fair in the south?” Longsword asked the earl of Chester.

“The same,” Ranulf surmised. “He’s managed to quell the highlanders in Glamorgan, but Deheubarth and Gwent are all in flames. At least Earl Marshall’s men in Pembroke and Chepstow are holding out down there.”

“That old bastard would have their hides if they didn’t,” King John replied, “And what of lord Hereford in Powys?”

“He fares no better,” Ranulf spat the gristle from his cup of wine.

“And what of the levies assembled in Chester?” King John continued the interrogation.

“I’ve received word a thousand Scottish sergeants are soon to arrive, but haven’t seen them yet,” Ranulf said, “Your royal levies from Lancaster and York are eating me out of my shire, but there are still no arrivals from Northumbria. The first I’ve seen of any of them was lord Alnwick in Nottingham.”

“A thousand you said?” King John was perturbed as he turned to Prince Alexander and his uncle Earl David of Huntingdon. “I wanted fifteen hundred.”

Alexander looked positively frightened. “I . . . I was told a thousand your majesty.”

“I was told nothing,” David explained.

“Miserable Scottish whoresons,” Ferrers of Derby cursed.

Prince Alexander stiffened at the words. He walked right up to Lord Derby, who was sitting on a massive root and leaning against the tree. Alexander said, “You have insulted my honor.”

He quickly drew out his dagger and slashed it across Ferrers’ left cheek.

“You stupid little welp! I’ll kill you!” Earl Ferrers screamed as he pulled a bloody hand away from his face. He launched himself at the boy, catching the prince’s right hand by the wrist as Alexander stabbed again. Ferrers then punched him hard in the face with a right hook, knocking Alexander to the ground.

“Get him! Ha! Ha!” Lord Guillame of Arundel cheered.

“Get him Ferrers!” Ranulf of Chester urged Lord Derby, on too.

Geoffrey Fitzpeter and William Longsword nodded their heads at the futility of it all. Peter de Roches sat with a bemused smile. The king was stunned and silently fuming. Ferrers pounced on Alexander and would have strangled the prince of Scotland had David and Warren not pulled him off. Robert, the squires and foresters looked on in shock.

“Let go of me you bastards! His life is mine! Trial by combat! I demand a duel! Trial by combat!” Ferrers struggled against David and Warren.

“Stop it!” King John commanded, “I said stop it!”

The little tussle froze. “I’m sick of all this bickering and backstabbing,” King John heartily announced. “The Welsh betray me, the Scots are slack, the Germans refuse me, the Northumbrians ignore me, my East Anglians defame me; and you would rather bait one another than stay true to our task? By God’s teeth, I’ve had enough of it all!”

The crowd under the huge oak grew quiet. King John was working himself into a serious Plantagenet rage and began pacing as if he didn’t have gout in his ankle. They’d seen this play out before and it rarely ended well.

“I swear if none of my subjects will respect me, then all of them will fear me!” John shouted, stopping in place to raise a finger to the leaf canopied sky. Then the king started pacing again, lost in his anger. “I see now, I must provide another example, for all to see what awaits the treacherous and the treasonous!”

It was never good when John dropped the royal ‘we’ discussing politics. He walked up to Earl Ferrers, who tugged himself loose of Warren and David’s grip. The king put his hand on Ferrers’ cheek, pulled it away, looked down at it, and then showed the bloody palm to them all.

“Blood is all anyone seems to understand anymore. Very well then, if its blood everyone wants tis blood they’ll get!” The king shouted.

There was a tense silence as the king wiped his hand on Ferrers velvet jerkin.

“What sort of example do you have in mind, sire?” Peter de Roches finally asked.

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“If the king wishes to see you, he’ll send word,” The sergeant ushering the door to the King’s Chambers told Maud for the third time.

“Fine then, be that way,” Maud shot an angry pout at him and huffed back into the heart of the solar room in the Black Tower. She scanned everyone present. Cute Prince Alexander was sharing a window seat with his sisters, but hardly held sway over King John. She didn’t know the handsome lord Belvoir, the wrinkly Earl David, or the scary looking Earl Ferrers well enough to ask them.

For the first time in England, Maud felt as she did at Fontrevault, insignificant. Then some servants over by the tables moved on with their duties and Maud noticed Robert de London sitting and moping with a cup by another cleric. “Robert,” She said under her breath and made an arrow line for him.

“Robert, tell me these horrible rumors aren’t true,” Maud said as she walked up to Robert and his friend. Jeffrey looked up at her and his face went blank. Robert’s hand strayed from his cup to the parchment with the royal seal at the bottom. She couldn’t help but notice the bronze Plantagenet Lion hanging about Robert’s neck.

“Maud, this is Jeffrey,” Robert sighed, “Jeffrey, this is Maud Fitzroy.”

“How do you do, Jeffrey?” She asked politely while he stared at her. She’d platted her thick black hair into two tails, and was wearing a white linen undershirt beneath a dark red tunic tailored to her form. She wore silver earrings and the ruby necklace was all that hung from her neck.

Jeffrey gulped. Robert kicked his friend’s chair.

“Oh,” Jeffrey shook himself coherent. “I’m . . . quite busy actually. I should leave now.” He stood and graciously offered Maud his chair while nodding with disbelief at Robert. Robert poured her a cup of mead and sighed as he looked down at the parchment bearing the king’s seal.

“Papa won’t see me, and I refuse to believe the rumors, Robert. Why do people say such terrible things? And why won’t papa see me?” Maud asked as she accepted the cup.

Robert poured himself more ale. “Do you want me lie to you?”

She squinted and pursed her lips at him in snarky defiance, “But he wouldn’t do such a thing. He just wouldn’t. I know.”

“He may be your father, but he’s also king of a people growing more unruly by the day,” Robert said, guzzling a third of the cup. “Maud, I know you’ve grown up in a French nunnery, but surely you’ve heard the stories of our majesty’s past? At St Bart’s, the monks told them at bedtime to give us the chills.”

Robert raised his hands half menacingly, “Be good boys or John will come and get you,” He whispered.

“But that’s just it. They’re all stories made up by jealous rivals,” Maud argued convincingly to herself. Robert nodded his head and gave her a silly little girl look.

“Well we’ve got to do something, we’ve got to . . .” Maud started, but Robert cut her off.

“Maud, listen to me. Peter argued one should be spared to return with the news. Earl Warren agreed, but King John did not. His brother Longsword pointed out the Welsh will only fight harder, to the last man even, once news reaches them. Lord Belvoir, Count Ranulf, and Earl Geoffrey agreed. Again, the king did not. If the king’s most trusted companions cannot change his mind, what makes you think we can?”

“So it’s true?” She asked, momentarily stunned.

Robert passed the parchment down to her. He’d written it in French. With each line Maud broke down a little more. Maud’s shoulders slumped, and she stared down at the fidgeting hands in her lap. When she looked up tears were streaming down her face. “Tis horrible, Robert. I . . . I can’t . . .”

Robert sighed and sloshed back another third of his ale. “I know,” he whispered and looked quite sadly at the young woman realizing who her father was. “I must bid you farewell, Maud. I’ve been given a task.”

Maud reached out and slipped her hand into Robert’s under the table. He flinched, but did not let go. All the sinful thoughts flashed through his mind, but Robert drowned them out with the logic of fear; the fear of her father. He passed a quick glance over his shoulder, and only the Scottish princesses were watching. He downed the last third of ale with his right hand.

“Where? What must you do?” She asked and squeezed his hand.

Robert looked deep into those grey eyes so like John’s. “I’m to tell the lords gathered in the borough of the king’s decision. It seems I’ve been elevated again. It will not do to send the undersheriff to address both the citizens and the lords of the realm together. So the lords will hear the royal decree from his new herald.”

Maud’s eyes twinkled through the tears, “Congratulations, Robert. You’re an officer of the crown now.”

Robert smirked. “Be careful what you ask for, lest you get it.”

Maud smiled but she seemed struck by the words. “Indeed,” Her brows furrowed and she asked, “Robert, what happened to the last herald? Papa hasn’t had one since I arrived.”

Robert sighed, “The king sent him across the Channel last summer to parlay with Archbishop Stephen Langton, but he decided to stay with Stephen in exile.”

“Oh,” Maud replied.

“He then died of a very sudden illness, very sudden,” Robert said no more.

“Oh,” Maud breathed as quiet as a mouse.

“Very well then,” Robert said and let go her fingers, then stood.

“Before you go, may I venture a question?” Maud asked.

“For certes,” Robert shrugged. He felt less flustered now that their fingers weren’t interlocked.

“Are you going to see Lord Dunmow?” Maud wondered.

“Oui,” Robert agreed suspiciously, “He will be there, for certes.”

“Take me with you,” Maud said breathlessly.

“What?” Robert said, “I can’t do that. It’s impossible, unthinkable. It’s rubbish.”

Maud persisted to stare at him those baleful grey eyes.

“The king would flay me alive,” He justified himself perfectly.

Maud smiled and cocked her head. Somehow, her eyes brightened. A tear still clung to her soft cheek. The familiar ruby showed brilliantly between her bosoms. “Please?”

CHAPTER 9- The Herald’s Burden

Nottingham: August

Robert paused in the tall, arched doorway of the Black Tower with his hooded assistant beside him. Behind them, Maelgwyn of Powys was strumming a small harp, and singing in chorus with two other Welsh boys, by the wide entrance to the kitchen. A few young scullery maids held plates to their chests, swaying to the song.

Rhodri of Gwent was telling a werewolf story to the half-dozen other kids still eating down the hall at the kitchen table. Several of the boys were scampering past Robert and his assistant, racing down the massive wooden spiral staircase that emptied onto the ground. The two oldest, Gruffydd of Gwynedd and Rhys of Deheubarth, were leaning against the staircase several steps down from the landing. They were talking quietly together and watching the undersheriff ride down to the Middle Bailey with a squad of Nottingham sergeants.

Through the sunset, Robert took a brief glance at the countryside stretching to the horizons. From the heights of the Black Tower, Sherwood Forest stretched north in a dark green sea of swaying trees. To the east sunset gleamed off the stone walls of Belvoir Castle like a beacon. The flat vale of Belvoir stretched on towards Lincoln in a patchwork of fields ripe and reaped of harvest. Some were fallow or unfinished or pastured. Irregularly shaped sections were hedged in with trees and bushes.

Robert thought he heard a low sob from his assistant, “Well its best we get on with this. Gentlemen,” he nodded to the royal sergeants ushering the door and headed down the staircase, urging his assistant on by the elbow.

“Are you sure you can do this?” Robert whispered.

“I was just thinking about all those boys,” The assistant gasped.

“Don’t, it’s easier that way,” Robert replied.

At the bottom of the spiral staircase, Robert guided them by the sheriff's guards and over to the wooden stables. It was lodged between two of the square wall towers of the Inner Bailey. Robert pulled out the Plantagenet Lion hanging under his hood and asked for a pair of horses.

The marshal of the stables stared at him and barked, "Barnaby!"

The stable boy brought out one small horse, a sorrel. "The two of you clerics can manage on this just fine," The stable marshal said.

Robert elbowed his assistant. "I should hope so."

He swung his leg up and over the short horse, lifting himself onto its blanketed back. He offered a hand to his assistant as the Marshal turned around to harass Barnaby about his poor shoeing skills. Robert pulled, and his assistant squeaked while swinging up over the horse. The marshal glanced over his shoulder as the two got comfortable on the sorrel's back. He thought he saw a flash of red and gold under that cleric's robe.

"We're off," Robert shouted and nudged the old sorrel on. The marshal watched them saunter into the maze of royal and official wagons crowded inside the bailey. As they approached the first pair of gate towers, a squad of men-at-arms pulled themselves up to attention. They all wore the black leather and iron studded jerkins of the royal guard. Red Plantagenet lions were sown over their hearts, and they were each armed with a short spear, a sword, and throwing axe.

"Sergeant Falmouth," Robert greeted their escort.

"Scribbler," Falmouth replied with a bow, then turned to his men-at-arms.

"Right, you good for nothing clod-hoppers, we're here to escort the king's herald, so let's look sharp," He barked in his thick Cornish brogue.

They pulled on the wide-rimmed steel bonnets they usually hung behind their neck, organized themselves into two small lines, and the man at right front unfurled a royal banner.

Sergeant Falmouth turned back to Robert and spat into the dirt. "We travel in your wake, scribbler."

"How pleasant," The assistant murmured behind Robert in French.

"What?" Sergeant Falmouth demanded from the ground.

"It's a pleasant evening for a ride," Robert commented, and his assistant giggled.

"If ye say so," Falmouth spat again.

They passed through the square gate towers down into the larger Middle Bailey, a second walled-in Courtyard with several towers interspersed between the guarded ramparts. Though it was more spacious, the Courtyard was packed with the wagons of King John's lord companions and their common folk. There was a bottleneck at the middle gate as the sheriff's butler argued with the royal butler over a giant barrel that had fallen off a wagon, dumping hundreds of gallons of King John's favorite Poitevan wine into the dirt.

Sergeant Falmouth started shouting and screaming at his men and the wreckage of the wooden cask was rolled aside while the oxen pulling the wagon were whipped into motion. He commanded traffic until the jam was loose while the two butlers fought it out and his men took all bets at even odds.

Down into the third and steeply inclined Outer Bailey they passed a park of mangonel catapults and petrary bolt throwers; all of them faced out. Herds of sheep, pigs, and cows were penned in along the walls while flocks of chickens clucked through the mud, and a herd of draught horses waited their turn for a new set of iron shoes.

Along the outer wall, the towers were round, unlike the rest of the square and rectangular fortress. King Richard rebuilt them in the crusader style after he'd smashed a hole through them, taken the old square Barbican, and hung Prince John's supporters so many years ago. The outer

Gate Towers, called the Barbican, were larger than all the others along the walls; only the Black Tower was larger.

Robert, his assistant, and their escort passed under the iron portcullis, through the dark passage lit by murder holes, beyond the outer oak doors, and crossed the drawbridge over the dry moat without incident. The assistant sighed in relief as they made their way through the city's pastures, covered in the tents of the Flemish camp, and on into the castle borough of Nottingham.

Two-story wooden houses emerged along the dirt road crowded with citizens, peasants, throngs of soldiers from dozens of lords, and the usual mayhem of pigs, dogs, chickens, horses, mules, and oxen. As they jostled amongst the tide of humanity, Robert's assistant's arms tightened around him. The assistant couldn't help but notice the way everyone looked at them upon seeing the royal banner. It was a mix of fear, hatred, and forced respect.

"Are you alright?" Robert asked. It was strange having arms around him.

"Oui," his assistant said in a hushed tone, "Everyone looks and sounds so foreign here."

Robert chuckled. "Not everyone in England speaks the king's French or wears silk. For some reason, most prefer the local English tongue and wear wool and hide they can afford."

"Ha, ha," The assistant laughed dryly.

Passing tithe barns, a church, several taverns, a smithy, a cooper's shop, Rope Walk, and Poultry Lane, they went to the open market in the town square.

"There's the undersheriff," Robert pointed to the official and his men-at-arms making their way towards the tall wooden cross in the center of the square. "We'll continue on to the Guild Hall, where the lords are meeting."

As they neared the small open square before the Guild Hall, Robert noticed several archers practicing in the side yard of the Bully Pheasant tavern. Many of them were just young men taking shots at empty barrels, but the elder among them looked familiar. He had a rich, red beard trimmed to accentuate his goatee and a jaunty archer's cap with a hawk feather. He wore a softened deer-hide vest with a dark green wool hood over the shoulders. Toughened leather armbands protected his forearms from the bowstring, which he wore over a white linen shirt. Loose woolen hose dyed Lincoln green were tucked into high, soft-leather boots.

"I think these men are from Dunmow," Robert said. "What's the ranger's name? Think, think," he murmured.

The ranger complimented his teenage son, who beamed with pride, and Robert clearly saw the chevrons and bar of the Fitzwalter badge on the young man.

"Is he here?" The assistant piped up and scanned the yard.

"We'll see," Robert said.

"Excuse me there ranger, are you not with Lord Dunmow?" Robert declared his question loudly in English.

The ranger turned and appraised the two clerics on the elderly palfrey. He noticed the Plantagenet Lion seal and banner, then scanned the men-at-arms behind them. "Should I know you?" He asked, flicked his archer's cap, and leaned on his quarter staff.

"Do you not remember me from Binham Priory?" Robert asked.

The ranger grinned, "Should I?"

"I was with Sir William de Mandeville," Robert explained as the ranger stared at him blankly, "I was the royal cleric."

"This isn't going well," The assistant whispered.

"Oh, right," The ranger finally nodded, "Will's scribbler."

"He doesn't sound impressed," The assistant whispered behind Robert.

“Shut up,” Robert said under his breath.

“What did you say?” The ranger asked.

“Nary a thing, sir,” Robert explained in English.

“I’m no sir,” The ranger replied, and his archer’s laughed.

“I need to see the baron. Is he inside?” Robert’s irritation seeped through as he nodded at the Bully Pheasant. The ranger smiled easily and repeated the question amongst his archers, who all chuckled.

“Nay,” The ranger responded and turned back towards his boys. “Now, who said practice was over, aye? Back to the barrels, boys, get the arrows.”

Sergeant Falmouth walked up beside Robert and pushed the steel bonnet to the back of his neck with the spearhead. He looked up at Robert and smiled a brown crooked grin. “Quite respectable he is to you, scribbler.”

“Why, thank you,” Robert shot back.

“All to right, I’ll take care of this, then,” Falmouth spat and grunted.

“That shan’t be nescesse . . hey. Nay,” Robert said as Falmouth walked ahead of them and planted his spear in the dirt.

“Oy, Whiskers! I don’t think you heard me king’s man fair and true,” Sergeant Falmouth shouted, resting his left hand on his sword hilt and the right on his spear. “Now tell us where the bloody baron’s arse is, or we’ll pummel your face in for you.”

“Indeed, you will?” The ranger responded to the taunt by twirling his quarterstaff in circles and walking towards the sergeant.

Robert looked around and everyone on the street was taking notice. A human ring was tightening about them. He saw Fitzwalter, Clare, Mandeville, and Bigod badges among the citizens.

“Sergeant, this isn’t necessary,” Robert warned his short sighted escort.

They were easily outnumbered, but Falmouth refused to hear him.

He chuckled as the ranger approached. Falmouth lifted the spear, lunging to stab it up into the man’s neck. The ranger planted his staff before him in mid-twirl and deflected the spear away from him. Taking the offensive, the ranger swung the quarterstaff at Falmouth’s head, but he ducked and the staff bounced off the steel bonnet on the back of the sergeant’s neck. Falmouth then swung the spear up towards the ranger’s throat like a sword. The ranger pulled his head back just in time.

“Heh, looks like I shaved you a bit, Whiskers,” Sergeant Falmouth taunted the ranger, who raised his hand to his beard and felt the shorn hairs of his goatee.

The people on the street were crowding closer. The royal guards, Robert and his assistant, and the Dunmow archers formed an uncertain perimeter with the side of the Bully Pheasant. Someone shouted ‘Even odds!’ And the crowd roared with takers.

Robert was growing more concerned by the heartbeat. “I knew this was a bad idea,” He said under his breath in Latin.

“I heard that,” His assistant pouted, “Can I see?”

“Stop this at once, I say!” Robert shouted at the back of Falmouth’s head.

“Come on, Whiskers!” Falmouth shouted and charged the ranger.

They shared a succession of blows end to end, then the ranger advanced, twirling blows as he spun and sank one right into Falmouth’s chest. The sergeant knocked his opponent’s hat off with the butt of his spear as he fell backwards into his guards. They threw him back up on his feet, and the second round of betting raised the stakes.

Robert's face reddened as he looked around at all the attention Sergeant Falmouth was drawing to them. This was not how he planned it. The secret was all but lost if things got out of hand.

The ranger swept his quarter staff low from the right. The sergeant jumped over the strike and ducked the counter swipe up and back towards his head. Falmouth stabbed off balance. The spearhead bounced off the ranger's arm band, cutting through the wool and linen covering his left shoulder. The spear nicked him behind the ear, but the ranger swept a quick strike back at the sergeant's face, catching Falmouth in the mouth and nose.

Stumbling back, Sergeant Falmouth dropped the spear and flung his hands to his face. Blood was dripping down between his fingers and he screamed, "Ahh! Ugh! Bathtard!"

The ranger stepped back, too. His arm band was nearly cut in half, and he was bleeding from minor cuts on his forearm and shoulder. Blood trickled down his neck behind his ear as well. The ranger smiled and started twirling the quarterstaff again.

Someone shouted 'two to one on the ranger!' and a fresh round of betting alighted.

Sergeant Falmouth turned back with a curse, "Fie and damnation!"

He dropped his hands. He'd lost his front teeth, and his upper lip was split open. His nose was bent nearly sideways. Blood coursed down his face, mouth, and neck. He pulled loose his falchion sword and dagger. The curved single edge of the blade was strengthened by a thick, straight, and dull backside; perfect for hacking.

"Enough ththick play," Falmouth spat blood, launching himself at the ranger again. The ranger attacked, swinging the staff ends at him left and right. However, Falmouth knew to deflect the falchion, so it didn't stick in the wood. Instead he slowly whittled at it with every deflection. Strips of wood began to fly into the crowd, some curling they were sliced so thin.

Just then, Robin and Walter Fitzwalter, Will Mandeville, and Adam Fitzwilliam came laughing out the door of the Bully Pheasant.

"Richard!" Robin and Walter shouted as they walked into the two bloody men facing off against one another.

"Robert de London?" Will Mandeville shouted at the cleric.

"Robert, what's this, then?" Adam shouted as they all looked with amazed amusement.

"Sir Adam!" Robert shouted, happy to see someone he knew. "Sir William! Sirs Walter and Robin! I have something to present to Baron Fitzwalter. I'm terribly sorry, my sergeant got ahead of himself."

"At least Richard Bumpstead put him back in his place," Robin pointed out, and many in the crowd chuckled.

"I told the royal herald our lord was not here," Richard Bumpstead explained, "The sergeant did not agree."

"He was in Sherwood with the king's hunting party today," Will told the brothers Fitzwalter, who shrugged eyebrows at one another until they nodded in agreement.

"Lord Dunmow might be here after all," Walter said and nodded to his father's ranger. Bumpstead backed off.

'All bets off!' Someone shouted, and the crowd let out a sigh of regret.

Robert turned the horse around and looked down at the other royal guards. "Why don't you take Sergeant Falmouth across the street and wait in the tavern. Clean him up and buy him an ale, make it two. We'll be out shortly."

Falmouth spit a mouthful of blood under the horse as he walked by. He shot Robert an evil eye. "Good to know ye have my back, thcribbler."

...

A handsome young man named Christopher Reeve gestured for the two clerics to wait in the hall and then entered the backroom. There had been incoherent mumbling coming from the far side of the thick wooden door. Suddenly, Robert heard someone shout, "The herald is here? Now? Tell him to tell the king I'll serve the full extent of my obligation, but if he wants to arrest me for calling him a rapist send more than half a dozen miserable footmen!"

The door opened slightly and Christopher side-stepped half-way out.

"Tis not why we're here," Robert explained calmly.

Christopher Reeve rolled his eyes and slipped back inside.

"Maybe this was a mistake," The assistant whispered in Latin.

"Now she sees truth," Robert cursed in English.

"By the Devil's brood, what's he want then?" The baron shouted through the door in Anglo-Norman. The door opened slightly, and Christopher side-stepped half-way out.

"I have someone you'd like to meet," Robert explained loudly, "Very much so."

A quiet mumbling whispered through the door.

Robert heard Christopher Reeve say, "A short person in a cleric's robe."

"Well don't just stand there, let them in!" Baron Fitzwalter shouted.

Christopher opened the door and allowed the two clerics inside. Robert and his assistant stepped into a living room above the tavern. To his right, Geoff Mandeville was sitting by his sister Lady Matilene, and her husband Earl Hugh of Hereford. Dispersed throughout the cozy furniture were Earl Richard de Clare of Hertford and his grown son Gilbert, Baron Robert Fitzwalter, his brother Archdeacon William of Hereford, Baron Eustace de Vescy of Alnwick, Earl Roger Bigod of Norfolk, and the grandfatherly Earl Aubrey de Vere of Oxford.

"My lords," Robert said and bowed before them, momentarily taken aback by the baron's company.

"Why is this person so important, herald, that I must see him before the royal decree?" Baron Fitzwalter asked.

Robert's assistant stepped forward and pulled back the hood, revealing a thick mane of raven black hair. Maud looked at the baron and took another step forward. Fitzwalter's hands balled. He looked about to scream.

Lady Matilene sucked in her breath, "By God's eye Geoff, she looks just like Matilda with black hair and grey eyes."

Maud was dauntless and stepped closer, then smiled at him, "Grampa?"

Fitzwalter's eyes filled with tears. He'd seen that smile and those rosy cheeks a thousand times from his daughter Matilda, and his wife Gannora. His angry smirk blossomed into a joyous smile. He stood, rushed to her, and grabbed hold of her tightly. They both started laughing and crying.

It was contagious in the intimacy of the moment.

"Oh lass, my little lost lass," Fitzwalter bear hugged her. "Oh, how I've missed you," Fitzwalter said with a smile of pure satisfaction.

"Grampa!" she cried through passionate hiccups.

Joyous laughter and clapping erupted around the room. Matilene consoled her brother Geoff with a sisterly nuzzle. Maud was the reason Matilda no longer bore children.

“That makes me grand-uncle!” Archdeacon William Fitzwalter said proudly and moved closer to hug Maud.

“You have done me a boon herald, a terrific boon! I owe you a profound debt,” Fitzwalter said after finally letting go of his granddaughter, so she might greet the others. He gave Robert the kiss of peace on both cheeks.

“Forgive me!” Fitzwalter laughed, “I don’t even know your name.”

“Robert de London, sire,” Fitzwalter smiled, forgiving the fact that they’d met at Binham Priory.

“Am I to understand you were with the king in Sherwood Forest today?” Fitzwalter asked as Geoff de Mandeville stepped up to them.

“I was, my lords,” Robert agreed.

“What happened?” Geoff asked. “I went to see my father around Nones, and the sergeant-at-arms said he’d just returned with the king, but they were not to be disturbed by anyone.”

“It’s terrible, grampa,” Maud said, wriggling in beside Baron Fitzwalter. “You won’t believe what papa has decided to do.”

They all looked at Robert. “What’s going to happen?” Fitzwalter asked for them all.

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Robert collected the royal escort across the street. Sergeant Falmouth was drowning his pain in ale. His nose was a swollen wreck that would never be straight again. His lip looked about to burst, and the bloody gap in his teeth was dripping into his tankard. They left him and made their way down the block to the Guild Hall.

The small square was filled with the pages, squires, sergeants, knights, barons, and earls of the realm. The five royal guards stood barricade several steps below and in front of Robert, so that the royal Plantagenet Lion standard was level with him. Robert looked about at the lake of faces, all of them dreadfully eager to hear the royal decree. All of them except for the lords from the Bully Pheasant, and they were stone faced and tight lipped.

Robin, Walter, Adam, and Will had positioned themselves in front of Robert. All was ready. Robert took one look at their dour faces and knew he’d made a mistake.

He gulped and the Lord’s Prayer ran through his mind. I have no fear as I walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, for you are with me, thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. Robert’s heart ached at what he must do. This past winter he’d been a simple cleric of the Court, a mere scribe like scores of anonymous others serving the king’s officials. All he’d ever hoped for was a chance at something better.

Now it was high summer. He’d gone from scribe, to envoy, to secretary, to chancellor’s steward, and herald in one season. It astonished him how quickly he’d found himself at the center of the web. He’d always assumed becoming a royal officer was the answer to the emptiness inside.

Standing before these people as herald to King John, Robert realized the heaviness of the burdens he’d taken on. He didn’t want to write the king’s words anymore. He didn’t want to deliver the king’s message at all. He didn’t want the power anymore, but it was too late. There was nothing to do but proceed.

Robert removed the parchment from the strap under his sleeve. He raised it for all to see the royal seal stamped to it. The church bells slowly began to ring the Vespers hour. It was time for supper as the sun slowly inched its way down for a short summer’s rest. Robert hadn’t eaten all

day and had no appetite for what he must now do, what he'd contributed to in his own small way by coming up with these words.

Robert cleared his throat. In the Anglo-Norman tongue of the shire nobility, he said, "To the earls, viscounts, barons, and lords of the realm. The final campaign against the traitorous Welsh beckons. So be it. They have forfeited their rights as peaceful subjects time and time again. They have flaunted the king's peace and denied all royal justice."

Over his shoulder, above the rooftops of the borough, on the walls of the Inner Bailey, several men clad in black thrust a boy into a crenal space between two merlon blocks of the rampart. The crowd gasped and started pointing, but quieted down as Robert continued reading his own words in King John's name.

"Let their fate serve as an example for all who wish to remain true and faithful subjects in the kingdom of England. To this end, having shown their barbarous and murderous nature across the March Lands, the Welsh and their over proud princes must be punished as never before. Let them suffer with the knowledge that their treachery has cost them dearly, even before one English soldier steps on Welsh soil."

Robert looked up at the crowd but their eyes were fixed above him. The boy was gagged and bound by hands and feet. Standing on the wall, he was just taller than the executioner in the black hood behind him on the rampart.

"For treason against the crown, King John sentences the princes of Wales to the execution of their twenty-eight hostages, kept in hope of preserving the king's peace." Robert said as calmly and evenly as possible. The Welsh boy was pushed and fell into the air until the noose about his neck tightened, jerking him violently, his body swinging to and fro.

"Nay!" Someone shouted from the crowd. "They're just kids! They haven't done anything!" The crowd agreed and began heckling Robert.

"They shall be hanged from the castle walls before the day is through and remain there until the Welsh trouble our kingdom no more." Robert's words were drowned out by the uproar. "So be it ordered by his majesty King John of England, lord of Ireland, count of Anjou and Poitou, duke of Normandy and Aquitaine."

The boy's legs kicked for a short time, but his life gave out, his head rested at a terrible angle, and he was gone. In the next crenal space, another boy was thrust up for all to see. Robert couldn't bear to watch, refusing to turn around and look up at the Black Tower. The Welsh boy's faces were planted firmly in his mind's eye.

"Forgive us father, we know not what we do," He murmured.

The entire city shrieked and shouted as the boys were hung from the walls of the Black Tower one by one. Some of the men in the square quickly turned their shock and anger on the royal guards. "Murderers! All of you are murderers!" Someone shouted.

Apple cores, chicken legs, rubbish, and the slop on the square was thrown at them. Finally, the crowd rushed the royal men-at-arms, wrestling them over their spears. The standard bearer was knocked in the face with a chunk of brick, and the royal banner fell down. In the confusion, Will, Adam, and Robin surrounded Robert. While Walter cleared a path, the others ushered him safely into the Guild Hall. The royal troops fought back long enough to retreat to the other side of the Guild Hall, where they escaped through the side streets of Nottingham.

...

King John picked a juicy chunk of venison from the small silver plate beside him, ate half, and threw the rest to the dogs. "So what do you think, Ranulf?"

"Hmm?" Ranulf blinked himself back to attention. There was a map of Wales on the long table between him, the king, Longsword, and Peter de Roches. Wooden figurines were placed about the map like chess pieces. "It will be slow going sire. You will need a garrison for the existing forts, men-at-arms to protect the workers building the new castles and towns, more men-at-arms to protect the foresters cutting down the woods, and cavalry to hunt the Welsh hiding in the highlands. Not to mention continuing the campaign against Prince Llewellyn."

"Against all of them, Ranulf," King John corrected the earl of Chester, "We shall start with Llewellyn, but by no means shall we finish with him."

"Regardless," Longsword cut in, "By winter, we must finish off Llewellyn and subdue all of Gwynedd, if we are to continue the campaign against the other princes. He is the key, the one all the others recognize as first lord. It will mean another round of scutage and gathering the feudal levies next spring, at the very least. Assuming King Phillip does not find some way to come to the defense of his new ally."

"What needs be done will be done, brother," King John announced loudly.

A young squire entered the solar room bathed in the crimson light of sunset dispersed through Venetian glass. He kept repeating the message under his breath over and over again. He'd say it and get out. Stopping before the king at the end of table, he stood at attention.

"Is it done then, Bill?" King John asked his favorite hostage, the son of Earl William Marshal.

"About half," Bill Marshal replied curtly, "I was sent by the sergeant-at-arms to inform his majesty the herald's escort has returned without the sergeant or the herald."

"What?" King John and Peter asked together.

Bill's eyes shot from the chancellor back to the king quickly. "Apparently, the crowd rioted after hearing the royal decree. Sergeant Falmouth was overcome by the crowd. The herald and his assistant were taken by lord Dunmow's men. The standard bearer was hit pretty bad in the face as well, sire."

"His assistant?" Peter wondered.

John batted the wooden figurines from the map with the back of his hand and snarled, "Traitors! God's teeth! Every last one of them is a traitor!"

"So, the hanging was not received well," Longsword pointed out.

"And now you are against me too, brother!" King John accused passionately and stood. He picked up a cup and threw it across the room into the fire.

William Longsword stood too, towering over King John. "I am not against you, brother. We are family, and you are my king. I warned you this might happen, and it has come to pass, nothing more. Though I disagree with your decision, I stand beside you still and always. Now, do with me as you will."

John's anger slowly abated. "That is a bold statement, brother, considering . . ."

"Considering, I am your trustworthy brother, most loyal subject, and one of your best captains," William finished the king's statement as he preferred to hear it.

John laughed dryly, "That too."

Bill Marshall cleared his throat. The men were shocked he was still there.

"What is it, Bill?" Peter asked and sipped from his goblet of wine.

"There is something else," Bill said and brought his right hand from around his backside. He held out a letter sealed with a red wax stamp. Longsword took it from Bill's hand and gave it to

the king. Count Ranulf lifted an eyebrow of intrigue. Peter leaned in his chair and cupped his hands, watching the king closely as he inspected the letter.

John held it close to his face and squinted at the wax stamp in the dim crimson light. "Tis from my daughter Joanna, Princess of Wales," King John smiled at all of them as he broke the seal with his finger. "Perchance her husband has finally come to his senses. It's too late anyhow."

...

"Did he not slay his nephew, Arthur of Brittany, to secure the crown?" Earl Richard de Clare asked the nobles and their men in the Guild Hall.

"Wasn't it your daughter's husband that did the slaying?" Sheriff Ros of Cumberland hollered from his table.

"That was a mistake!" Baron Reginald de Braose stood, "Hugh de Burgh and my father, God rest his soul, merely gelded the boy, but he died of the wound later. They did not intend to kill him."

"The purpose was all the same," Baron Mowbray piped up. He was one of the most powerful lords of the north, with extensive lands in Lincolnshire, Yorkshire and Northumbria. "Lay with the devil and you spawn a demon."

"The point is that John has no qualms about killing children, even his own family." Baron Gilbert de Gant of Lincolnshire backed Lord Hertford.

"And see how he rewards his companions!" Richard took back the attention now that he had support, "My daughter and grandson were chased across Ireland, thrown in a dungeon and forgotten. They starved to death, for the love of God! For what, to bury the truth of Arthur's fate? To keep us silent and afraid?"

"It hasn't worked on you, Richard!" Baron Mowbray joked, and the hall burst into laughter.

"You're no better, you little garden gnome!" Richard brayed and the hall laughed even harder.

Mowbray's smile turned to a scowl. He was ever sensitive to his lack of height. "Speak to me like that again, and you'll find yourself merely gelded, Lord Hertford," He threatened Richard venomously.

"How? With your teeth?" Earl Richard taunted the dwarfish lord.

The entire hall burst into hoops and hollers, expecting a fight as Baron Mowbray hopped onto the table. "The way I heard it, your daughter didn't know how to keep her mouth shut. That is until they found her corpse digging into her son's arm!"

"How dare you besmirch my daughter's memory!" Richard shouted, "I'll kill you!"

Sheriff Ros and Baron Gilbert intervened between the two of them before any blood was shed.

"Why should my mother and brother pay for a crime they did not commit?" Reginald de Braose stood by his grandfather to face down the Northerners. "Tell me Baron Mowbray, is it a crime to tell the truth?"

"Papa did that to a woman and her child?" Maud asked Robert. They were sitting at the Fitzwalter's table drinking ale with all the others. It was the first time she'd ever tried ale, and didn't like it as much as wine or mead. It made her feel bloated. All the shouting was giving her a headache too.

“Well, Lord Hertford’s grandson was full grown, but thrown in the same cell with his mum, Lady Madilyn. Baron de Braose had fled to France and . . .” Robert began but was cut off.

“Oh him! I know this story now. He died all alone, Robert. He died of a broken heart, but Archbishop Langton was there in exile and forgave him all his sins. It . . . it touched us all at Fontrevault. So sad.”

Robert saw tears welling up in Maud’s eyes. Near them Baron Eustace de Vescy stood at his table. To distract the Clares and Braoses from quarrelling with Mowbray he began telling the hall of the time King John tried to fool his wife into sleeping with him, and how Eustace fooled the king into sleeping with a harlot instead.

Maud’s eyes welled up and she started nodding her head. “I can’t take anymore of this,” Maud cried and rushed for the door.

“Maud, wait!” Robert called after her but she kept on moving in the oversized robe.

Robert shrugged at Robin and Adam across the table, then headed after her. As he neared the hallway a drunken knight stepped in front of him. “Aren’t you the king’s herald?” The man accused.

“I . . . I,” Robert didn’t know what to say. He’d been rushed into the hall so fast, and it filled so quickly. He forgot these were the people chasing him.

“It is,” The man leered and lurched, “Tis the royal herald!”

“Listen, I’m just a messenger, really,” Robert explained.

“I say we hang him by his toes!” The man shouted, and a few of the other Lacy men agreed. One of them unsheathed a dagger and started stepping towards Robert.

“He’s with us,” Robert heard from behind him. He looked over his shoulder and saw Adam walking up with Robin and Will Mandeville.

“Didn’t you hear?” Will Mandeville asked the drunken Lacy goons, “He’s with us.”

They backed off, stumbling and confused that their lord’s cousin was acting against them.

“Perchance we should find my niece?” Robin asked the group “Father won’t have her getting lost out in the borough.”

“Thank you, gentlemen,” Robert smiled, “I owe you my hide. Fitzwalter isn’t the only one who’d be angry if she were lost.”

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“My lord! Nay! Tis a bread knife is all!” Jeffrey screamed as two guards dragged him out of the solar room to the waiting dungeon. “Nay!”

King John drained his goblet and steadied himself with the edge of the table. “Search everyone on this floor for weapons. If they are not a royal sergeant or knight bring them to me. Non. Throw them right in the dungeon with that refuse!” King John ranted at his sergeant at arms, who bowed and left the room.

“Sheriff, I want this castle shut tighter than God’s teeth on the devil’s tit!” John shouted at Phillip Mark and pointed him away.

“Sire, we must remain calm,” Peter de Roches interjected, “It was a bread knife after all.”

“What?” King John asked scathingly.

“Jeffrey the scribe, my lord,” Peter replied, waving his hand out the door.

“I’ll have no one I don’t trust near me with a weapon ever again. Ever!” King John slammed the goblet down on the table and spilled the plate of venison. His dogs rushed for the scraps. “He was a traitor.”

“Sire, he was our best accountant,” Peter explained, breathing deeply to remain calm, “And he was just hungry.”

King John scratched at his beard a moment, “We’ll get another.”

Peter sighed, “For certes, m’lord.”

He glanced over at William Longsword poking logs on the fire. John had fisted the letter into a ball after reading it, and hurled it at the fire. Longsword rushed to save it from the ashes, but the contents were already burning John’s soul. His Plantagenet rage was taking over.

“Mayhap your daughter is bluffing,” Peter postulated, “Perchance she’s thrown in with her Welsh husband and is trying to frighten you off the campaign.”

“I know my own daughter, Peter!” John snarled and overfilled his goblet again, “If she say’s its true, then it is!”

“For certes, m’lord,” Peter said, “We simply need to remain calm and think this through.”

“I am calm, Peter!” King John shouted as he took a long tug on the goblet. Suddenly he threw it away, wine sloshing everywhere. Wiping at his mouth with his sleeve, John shouted, “Where’s my butler? This isn’t my usual wine! Must I fear poison too? Throw him in the dungeon!”

“There was an accident with the royal cask at one of the gate towers majesty. It’s the sheriff’s wine, is all.” Peter tried to quell the king’s rising paranoia.

“Then throw him in the dungeon. This wine’s terrible,” King John yelled and made for the mead. He stared at the men in the room and noticed they all looked afraid, except his brother, who didn’t seem to care at all. “It was a joke.”

They all forced laughter out somehow, except William Longsword. He sighed. John looked at the companions he’d called to the room for council. Their fear angered him. “Well, don’t just sit there all of you!” John shouted at Ranulf of Chester, Willem Warren, Guillame Arundel and Earl Ferrers. “You have men in the borough. Go find them and find out what they know! And if they don’t know anything, pay someone who does!”

“Sire,” Peter cut in.

“And someone find my herald!” King John shouted.