

LOVE'S LANDSCAPES



Don't Read in the Closet 2014

A POINT OF HONOUR

K. Mason

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

A POINT OF HONOUR

By K. Mason

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love's Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love's Landscapes?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love's Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Photo Description

In a clearing within a wood, a long haired young man, wearing black hose and tunic with lacing up the sleeves, kneels on his left knee. His head is bowed over his hands, which tightly grip the hilt of a plain long sword, which is held in front of him, tip down on the ground. It appears as though he is showing submission to whoever is standing in front of him.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

The man in the picture has a difficult choice to make, and whatever he decides will influence many lives. Who is he, and what led him to where he is now?

I'd love to read a story set in the Middle Ages, with plot that isn't solely focused on the relationship. Explicit sexual content and tension are beyond welcome, but please no non-con scenes or BDSM.

Think steel, blood, sweat, and forbidden lust. ;D

Sincerely,

Agnes

P.S.: I'd prefer it not to be too angsty—people were tough back then ;)

Story Info

Genre: historical

Tags: outlaws, knights, reunited, friends to lovers, outdoor sex, frottage, first time, HFN

Word Count: 29,596

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August 1204

The screams of fear, pain and anger faded behind him as he galloped through the woods. Soon, all Stefan could hear was the steady beat of hooves on hard ground and the pulse of his own blood as it rushed past his ears. Bent forward over his horse's neck to avoid being hit by low hanging branches, he trusted his mount to follow the almost invisible poachers' path through the trees. He gripped the reins in one hand, but made no attempt to steer. The other grasped the heavy burlap sacks which he had tied together and hung just in front of the pommel of the worn leather saddle, the contents clinking occasionally with the movement of the horse.

By the time the trees thinned out and he began to slow the horse, first to a bone-jarring trot and then finally to a walk, daylight was fading. Above him, the sky had turned an inky violet and the first stars had begun to appear. Both he and his horse were breathing heavily as they drew to a halt at the edge of the wood and surveyed their surroundings. There was no one in sight or hearing.

"Good boy." He patted the horse's neck in approval before nudging him back into a walk and turning him onto the worn track that led towards Elmton Bluff, and the caves that passed for home.

The outer boundary of the small village of Elmton, which stood on the opposite side of the river from the limestone escarpment which housed the caves, was marked out by a row of open sided barn sheds. Stefan could hear the lowing of cattle waiting to be milked as he approached. Beyond that, a cluster of wooden houses, barely more than shacks, had been set up haphazardly. In the twilight, Stefan couldn't see the smoke of the cooking fires that he knew would be rising through the thatching of the dwellings. He could just make out a larger, denser, plume of smoke on the far side of the village. The trademark sign of the smithy, the most important building. In the distance he could hear the faint but steady hammering of steel on steel, a sound that more than anything made him feel at home—a reminder of days when he lived in a castle, not a cave.

Suddenly, he heard the clatter of horses approaching at speed from behind him. Turning back off the track, Stefan dug his heels into his own horse's flank and they plunged into the shelter of a spinney of young beech trees. As soon as they were under cover, he pulled his horse up and swung back round to face the road. Stefan reached for the sword that sat in the battered scabbard on his left hip, his hand resting lightly over the hilt.

As the riders came closer, they began to slow, finally drawing to a halt on the road level with where Stefan hid within the trees. He could hear the low murmur of voices, but couldn't catch the words. Cautiously, Stefan made the call of an owl, hooting twice then waiting for the count of three and calling once more. He was answered almost immediately with the same signal in reverse. Dropping his hand from his weapon, he swung down from the horse and led it back towards the road, where five men waited, still mounted.

"My Lord, how like you to be first back." The dark haired man at the back of the group gave a mocking bow from atop his horse as he spoke.

"And how like you to be last, Drake," Stefan replied sarcastically, with a slight inclination of his head.

"Oh, don't start the pair of you." The leader of the group fixed each of them with a glare from under his thick, dark eyebrows as he spoke. Stefan and Drake both mumbled something that could have been taken as an apology. The other man swung down from his horse and gathered the reins in his gloved fist. "Let's get the horses in and settled."

The others followed his example and dismounted. The six men led their horses around the outside of the village to the last barn and tethered them to the wooden fencing. Like Stefan's, four of their horses had burlap sacks resting over their withers. As the men lifted them, some were obviously heavier than others. A couple of the men slung theirs over their shoulders and began to untack their mounts. Stefan held his in his hand, gently hefting it up and down so the contents gave out a series of metallic clinks.

"Leave them," the leader of the group commanded, dropping his saddle over the fence. "Wilf will send some of the boys down to deal with the tack and turn them out into the meadow." He smacked his hand against his horse's neck, with a dull hollow sound as leather met heavy muscle, before turning away and walking towards the river.

The others followed him, Stefan staying as far away from Drake as possible. There was no love lost between him and the older man, who constantly mocked the fact that, despite his noble upbringing, he was no more than a common

outlaw. It was he who had bestowed on him the nickname "My Lord", shortly after their first meeting.

The arched wooden footbridge crossed at the narrowest part of the river. As they reached, it two young men carrying torches were just stepping off onto the grass.

"Wilf send you down to see to the horses?"

"Yes, Booker," the tallest of the pair replied quickly.

"Good lad." Booker reached forward and ruffled the thatch of mousey brown hair.

The youngster gazed up at him with something close to reverence. Stefan smiled inwardly; he knew that look. He'd seen it before on other young men, new to the group, being tested to see if they had what was needed to earn their place and stay. Hell, he'd probably given Booker the same look himself in the early days, when he was desperate to belong, when he wanted nothing more than something that felt like family.

He wondered idly how long it would be before Booker took the lad to his bed. It was part of Booker's methods to promote loyalty and trust. He never took anyone unwilling; it was all done in comfort. For Stefan, it had only been a few months after joining the group before he'd been pulled into the pile of stolen furs and blankets laid out on the ground in the back of Booker's small, private cave. The man had held him close, all the time asking if this was what he wanted, before slowly removing his hose and shift. Then he'd run his calloused hands over Stefan's body, finally removing his undergarments and stroking his member with rough fingers, until he spilt his seed into Booker's palm.

There was no expectation of anything in return, but Stefan had wanted desperately to please the older man. So he had taken the hard, heavy erection into his own hand, still soft and childlike in comparison to those that had played him. Hesitantly, he'd begun to stroke, then, encouraged by the noises Booker was making, he tightened his grip and began to move his fist with more determination. When the warm and sticky fluid gushed over his fingers, Stefan felt a warm rush of satisfaction. Booker had taken him into his arms and held him overnight. He'd spent more than a few nights with Booker since, but he'd never told anyone that the first time was how he celebrated his seventeenth birthday.

Booker led the way up the steep path towards the large opening in the rock face. Outside, another half dozen men worked as they waited. Three were sharpening an untidy selection of swords and axes that lay on the ground around them, the metal grating with an unpleasant noise over the surface of the whetstone. Another two were helping feed the fire, over which a large pot hung on a thick piece of green wood. Two women held skillets over the flames. The elder had streaks of grey in the black hair that was pulled back from her lined face. The other, a slight, young woman, with a patch over her left eye. Stefan's mouth watered at the smell of the frying meat, even as his stomach grumbled its complaints. It had been a long time since he'd broken his fast with only a hunk of day old bread soaked in goat's milk.

Booker strode towards the older woman and grabbed her round the waist, bussing her soundly on the mouth as she turned her head towards him. He skipped back with a laugh as she aimed a slap at him with the heavy wooden spoon, grease splattering on his tunic.

"You can pack that in if you want feeding tonight," she threatened.

"Sarah, my love, you wouldn't be so cruel?" Booker grinned. Reaching out, he tapped her familiarly on her backside as she gave him a final glare and turned back towards the fire.

Leaving her to her cooking, he sauntered over to the last man of the group. He sat on a rock by the fire, a book open on his knees and a pen in his left hand. Though Wilf was almost as old as Stefan, he looked much younger. Large blue eyes looked out from under the shaggy blond hair that surrounded a pale face; the bridge of his nose was sprinkled with freckles. His right arm, withered and limp, hung against his body, only the tips of his twisted fingers showing below the shortened sleeve of his tunic. He looked over at the approaching men expectantly.

"Well then, what have you got for me?" he asked eagerly as Booker approached, the rest of the men following him.

One by one, the men opened the rough sacks they carried and tipped the contents out onto the ground in front of him, before stepping back out of the way.

"Nice," the man almost purred as his eyes inventoried the goods.

His bag now empty, Stefan wandered over to the rock-face behind the fire. On a ledge, at hip height, was an open barrel of small beer. Taking a wooden

beaker from the pile beside it, he dipped himself a cup of the sun-warmed brew. He didn't realise how dry his throat was until he started to drink. The first cup did much to ease his thirst; he barely tasted the bitterness of the cloudy brew as he gulped it down. Dipping out a second drink, he carried it back towards the others and perched on one of the rocks scattered around the fire.

As the last of the bags were emptied, the young man suddenly jerked his head up and stared coolly at the man who held it.

"And the rest, Tripp," he said quietly.

"That's all of it," Tripp replied evenly. He stepped back as he spoke, his hand still clutched round the bottom of the upturned sack.

The rest of the men fell silent, an uneasy tension spread through them. More than one man's hand strayed automatically to whatever weapon he carried.

"Problem, Wilf?" Booker asked calmly, making his way back to the front of the group.

"I hope not. Tripp here seems to be having a small problem letting go of the goods."

"Let me see if I can help." Drake stepped up behind Tripp, his left arm reaching round and grabbing Tripp's wrist, hard. Tripp hissed as Drake continued to apply pressure to the joint. He tried to step away, twisting his arm up sharply to break the restraining grip. As he moved, Drake's other arm dropped over his right shoulder. The short dagger he held in his hand came to rest against Tripp's throat.

"Drop it," Drake said coldly.

No one moved. Drake squeezed more tightly on Tripp's wrist; at the same time, the point of his dagger punctured the skin just below his Adam's apple. A single drop of blood welled up and began to run down his neck. Tripp began to turn white, his captured hand shaking.

"Drop it," Drake repeated. With a growl, Tripp flung the bag towards Wilf and struggled to get free. Drake didn't let go, instead he pushed the blade deeper into Tripp's neck.

Only Wilf moved. Putting aside the book and quill pen, he picked up the bag and upended it. Four large silver coins tumbled out to join others on the ground in front of them.

Without a word, Booker walked up to Tripp. Drake let him go and stepped back quickly as Booker raised his hand and casually backhanded Tripp. Tripp's head jerked sharply backwards with the force of the blow.

"You're gone," Booker said with finality. "I told you when you joined us, this is a joint enterprise. We don't steal from each other. We work together. You had your chance."

"We're thieves and outlaws for Christ's sake! Of course we steal from each other," Tripp said angrily as he looked round the group. "Most of you would steal from your own mothers given half a chance."

"No." Booker said flatly. "We wouldn't. We may be thieves, and worse, but we don't commit murder, we don't rape, and we don't steal from each other."

"Honour amongst thieves. You really believe that?" Tripp interrupted.

"My group. My rules," Booker continued as though Tripp hadn't spoken. "Collect your belongings. Drake, Aidan, see that he's at least five leagues away before you return." Booker turned away, not waiting to see if his commands were followed, and strode into the cave. Sarah whispered something to her helper as he passed and then followed him inside.

"Come on, lad." Aidan, the oldest of the group, rose to his feet from where he'd been sitting next to the fire. "You heard the boss."

"I want my share first," Tripp demanded, stepping quickly towards where Wilf had started to sort through the spoils of the day's work and drawing a knife from his own belt.

Without thinking what he was doing, Stefan started to move. He stepped directly between the two men and drew his sword. Holding the point low in front of him, his grip loose on the hilt, he waited.

"Get out of my way, boy," Tripp snarled. "I will take what's mine."

"Don't be foolish," Aidan cautioned as Tripp stepped forward again, hefting the knife in his hand.

"Move." Tripp's arm thrust forward as he spoke, the blade slashing towards Stefan's face. Stefan feinted to the left; at the same time, he brought his sword arm up, knocking Tripp's arm away. The longer reach of his weapon gave him the advantage.

"You aren't a murderer, remember?" Tripp said as he raised his knife again.

"I'd call it self defence," Stefan said with a grin as he lunged forward, striking at Tripp's hand with the flat of the blade and sending the knife spinning into the grass.

"Enough!" Drake barked from behind them. "Put your toy away, My Lord. And you." He aimed a hard kick at the back of Tripp's knee. "Get your stuff, or I'll run you off without it."

Stefan stepped back, but didn't immediately re-sheath his sword. Drake, running out of patience, grabbed Tripp roughly by the arm and twisted it behind him, marching him away towards the cave. Aidan followed slowly in their wake. The tension ebbed out of the watching men, and a buzz of chatter started up as they returned to what they'd been doing.

Stefan finally put his sword up and took a seat on the rock next to Wilf, who, completely unruffled by the turn of events, continued to write details of their haul in the book on his knees.

By the time Booker and Sarah emerged from the cave, the two young men had returned from tending the horses. Sarah and her helper, Nell, began to dish out bowls of thick barley and vegetable pottage, served with a piece of braised rabbit on the top. The men helped themselves to slices of warm, heavy rye bread and beakers of ale. For a while, the only noise in the camp was the crackling of the fire, and the dull clink and scrape of the wooden spoons they used.

"Right, Wilf," Booker said eventually, laying his bowl aside. "What have we got?"

"It was a good day." Wilf's eyes brightened as he spoke. "We've coin enough to buy food and necessities for at least three weeks. There are a couple of bolts of cloth that won't fetch any useful sort of price, but we can probably make use of them. Some silks, which should fetch a good price. The jewellery and silver plate we'll need to fence. I'd suggest that's taken even further afield this time." He paused for a moment to think, before continuing. "You said the caravan was going from Cambridge up to York, so I'd suggest perhaps we try Litchfield. They're building the new cathedral so there'll be traders passing through. I suggest we try to set up an agreement to exchange goods with one of the traders coming from Chester way." He looked down at his inventory again. "Other than that, there are a couple of daggers but no other weapons. I suggest we keep those for now. They're not decorative so won't fetch anything much."

“Very well,” Booker said with a nod. “Tomorrow then, Madoc, Cerdic and Edwin, you take yourselves off to Litchfield with a selection of the goods and see what you can do. We’ll take coin for them, or a straight trade for items we can sell closer to home.”

“It’s a fair distance to travel, and setting something up might take us more than a day, particularly if we don’t want to raise any suspicions.” Madoc’s accent gave away his Welsh ancestry.

“Fine.” Booker nodded in agreement. “But if you aren’t back in three we’ll come and look for you. Hal, check in the village and see if there is anything they need. Then, you and David take Sarah and Nell over to Worchesope in the wagon. We should stock up on provisions whilst we’ve a chance.”

“We’ll need to stop at the Priory to speak to the Infirmarer, and I should buy some herbs and more salve from him whilst I’ve a chance,” Sarah added.

“Very well, Drake and Aidan won’t be back till around dawn so they can stay here tomorrow with Wilf and the boys.” Wilf nodded in resignation. He rarely got the opportunity to go further than the village; his withered arm and pale blond hair made him far too easily recognisable. “Ralf, Stefan, you two are with me. We’ll be leaving early for Doncaster.”

“Fine,” Ralf replied with a sideways glance at Stefan, who nodded. Despite wanting to ask why they were going there, Stefan knew better than to waste his breath asking questions.

“Good, now I’m calling it a night. Boys, here.” He snapped his fingers and the two boys came scurrying over from the far side of the fire. “Do as Aidan and Wilf tell you tomorrow, but make sure that we’ve enough wood for the fire and that Sarah’s cooking pots are all clean.”

“Yes, Booker.” The pair replied in chorus, sounding unbelievably young to Stefan’s ears.

“Good, bed now, the pair of you.” He reached out and patted them both on the arm as they scurried past him into the cave. Looking at the men around the fire he added, “Tidy up out here, then get your rest.” He held out his hand to Sarah, “Coming my love?”

“Nell, you turn in too,” Sarah said as she rose to her feet and took Booker’s hand. The younger woman followed them into the caves.

Stefan sat for a while watching the fire as it died down to embers. Gradually, the men began to collect their goods for the following day from

Wilf, before drifting away into the caves, some singly, others in pairs. There were no fixed relationships amongst the men; comfort, and release, was taken wherever it could be found. The only exception was the women. Sarah was exclusively Booker's helpmate and, in addition, she was fiercely protective of young Nell's virtue. Woe betide anyone whose hands, let alone other body parts, strayed too close to the girl. Sarah was fast with a short blade, as many who had pushed their luck could attest to.

"Are you staying out here all night?" The wizened fingers of Wilf's right arm brushed lightly against Stefan's shoulder; he hadn't even heard him approach.

"I guess not," Stefan said, as he rose to his feet. "Do you want company tonight?"

"That would be nice," Wilf replied with a grin and headed towards the mouth of the caves with Stefan following him, glad of a friend with whom he could share himself without expectations.

The early morning cloud had long since burnt away, leaving only a few wisps of cloud in the clear blue sky above them. By the time they turned their horses off of the Great North Road and onto the track that ran alongside the River Don, it was beginning to get uncomfortably warm. Stefan had already thrown back the hood of his woollen travelling mantle. His long straight hair was tied at the nape of his neck with a leather thong, and the exposed pale skin on his forehead and nose was beginning to prickle, suggesting it was starting to burn. Booker had remained characteristically close mouthed about the purpose of their journey, but Stefan had noticed that, aside from a handful of coins, he'd not brought anything with them to trade.

They weren't the only travellers on the road. Goods wagons loaded for market trundled along the path, which was marked out only by the well-worn, hard packed soil surface. It was crossed too often for grass to grow. As they got closer to Doncaster itself, they passed teams of drovers, their herds of heavily-coated sheep meandering slowly and haphazardly in front of them. Dogs darted amongst them, trying to keep the flocks moving forwards.

Stefan's horse fidgeted impatiently under him as they stood in the queue waiting to cross the bridge that lead up to the Boar's Gate, one of the five entrances to the walled city. Passing through the fortified gateway, they moved

onto Market Street, their horses' hooves skidding slightly until they got used to the cobbled surface. The main market was being set up in the forecourt that surrounded the Church of St Mary Magdalene. The livestock were herded into pens to one side of the square, while at the others vendors and merchants set out booths to display their goods. The noise and bustle continued to grow as sellers cried their wares to a background of bleating sheep and squawking poultry. Booker kept his horse moving forward, leading Stefan and Ralf straight past the chaos and out the other side.

Turning onto Baxtergate, they pulled their horses up in shock. This had once been a busy street of bakers' shops, where had risen the homely smell of fresh baked bread. Instead, all that remained were the charred, skeletal frames of the wooden buildings. In places, they'd been reduced down to almost nothing, just piles of timber littering the ground, spilling out into the street itself. Here and there, amongst the ruins, children darted in and out of the debris, their faces, hands and legs coated in soot and ash.

"Merciful God," Ralf whispered as he stared at the devastation.

"I hope he was," Stefan replied sincerely.

"Come on," Booker said impatiently, nudging his own horse into a walk again. "I'm meeting someone before noon at the Inn on Frenchgate; he said he wants to put some business our way."

"Business?" Stefan asked as he moved his horse forward to join Booker's. Ralf followed, still surveying in horror what was left of the street. Their horses' hooves stirred up clouds of ash as they walked.

"Yes, he's offering a commission for us to recover something for him. He sent word via the smithy last week for us to meet him here today, if we were interested. He'll be in the back room waiting."

"And you trust him?"

"He gave the usual passwords in the message," Booker said with a shrug, then put his hand to the short dagger that hung at his belt beneath his cloak, "and I'm not going in unprepared."

"What do you want us to do?" Ralf asked.

"The Inn is close by the junction with Silver Street. If we ride past and can't see anything amiss, then, Stefan, you and I will leave our horses with Ralf and go back into the inn, separately. You go in first, get a drink and then find a seat

in a corner of the back room. The man I'm meeting will be sitting alone and have a set of dice on the table to identify himself. If you can, get close enough to listen."

"So you don't trust him then."

"I don't know him. So I am taking no chances. But needs must, and he's offering good coin for the work. I'll follow about five minutes after you. If you think there is anything wrong, anything at all, don't stop, come straight back out."

"Fine." Stefan replied curtly.

The Inn was the last building at the end of the road. A sign with a crude painting of three dirty yellow crowns on a green background hung over the open doorway. Riding down the street, Stefan was struck by the fact that around him people were talking in the Norman French of his childhood home, not the English that he'd gotten used to speaking amongst Booker's men over the last five years.

"The man you're meeting, he does speak English?" Stefan asked as they rounded the corner into Silver Street.

"Yes, it's one of the reasons for meeting here. This part of the city is mainly Norman traders, so anyone overhearing will probably not understand much of our conversation."

They drew to a halt by a large, stone water trough and dismounted. The horses had their muzzles in the water before Stefan and Booker handed Ralf the reins.

"If we're not back in an hour, take the horses out of town and go south. Stay off the roads. Don't stop and wait for us. If we don't catch up by nightfall, head back to the Bluff," Booker ordered. Turning to Stefan, he added, "The same goes for you lad, any trouble get yourself out; we'll meet up later."

Stefan nodded as he pulled the hood of his cloak up over his hair. Turning away with a final pat to his horse's neck, he walked slowly back along the street, taking care not to draw attention to himself.

The Inn was hot and stuffy. Swirls of dust danced in the thin shafts of sunlight that fell through the dirty glass windows. The air smelt and tasted stale. The main room was filled with around a dozen tables; bench seating and low stools had been set up around them. Despite the hour, a good number of patrons

appeared to be already well into their cups. At one table, a spirited trade was underway, with goods spread out in front of the men sitting there as they haggled noisily. Carefully Stefan scanned the room, but nothing seemed unusual or out of place. Signalling to a weary looking bar maid, he handed over a silver penny in exchange for a tankard of ale. Pointing through to the back room, he indicated where she should bring it before heading through the low doorway that separated the two rooms.

This room was smaller and darker. The windows, set high up in the whitewashed walls, gave only scant light. No fire burnt in the large, stone fireplace that took up half of one wall. There were four tables in the room, and only two were occupied. At one of them two young, finely dressed men sat, both of whom looked not only decidedly out of place in these surroundings, but a little the worse for wear. At another table a solitary man sat with his back against the wall, as he negligently tossed a set of dice in one hand. The tankard of ale in front of him appeared untouched, the slight foam of the head still visible over the rim. Stefan couldn't see the man's features, as the hood of his cloak shadowed his face. The cloak itself was open, and beneath it Stefan could make out a lighter coloured surcoat cinched at the waist with a heavy leather belt. The belt angled downwards slightly on the left side, which gave Stefan the impression that the man was armed.

Moving past without stopping, Stefan took a seat at the far corner of the next table over. After the bar maid brought over his drink, he thanked her and took a mouthful of the ale, the sour brew causing his mouth to twist into a grimace. Pushing the tankard away, he slouched down in his seat and let his head fall forward, pretending to fall asleep.

It wasn't long before he heard someone else enter the room. Tilting his head slightly and looking through his eyelashes, he saw Booker pause in the doorway and scan the room before casually walking over to the table occupied by the dice-tossing man.

"May I, Wilhelm?" he asked. Not waiting for a reply, he placed the tankard he was carrying down, pulling out a stool and settling himself on the opposite side of the table.

"You wager, Booker?" The other man asked as he cast the dice again onto the wooden table top. Booker nodded, confirming his identity, before he produced a battered leather coin pouch from under his cloak.

"The stakes?" he asked.

“Best of three, silver penny a game, highest roll wins.”

“Your coin?” Booker asked as he shook out a small pile of pennies onto the table. The other man grunted as he produced a handful of mixed coins.

It was impossible for Stefan to hear the conversation between the two men. They spoke softly, their voices further hidden beneath the clatter of bone dice against wood and the clinking of the moving coins.

Eventually the game ended and Booker gathered up the pile of coins now resting on his side of the table. Standing, he lifted his tankard and saluted the other man before draining the last of the contents.

“Good game,” he said simply to the other man before he turned and left.

Still feigning sleep, Stefan waited for the other man to leave. It wasn't five minutes before he tucked the dice and remaining coins away under his cloak. Pushing back from the table, he stood and raised his right hand to reset his hood. A heavy gold ring glinted as it moved through a shaft of light from the windows. Stefan had to suppress a gasp of surprise at the sudden sense of déjà vu. He'd seen that ring before, or a likeness of it.

Stefan had an overwhelming feeling that he was missing something. No sooner had the man left the room than he stood up and followed. Without looking behind him, the man walked confidently down the street. Stefan kept in the shadow of the buildings, his hooded cloak gathered tightly around him, as he trailed behind. They were nearly at the Hallgate entrance to the city when the man stopped suddenly, outside a livery stable. On the opposite side of the road, Stefan kept walking, trying not to be noticed. Darting into the entrance of a nearby alleyway, he stopped and risked a glance over his shoulder. The man had gone.

Cursing under his breath Stefan waited, watching the street to see if the man would reappear. Ten minutes later and the stench that rose from the refuse left in the alleyway was making his stomach churn. He was about to give up and see if he could find Booker and Ralf before they left the city, when five armed men on horseback exited the livery yard. In the middle, no longer wearing the nondescript travellers cloak but instead a deep red cape, marked out with the badge of the Earl of Somerset, was the man he'd been following.

“Whoreson!” Stefan swore as he watched them go.

By the time Stefan returned to Silver Street, Ralf and Booker had gone. Following Booker's earlier instructions, he headed south, staying off the Great North Road and travelling along footpaths and game trails that wound their way through the woodland. He skirted around the edge of the busy town of Tickhill and, with an eye to the position of the sun, continued to the southwest. It was late afternoon before he reached the small hamlet of Oldcotes.

There was little movement around the cluster of wooden framed cruck houses which formed the centre of the village. At this time of day, nearly all would be out tending the fields and livestock that made their livelihood. A few very small children played alongside scrawny chickens, who scratched in the dust searching for food.

As Stefan reached the first cottage, a woman came to the doorway with a child of about two, red faced and crying, riding one hip. In her other hand she carried a heavy metal skillet.

"Good day," Stefan said pleasantly, stopping several feet from the doorway.

"What do you want?" she asked bluntly, eying him with suspicion.

"I'm just passing through, on my way home, to Elmton." Stefan paused. The name of his own village was known hereabouts, not least as the base for Booker's camp in the bluff. He was relieved when the flinty glare he was receiving changed into a slightly warmer smile.

"Are you Stefan?" she asked, to which he nodded. "Do you know our Wilf then? Can you describe him?"

"Yes, blond hair, freckles and a crippled right arm. How do you know him?"

"I don't," she said with a shrug. "But you do and that's what matters. Two men came by earlier with three horses. They said someone might be following and that, if they looked as you do, and were able to describe Wilf, as you did, then you were Stefan."

"Did they leave any other message?"

"Nah, but if you follow the path there," she pointed over Stefan's right shoulder out of the village, "you'll find the river. They said they'd water their horses and rest for an hour or so."

"Thank you." Stefan dug in the pouch hanging from his belt and drew out a small silver half-penny and tucked it between her hand and the child she held.

Booker and Ralf were sitting at the water's edge when Stefan found them, the horses cropping grass close by.

"What kept you, boy?" Booker asked as he reached them.

"Slight detour," Stefan replied. "I followed your man out of the Inn and saw him leave the city. By the time I made it back to Silver Street you'd gone."

"You followed him? Why?" Ralf asked.

"I wanted to check something," Stefan said blandly.

"Were you spotted?" Booker asked sharply, and Stefan shook his head in response. "Fine, let's get home. We'll discuss it later."

By the time they reached the Bluff, night had fallen. The sky had clouded over and big, heavy, drops of rain were falling, bouncing off the limestone plateau outside the caves. Sarah had the fire pit in the central cave going, her ever-present cauldron of pottage on a hook over it. Stefan sank down on to a seat fashioned from a fallen tree trunk, dragged into the cave and rolled against the wall.

"Here." Wilf waved a beaker of ale in front of him. "Long day?"

"Yeah, and it's not over yet."

Wilf raised an eyebrow at Stefan's response. "Problems?" he asked, but Stefan only shook his head as Wilf took a seat next to him.

Everyone had returned, except the three men who'd headed to Litchfield with the jewellery. After they'd finished eating, Booker rose from his seat beside the fire.

"We've got a commission," he announced. "I met with a man today who, for a price, wants us to help him recover something that belongs to his lord's family. Five days from now, a coach will be travelling the Great North Road from Nottingham to York, carrying with it two young boys who are being held prisoner by Lord Sans-Terre." Stefan jolted suddenly at the name, sitting bolt upright and hissing through his teeth. "We're to retrieve the boys and take them to safety, at Peveril Castle."

"Peveril?" Wilf whispered to Stefan. "That's one of Derby's castles isn't it?"

"Yes, which is odd given that the man wasn't one of Derby's men," Stefan replied. Booker glared at them for a second before continuing.

“They’ll be in a carriage with a couple of servants and a guard of around six armed men. If we can distract the guards, then a couple of us should be able to slip into the carriage and get the boys out. They’re young enough that doubling up on horseback won’t mean carrying too much weight. I think the best place for an ambush would be early on in the journey, probably around Ranby.”

Stefan rose to his feet. “Booker, I think we’ve got a problem,” he interrupted.

“Why? It seems a simple enough job?”

“Yeah, perhaps a little too good to be true maybe,” Stefan couldn’t keep the sarcasm out of his voice. “Do you actually know who you are working for? Or who Lord Sans-Terre is?”

“We’re working for the man who’s paying us,” Booker replied, a hint of anger in his voice.

“And that is?”

“The Earl of Derby, his man was carrying his seal.”

“Seals can be forged.” Stefan said bluntly. “Did he give you any other evidence of his identity, or say whose children they were?”

“No, he seemed honest enough. He said the children were Derby’s sister’s.”

“Christ’s sake, Derby doesn’t have a sister,” Stefan snapped.

“And of course, My Lord Stefan here knows all about the nobility,” Drake mocked. “What with him being of such a high station and all that. Not, of course, being a disowned bastard.”

“Drake,” Aidan growled warningly. “Let him continue.”

“I told you I followed the man after you met with him, and he’s not one of Derby’s men. When he rode out the city, he was wearing the badge of a different lord. He’s one of Somerset’s men.”

“Somerset? But...”

“Yes,” Stefan interrupted angrily. “And Lord-Sans Terre, God’s blood, you really have no idea do you? Do you want to hang for treason, have your head put on a pike above The Tower gates?” Booker stepped back as Stefan surged towards him, angrily waving his arms. “Lord Sans-Terre,” he continued. “Sans-Terre is Norman, not Irish. In English, Sans-Terre means without land, lacking

land. And Lord Lackland,” Stefan watched the colour drain from Booker’s face, “is the common nickname for our king.”

Booker fell back heavily onto his seat. Around him the men looked on in silence, their eyes flicked between where Booker sat and where Stefan still stood, his face flushed with anger.

“The boys, did that man give you their names?” Stefan asked.

“Yes,” Booker nodded weakly. “Richard and Oliver, he said they are about ten and twelve years of age.”

“The king’s natural sons then,” Stefan replied bleakly. “You’ve been paid to kidnap the king’s sons.”

“What’s the problem? They’re just bastards,” Drake needed.

“Bastards or not, they’re part of the royal family. Under the king’s protection.” Stefan didn’t rise to the bait. “It looks like Somerset is setting up Derby, but you do what he wants and we’re going to be the ones caught in the middle. Somerset and Derby, they can buy their way out of trouble, or leave the country. But for us, no, it will be a very short trip to the gallows or the block.”

For a long while, the crackling of the fire and the hiss of the rain from outside was the only noise in the cave. Eventually Booker rose to his feet and stormed angrily away into his own part of the caves.

“What the hell do we do?” Wilf eventually asked, breaking the silence.

“What we’ve been paid for. A job is a job after all,” Drake replied with a shrug. “We’re outlaws anyway, most of us have a price on our head.”

Some of the men voiced their agreement whilst others disagreed and soon a spirited discussion was under way. In the midst of it, Stefan slipped out of the cave and into the night. Keeping close to the edge of the bluff, he made his way round to a sheltered alcove and sank down against the cold damp stone.

He’d done many things since he left home that he wasn’t proud of; hell he’d met Booker one miserable December day when he’d foolishly tried to pick the man’s pocket whilst shivering with cold. He rubbed his right wrist at the memory of Booker’s strong grip around it...

December 1199

Stefan struggled as the man pulled his arm up behind his back and marched him behind a stinking midden.

“That was foolish,” the large man growled.

Stefan was terrified. He'd managed less than four months of trying to survive on his own. At first, it hadn't been too bad; he'd stayed in the woodland and on the moors. Food had been plentiful; nuts and berries he found in abundance. He even managed to snare a rabbit or two for meat. What started out feeling like an adventure had changed as autumn turned to winter, when finding food and shelter had become harder, driving him into the town.

He'd tried to beg, but been driven away each time by either upright citizens or more established beggars who didn't want him working on their streets. For the last week, he hadn't eaten anything more than a few crusts of bread and a couple of half rotten apples he'd managed to find in the gutter. He was cold, starving and desperate when he decided to try and pick the man's pocket. His first attempt and he'd been caught. He cowered, expecting a beating or to be turned over to the sheriff like the common criminal he was. For a long time the man had said nothing, simply looking him up and down.

Then he asked gruffly, “What's your name boy?”

Stefan told him, beginning to feel less afraid of a beating and more concerned by the man's appraisal.

“How old are you?”

“Sixteen,” Stefan had replied, his teeth chattering.

“Well then, I think I can probably make use of you.” The words had Stefan struggling in the man's grip. “Steady lad,” he'd cautioned, as he yanked Stefan against him, his free arm going around his chest and holding him tightly. “I'm not going to hurt you.”

Stefan continued to fight against him, until overcome with exhaustion and cold, he gave up and sagged limply in the man's arms.

“Now then, that's better.” The man spoke calmly, much as grooms speak to a panicked horse. “Do you have any belongings you need to collect?”

Stefan shook his head. He now carried his whole life with him. Long gone were the reminders that he'd taken from home, traded for meagre amounts of food, or a night with something other than the sky over his head. He only had the clothes on his back, a short knife that was tucked inside his hose and a small silver ring sewn into the hem of his tunic.

“Let's get out of here, shall we.”

The man didn't release his wrist, and Stefan was kept close by his side as they made their way out of town. As they walked along the side of the road, he slipped and stumbled in the mud, water seeping through the worn-out soles of his boots. The man kept him upright and tugged him closer to his body. As they approached a small grove of trees, the man drew to a halt and to Stefan's surprise, made a hooting noise, like an owl. He waited a pause, then repeated the call.

An echoing reply came from the trees, and shortly after a man appeared through them, leading two sturdy horses. He looked at Stefan in disgust.

"Another stray, Booker?" he asked as he handed the reins of one of the horses to the man still holding him up.

"Later, Drake," Booker replied, as he released Stefan and swung up into the saddle. For a second Stefan swayed, dangerously close to keeling over with exhaustion. "Here," Booker gripped his arm and pulled him up behind him.

Years of riding made it automatic for him to swing his leg over the back of the horse and settle behind the saddle, his arms holding tight round the man's waist.

Stefan didn't remember much of the journey, lulled into sleep by the cold, the motion of the horse, and the low sound of the men's voices. Occasionally, he'd open his eyes and look around, but all he saw were trees, which all looked the same.

He woke with a start when the horse came to a stop.

"Come on now, sleeping beauty, off you get." A hand tugged at his arm and Stefan found himself pulled gently from the horse by an older man, whose silver hair and beard were cropped unfashionably short.

"Go on lad, go with Aidan," Booker urged, pushing him away with a gentle shove.

Stefan followed the man without taking in his surroundings. It was enough of an effort to place one foot in front of the other.

"Here, this way." The man put a hand on Stefan's shoulder and steered him forwards into a cave, where a group of men sat round a roaring fire. "Sarah, can we get a mug of gruel please, and Wilf, we need a couple of blankets," the man said as he kept Stefan walking.

Stefan was steered into a small secondary cave, where a couple of greasy tallow candles gave off a black, acrid smoke along with a dim light. In one corner was a pile of dry straw.

"Here, take this." Aidan took the thick, roughly woven homespun blankets from a boy a few years younger than Stefan, who had followed them.

"Sarah's bringing the gruel, I couldn't carry it," the boy said with a rather bitter smile, nodding towards his right arm. Stefan stared at the deformed arm, which hung useless and twisted below the cut off sleeve of his tunic. Flushing as he realised how rude he was being, he looked away quickly.

"Sorry," he said in apology for his rudeness. Aidan wrapped one of the blankets around his shoulders. The other he spread out over the straw.

"What for? 'Tisn't your fault," the young man said with a shrug.

"Out the way, Wilf," a woman's voice said from just outside. Wilf gave Stefan a cheerful grin and ducked out to make room for the woman. She looked Stefan up and down before handing him the mug of thin, watery porridge she was holding. "Drink," she commanded. The wooden mug was warm in his hands, the liquid inside warmer still as he slowly sipped it.

"Thank you," he said, handing back the empty mug. He'd been tired before, but with the warm food inside him, he found himself struggling harder to keep upright.

"One with manners, that's a change," the woman said with a grin as she reached out and took the mug.

"Stefan, my name's Stefan." His voice seemed to be coming from a long way away.

"Time to get some rest." Aiden gently pushed him down onto the blanket covered straw, gently patting down his body as he did. "I'll be taking this for now." He took the knife from Stefan's belt. As the man's hand found the lump, where the ring was sewn into Stefan's tunic, Stefan lurched upwards, catching the man's wrist in his hand.

"No!" he exclaimed sharply pushing the man away.

"Steady, lad, it's okay. A trinket, I take it?"

Stefan nodded sleepily, his hand now curled tightly round the bunched up fabric that held the ring. He didn't hear the man leave.

When he woke the next day, he found Booker perched on a three-legged stool watching him.

“Thought you were going to sleep the whole day through,” he said reaching out and tousling Stefan’s hair.

“I’m sorry,” Stefan started to apologise, but Booker held his hand up and shook his head.

“You needed the sleep; you’re no good to anyone if you’re exhausted. Come now, I’ve brought some clean clothes I think might fit. Get yourself changed, and come out and meet my men properly.”

August 1204

Stefan smiled at the memory. They were a mismatched group. Some, as Drake had said, carried prices on their heads, but others simply wanted to find a different life, a better life, from the one they’d been born to. They didn’t always get on. Some men came and went, but it was a good life—he’d found a family of sorts. Something he never thought he’d have again.

They did have a code of honour, not the one he’d been brought up with, but one that he found he could live with. Booker had morals and standards, and though they might not always be conventional, he lived by them. As a result, his men did too. He was loyal to those with him, and that loyalty was returned, with no little degree of respect. And he didn’t renege on a contract. If he accepted money to do a job, then that job would be done. They were a band of men for hire, and the work they were hired to do wasn’t always on the right side of the law, though, sometimes, it could be argued that it was for the common good.

Stefan’s gut clenched unhappily at this thought. For Booker he’d lied, stolen, fought and killed; not murder, but in self defence. However, this was treason. This was to take action against his king.

Stefan stared out into the blackness of the night trying to reach an accommodation between his heart, which would follow Booker loyally wherever he led, and his mind, that screamed at him that the plan was utter folly, doomed to failure that would destroy them all.

He didn’t hear the soft footsteps approaching, and jumped with a start as Sarah, her cloak wrapped tightly round her, sank to the ground beside him. In

the darkness, he could just make out the frown that creased her brow and the tight lines around her unsmiling mouth.

"I don't want to lose him," she said softly. "I don't want to lose any of you, but this job, this plan..."

"Is dangerous," Stefan finished her sentence.

"Is worse than dangerous. It's fatal." She shuddered. "I've been with him for nine years now; I couldn't imagine my life without him. Yet if he goes through with this, then that is all I can see for my future."

"I don't know if I can help him," Stefan said honestly. "If he's set on this, I won't be able to change his mind."

"And worse, you'll follow him into it."

"I don't know," Stefan admitted. Sarah's head turned sharply towards him as she stared into his face.

"You'd desert him? After all he's done for you?"

"It's not that simple, Sarah."

"No, I suppose it's not." They both returned to staring out into the night, the heavy drops of rain hitting the ground the only sound. Eventually she continued, "Did anyone ever tell you how I came to be here?"

"No, and I never asked. Booker made it clear from the start, I didn't have to share my history with anyone unless I wanted to, and they didn't have to share theirs."

"And yet you told us?"

"Well, yes, I was sixteen years old and feeling very sorry for myself. What young person of that age doesn't feel as though the world owes them something? By sharing my story, I got more attention than I'd ever had before." Stefan's mouth twisted as though he'd bitten into something sour. "I've grown up a bit since then."

"Yes, you definitely have." Sarah's hand slipped over to take Stefan's. "Booker rescued me," she continued. "It was one evening, in the spring. He came through the village where I lived with my husband. He saw my husband beating me outside our home, not with his fists but with a leather strap. It wasn't unusual; my husband drank too deeply, and I never did know when to keep my mouth shut. It never took much to set him off. Booker got between us;

it took a single punch to lay my husband out cold. The rest of the village had never lifted a finger or voice to help me, yet here was this stranger that wasn't going to stand by and watch. I left with him the same evening."

"With no regrets?"

"Everyone has regrets. But if I had to do it over again, I'd make the same choice. Life has been good to me here. I've got the family I never thought I'd have, particularly with Wilf, Nell and the youngsters."

"Doesn't it bother you that he's not faithful, that he takes others to his bed? That he takes men to his bed?"

"Booker has a big heart, and he chooses to share the love he has with his men as well as with me. So no, it doesn't bother me. Besides which, it's a woman's lot in this life. We're property of our fathers till we marry, then property of our husbands. They can do with us as they will. I've never known a man to be faithful. Booker has never raised a hand to me in anger. He treats me with respect. That he shares his bed with others is a small price to pay for the freedom I get from being his woman. And I don't want to lose that freedom."

"Is that all it is, freedom?"

"No," Sarah said with a rueful laugh. "I do love him."

"I am not sure I even know what love is."

"Really? You've never been in love?"

"I don't think so. There was someone once..."

"But you couldn't follow your heart?" Sarah said softly.

"No." Stefan reached with his free hand into the neck of his tunic and withdrew a silver ring that hung from a leather cord around his neck. "I never had a chance to," he whispered.

Sarah gave Stefan's hand a gentle squeeze and rose to her feet.

"Good night, Stefan. I hope you come to a decision you can live with." She turned and disappeared into the night.

Dawn was beginning to break when Stefan woke. He rose gingerly, his back muscles protesting at the movement, his joints cracking. He walked quietly back to the cave and into the small area where Wilf slept, curled up under a pile of blankets and furs. Placing one hand over Wilf's mouth, Stefan shook him gently to wake him.

“Hush,” he cautioned as the other man startled awake. Wilf went to push himself up, but Stefan shook his head. “Just listen,” he said. “If Booker doesn’t go ahead with this plan, someone else will. Somerset has gone a long way to set this up for Derby to take the fall. We can’t win. Go ahead with it and we’re dead men walking; back out now, having taken the money, and our odds of survival aren’t much better. We need help, and I think I might be able to get us all out of this.”

“How?”

“There’s someone I know, and trust. I need to speak to him first, to see if he’ll help.”

“Someone from your life before?”

“Yes.” Stefan nodded. “I’m going to try and get a message to him. Don’t tell anyone anything yet. I’m going to Blyth Abbey; I should be back by sundown.”

“What am I meant to tell the others?”

“I don’t know, make something up.” Stefan grinned. “Tell them I was in urgent need of confession.”

Stefan rode in to the abbey’s busy forecourt just as the bells summoning the monks to Sext began to ring. Hitching his horse to a tethering post near the abbey’s stables, Stefan made his way into the church. He entered the chapel amongst the lay brothers and monks who had ceased their work to attend the office. With them, a handful of people not in religious garb, either locals or guests of the abbey, followed through the heavy wooden door.

Despite the warmth outside, the air in the church was damp and cold. Drawing his travelling cloak more tightly around him, Stefan slipped into a pew at the back and waited whilst the precentor led the choir of monks through the service. After the Kyrie Eleison and blessing, Stefan waited in his seat as the sparse congregation filed out.

The monks followed in a sedate procession. Behind them, a group of younger men, wearing shorter grey tunics rather than the floor length black, hooded habits of the older monks, filed down the aisle with slightly less solemnity. A couple of them were barely more than children, but most appeared to be close to manhood. Stefan shuddered at the sudden realisation that, five years ago, one of these soon-to-be monks could have easily been him.

As they passed, Stefan rose to his feet and followed them outside, his eyes watering at the sudden change from the dim candlelight to midday sunshine. As he stood in the open doorway of the church, an elderly monk bustled up to him, smiling.

“Good day, may I be of some assistance? I am Brother Francis, the abbey’s guest-master.”

“Thank you, Brother,” Stefan replied politely. “I was just going to see to my horse. I only arrived just before the service.”

“One of our lay brothers will see to him for you. Do you have business here or are you just passing through?”

“I have business here. I need to speak to your Prior, if he will grant me a brief audience.”

The monk looked at Stefan curiously, as though he couldn’t match up the roughly clothed, longhaired young man with the cultured Norman French he spoke. “Prior William should be able to see you this afternoon, in the meantime will you join us in the refectory for our meal?”

“Thank you, that would be appreciated.”

Brother Francis led him past the church and around the open sided cloister to the refectory. Trestle tables were laid out in long, neat rows, with benches on either side of them. Already the monks were taking their places at the tables. Stefan was directed to a table at the far end of the room, where a couple of young men, not in religious uniform, were sitting on one side.

“Our guest table,” Brother Francis advised. “If you’ll be seated, I will advise the cellarer that you are joining us for our meal.”

“Good day,” he greeted his dinner companions amiably as he dropped onto the bench at the opposite end of the table from them, his back to the far wall so he could observe the rest of the room. His recent past had made him cautious, and he didn’t feel at all comfortable, even in company such as this, at not being able to observe a crowded room.

The food was served by some of the novices, under the direction of two monks, one of whom ladled out bowlfuls of a thick, savoury stew. When his portion reached him, Stefan found it included large pieces of well-roasted pork. It was accompanied by a small, flat loaf of crusty bread with a cross carved in the top and a beaker of watered wine.

Stefan offered his thanks to the young man who served him and quickly tucked into his meal, breaking the bread into pieces and using them as a scoop. The room ate in silence whilst a lone monk stood at the lectern and read aloud from the Rule of St Benedict.

As the meal ended, the monks began to file out. The novices cleared away the dirty crockery. One elderly monk remained to supervise them, moving from table to table as he checked their work. Turning to the guest table at the end of the hall, he stopped suddenly, his hand flying to his mouth, his eyes widening with shock.

“Stefan? Stefan fitz Warren?” He shook his head as though trying to clear his vision, not believing what he was seeing.

Stefan rose quickly to his feet and approached him. “Brother Thomas,” he said with a small bow of his head. Smiling softly at the older man he added, “It’s been a while.”

“A while? That’s all you can say, child? I’ve thought you dead these past five years!” Thomas exclaimed as he reached for Stefan and pulled him into a rough embrace.

The novices had ceased working and were staring at the two men. Unnoticed, Brother Francis, the guest-master, had returned to the hall and, with him, the imposing figure of the Abbey’s Prior.

“Brother Thomas,” the Prior said sternly, making his way towards them. The older man released Stefan immediately, stepping back and turning to face his superior.

“Prior William, my apologies. May I introduce you to Stefan fitz Warren of Gainsborough.”

“Just Stefan, Father. I don’t have the right to the name anymore, and I never had the right to the title.”

The Prior raised one eyebrow slowly at Stefan’s statement. “Brother Thomas, as Master of the Novices, may I suggest you get your charges settled into their afternoon tasks and then come and join us in my office.”

“At once.” Brother Thomas turned and started herding the group of highly curious novices out of the refectory.

Prior William led Stefan back around the cloister to his small office, tucked in behind the scriptorium and library. A large, heavy oak table took up much of the room, its top covered with papers. On the stone wall above the Prior’s chair,

a heavy wooden crucifix with a carved image of Christ hung. A small fire burnt in the fireplace to keep the chill out of the room, and tallow candles provided the only light.

“So,” the Prior began as he took a seat behind the desk, leaving Stefan standing on the opposite side. “What brings you here? May I assume that you aren’t just passing through?”

Stefan didn’t answer immediately, weighing up what to reveal to the Prior. “I came seeking help,” he said eventually. “I need to get a message to someone.”

“And you think we can help you with this?”

“I am hoping so. I, well, my, erm, employer, we, that is to say...” Stefan stuttered to a halt, unsure how much he should reveal.

“Come now, let us treat this office as the confessional. I am a priest; anything you say in here will be kept in the strictest confidence.” Stefan nodded but didn’t immediately speak. “Why don’t you start at the beginning? Tell me of how you know Brother Thomas.”

“He was my tutor, years ago.”

“So you are a Gainsborough then?”

“By coincidence of birth only, Father.” Stefan gave a rueful smile.

“You are baseborn?”

Stefan nodded and continued, “I am my father’s firstborn, and my mother was a servant girl. He was just eighteen years of age when I was born, and she even younger. She died shortly after my birth, of milk fever, and her family wanted nothing to do with me. My father took me in, acknowledged me. I was brought up in Gainsborough castle, as his son.” The Prior said nothing but smiled encouragingly at Stefan to continue. “I was four when he married for the first time. His new wife was happy to have me as part of her family, even after she had her own children. Two girls, Eleanor and Marie, my sisters. When I was nine, my stepmother took a fatal fall from her horse. That was when Brother Thomas became my tutor. Until then he had been a monk, at Skendleby Abbey, but, before he had been called to serve God, he had been one of my grandfather’s men and for a time tutored my own father. I believe my father prevailed upon him and his superior out of family loyalty.

"I knew that I could not be my father's heir, so it wasn't unexpected when he announced he was re-marrying when I was thirteen. His second wife was the Earl of Gloucester's youngest daughter. I'm afraid there was a mutual dislike from the start. I found out, not long after she came, that my father had neglected to mention he had a bastard, let alone that I lived with him as part of the family."

"I can see how that could have been a problem," the Prior said dryly.

"Yes, well, it wasn't a good time. We argued at first, much to my father's annoyance. After a few hidings, I learnt just to keep out of her way. My schooling had more or less stopped by then, and I was spending more time with my father's squires and his new wife's youngest brother, Benedict. He had accompanied his sister at the time of her marriage, and then stayed to take a place as one of my father's men. He was seventeen and hoped to gain his knighthood. He took me under his wing and helped teach me weapons and swordsmanship. We'd take the horses out and ride for hours over the wolds, sometimes being gone all day from the castle. He was my first true friend." Stefan smiled as he recalled the memories.

"And Brother Thomas?"

"When my lessons stopped he was no longer needed as a tutor. After all, my sisters didn't need an education. He stayed for a while as an advisor to my father, but then returned to the Abbey. When he transferred here, he stopped by on his way to tell us where he was going."

A gentle knock on the door interrupted them.

"Herein," Prior William called out and Brother Thomas entered the study.

"Father." He nodded respectfully to his superior.

"Good, thank you for joining us, Brother. Stefan has just been telling me about his history, and how you were his tutor."

"Yes." Brother Thomas smiled fondly at Stefan. "He was a good student, a little unruly at times, but then what youngster isn't?"

"Quite so." Prior William nodded his agreement. "Now, you mentioned that you thought Stefan had been dead for the past five years?"

"Yes," Brother Thomas replied. "I'd been here a little over a year when a messenger came to the Abbey searching for him; you won't recall that, it was before your time. Anyway, apparently he'd run away from Gainsborough some

weeks before and no one knew where he'd gone." He glanced at Stefan as he continued, "I asked Benedict to let me know if and when you returned, but no word ever came back."

"Benedict?" Stefan said in shocked tones. "Benedict came to look for me?"

"Yes." Brother Thomas looked puzzled. "Is that such a surprise, the pair of you were always close."

Stefan couldn't help the colour that rose in his cheeks. "We were. At one time we were as close as brothers."

"So what happened? Why did you run? And where have you been?" Brother Thomas asked.

"It was because of my stepmother," Stefan continued. "One afternoon, shortly after my sixteenth birthday, Benedict and I were out in the tilt yard practicing when her maid came with a summons for him. I was annoyed at the way he just dropped everything and went to her, so I followed to find out what was so important. She was in the formal gardens, sitting on a bench under the rose arch. It was quite simple to get close enough to see them, overhear what they were saying, while not be observed." Prior William raised an eyebrow at this confession and Stefan hurriedly continued. "The first thing I saw was them embrace, and then she guided his hand onto her stomach as she told him the midwife had confirmed that morning she was with child, and expected to deliver in around five months or so. Benedict congratulated her, and said he hoped that she would have a son. Then she said... She said," Stefan closed his eyes as he continued. "that her husband, my father, was so pleased with her, that he'd finally come round to her way of thinking. That a bastard son was an embarrassment, and should not be brought up as one of the family. He'd agreed that I should be sent away. They'd arranged for me to go to Lincoln, to become a novice at the Abbey there. I wasn't to be told, I was just going to be taken there, leaving at dawn the following day."

"And so you ran?"

Stefan nodded miserably. "I waited until nightfall. Took what I could carry, a couple of changes of clothes, some bread, a handful of coins. Then I went to the stable, intending to take my horse, but Benedict caught me."

"He didn't stop you?"

"No, he didn't even try," Stefan sighed. "I told him what I'd overheard, that I had no intention of becoming a monk and being hidden away, forgotten, in a

cloister for the rest of my life. He heard me out, and asked where I was intending to go. I didn't have a plan, so I told him I would seek out my mother's family and that they would take me in. He believed me, but he wouldn't let me take my horse. He said, in case I was stopped as a horse thief and couldn't prove he was mine. He said he wouldn't want to see me hang."

"So where did you go?"

"South, at first anyway. I wandered around the countryside for a while with no destination in mind. Some nights I would find shelter in a hamlet or croft, but for the most part, I slept outside in the woods. I eventually ended up in Tickhill, just before winter started in earnest." Stefan paused, considering how to continue. "I fell into the company of a group of men from Derbyshire, and I've been with them ever since," he said vaguely.

"But you've returned now? What do you intend to do? Return home? You're a grown man now; you've no need to fear being sent away anymore."

"Certainly no one could force you to join the order or take vows as a monk against your will. Though I don't believe that it is that bad a life." There was a certain level of censure in the Prior's voice.

"My apologies, Father. I was but a sixteen-year-old boy, about to lose home and family. I am sure that it is a fine vocation for those who are called to it. But it is not for me." Stefan began to pace up and down in front of the Prior's desk. "I will not return to Gainsborough, but I do need to get a message to someone there."

"Your father?" Brother Thomas guessed.

"No, to Benedict. I need his help. I am sorry, Prior William. I cannot reveal more about what I need his help with; it wouldn't be fair on your conscience or safe for either my companions or me."

"And you think Benedict will help you, no questions asked?" Brother Thomas asked.

"I hope so." Stefan stopped pacing and reached for the leather cord around his neck. Pulling it over his head, and resting the ring that it held on the palm of his hand. "When I left, Ben gave me this," he said softly. "He told me, that if ever I needed him, wherever and whenever, if I could get a message to him with this ring as proof that it was me, he would come."

As the two men stared at the silver signet ring that balanced in Stefan's palm, Stefan's mind replayed another gift that Benedict had given him that

night. After shutting his horse back in its stall, Benedict had pushed Stefan gently against the wall of the stable, his taller frame covering Stefan's. He'd held Stefan's wrists still by his side and without saying anything, he pressed forward and kissed him firmly on the mouth. Not a formal kiss of peace, or a kiss of farewell or greeting, but a lover's kiss. The last words he'd said before he'd turned and rushed out of the stable were, "Stay safe."

"And what message would you like to pass to him?"

"That I need to speak to him. I cannot explain why as it would put people in danger. I thought that someone could pass him the ring so he knew the message came from me, and ask him if he would meet with me. It would have to be soon, very soon."

"Danger? I will not have one of my brothers harmed on your behalf."

"They will not be harmed if they don't know anything. Just ask Ben to meet me, the day after tomorrow, two hours before sunset, in Gamston Woods."

"I am not sure I like this. Are you adamant that you can't tell us more before we become involved?"

"I would if I could Father," Stefan said, shaking his head. "I wouldn't ask for help, from Ben or from anyone else, if I didn't think it was a matter of importance."

"Please, Prior William," Brother Thomas interceded. "I can go to Gainsborough, it wouldn't be out of order for me to call on a family I have long known."

"You are willing to act solely on this boy's word?"

"Yes, Father. I know this *man*." He emphasised the word making Stefan smile. "I taught him many things when he was a boy and one of those was to be honest and act with courage. I trust him."

Prior William looked from one man to the other as they stood in front of him, both watching him intently.

"Very well," he said finally with a nod. "Tomorrow at first light, Brother Thomas will ride to Gainsborough with two of the lay brothers to pay his respects to your father and his family. If Benedict is there, he will pass your message. The rest is up to Benedict."

"Thank you, Father," Stefan said with a sigh of relief. Turning to Brother Thomas, he pressed the ring into his waiting hand. "I am in your debt, Brother Thomas."

"No debt is owed, Stefan. I am just relieved to discover that you are alive and well," he replied, before adding with a slight smile, "As I am sure that Benedict will be."

Wilf was balanced on the railings of the open sided barn as Stefan turned off the footpath and rode his horse under the shelter. Hopping off his perch, he took hold of the reins from under the horse's mouth in his good hand, as Stefan dismounted. Handing them back to Stefan so he could tether his mount.

"Booker's not pleased," he warned.

"Not pleased, angry, or downright furious?"

"I think he'll hear you out. It was quite a spirited discussion he and Drake had this morning when they discovered you were gone."

"I am sure that Drake wanted to run me through on sight when I returned."

"Something like that," Wilf admitted. "The others weren't as vocal, or potentially as violent, as Drake; but some were less than happy that you'd gone without explanation. It split down about fifty-fifty, until Sarah got involved."

"Sarah?" Stefan said in surprise. Although she was in charge in relation to domestic matters on the bluff, Sarah didn't generally get involved in the business side of things.

"She was the one that talked Booker round to giving you a chance to explain." Wilf gave his peculiar lopsided shrug.

"Well, I'd best go put their minds at rest that I haven't betrayed them."

"You'd hardly have come back here if you had," Wilf said practically.

They walked up to the bluff side by side in silence. At the top of the path, Booker and his men had taken up station in a row in front of the fire, watching them approach.

"Luck!" Wilf whispered out the side of his mouth as he stopped moving, letting Stefan walk the last few yards towards the other men alone.

No one spoke. Stefan could see the tension in the men's faces and posture. More than one of them remained armed, which was not usual once everyone was in the camp. He also noticed that Aidan, standing between Drake and Booker, had his left hand clasped tightly around Drake's right wrist, preventing him from reaching for his weapon.

"You'd better have a damn good explanation for where you've been," Booker growled.

"I have," Stefan said as calmly as he could. "Will you hear me out?"

"Why should we?" Drake spat. "For all we know you could have sold us out, just be waiting for the sheriff to turn up."

"Drake has a point," David added in a measured voice. "Are we in danger?"

"No more so than you were this morning." Stefan replied coolly. "I wouldn't betray you. You are my family."

"Family! That's rich coming from a bastard whose own kin didn't want him. I always knew you and your noble blood, your fancy ways, would ruin everything we have here." Drake fought against the firm grip Aidan held him in. "I say we deal with him now, pack up and get out of here whilst we can. Leave him behind for the crows."

"Enough," Booker shouted, cutting Drake off. "I said we'd give him a chance to explain before we did anything."

"You might as well come and be seated and discuss it in comfort," Sarah called from beside the fire. Her tone made it clear it was slightly more than a suggestion, and the six men facing Stefan broke ranks, though Aidan still held onto Drake. Stefan followed them to the fire, with Wilf behind him. Nell and the two boys were nowhere in sight.

"Explain," Booker said shortly, as he took a seat on one of the rocks. Stefan eased himself down onto an old tree trunk that served as a bench opposite him.

"I did a lot of thinking last night," he began. "You've taken Somerset's money and I know that you will want to honour the agreement." Stefan paused and Booker nodded his agreement. "But what he's asking you to do, us to do, is commit treason. I have done many things for you over the last five years that have broken the law, but you've always been clear where our limits lie. For a bandit chief you are surprisingly moral, Booker." Stefan smiled at the older man. "You've taught me, and all of us who stay with you, to have morals too. And treason, like murder, is a line I won't cross."

"So you sold us out." Booker's words were more a statement than a question.

"No, but I think I know of a way to get us out of this. I also don't want any harm to come to you, to any of us. Backing out of the contract, or simply not

fulfilling it, isn't an option either. It will give Somerset and his men a reason to hunt us down and destroy us. Either way, we wouldn't survive this."

"So you've a different plan?"

"I'm working on it. We have to seem to have been taken in by Somerset's man and to recover the children, but without committing treason. For that I need help from someone who might be able to get an audience with the castellan at Nottingham, and then, hopefully, whoever is in charge of the children's journey."

"And of course you know someone that can do that?" Ralf asked in amazement.

"Yes." Stefan nodded. "There is someone, from my past, who might help us. I went to Blyth Priory today to send a message to ask him to meet me."

"What did you tell them?"

"Nothing, I just asked for a meeting. I didn't say anything about why." Stefan shrugged. "It's a long shot I'll admit, but if he agrees, then I will be in Gamston Woods to meet him the day after tomorrow before sundown."

"I don't trust you," Drake said bluntly. "What's to stop you from selling us out?"

"How about honour, or friendship, perhaps loyalty?" Stefan suggested mildly. Drake snorted with disgust.

"And if he does agree to help?" Booker interrupted. "What if he can get you an audience with the castellan. What then?"

"That part I haven't worked out yet," Stefan admitted. "But even if I have to go and confess to the plot, I would do it without giving you away. I would do that for all of you."

"Who is it you are meeting?" Aidan asked curiously.

"I would rather not say," Stefan hedged.

"Someone you trust though?"

"With my life," Stefan replied quickly.

"Well, Booker, what do you think?" Aidan asked their leader.

"We give Stefan the benefit of the doubt." He said, then with a shake of his head continued, "I don't see how he can get us out of this, but I am willing to let him try. He's right about one thing though, I can't give back the money

we've been paid, and, because I've taken the money, I am duty bound to do what I've been paid for. No man need join me though, unless he wants to, but if Stefan fails, then I will go ahead with the ambush as planned."

The late afternoon sunlight fell in narrow shafts through the heavy canopy of leaves as Stefan sat dozing, his back against the moss and bark covered trunk of the sturdy oak tree, waiting. He'd left the Bluff early, to escape the dark looks and comments from some of the others as much as a need to get to the rendezvous on time.

Yesterday had not been a comfortable one. Booker had barely looked at him, let alone spoken. He'd sent Drake away with Aidan and Hal, supposedly on an urgent errand, as soon as they'd broken their night's fast—which was probably for the best given the not-so-veiled threats Drake was still making. When the three who'd been to Litchfield returned shortly before the midday meal, Stefan had taken it upon himself to see to their horses, whilst they accounted for their trading and Booker brought them up to date.

That evening, he'd eaten a solitary meal on the far side of the fire, subjected to dark looks from some of the others. Only Wilf, who had had his own work to tend to, had spared any time for him.

"Booker does trust you," he'd said, coming to join him after they'd eaten. Stefan had only grunted in response. "It's true," Wilf had insisted. "He's just feeling a fool for being taken in so easily by Somerset's man, and he's worried about what to do for the best. If he didn't trust you he'd not be letting you go off tomorrow on your own."

Stefan wasn't convinced but he'd just nodded and not argued. Standing and squeezing Wilf's good shoulder gently, a silent thank you for his support, he took himself into his chamber in the cave for the night.

The early start and solitary ride to Gamston had helped clear his head, and put him in the right frame of mind for his meeting with Benedict. It had been five years since he'd seen him. As he waited, his mind went back to the first time they'd met...

March 1196

It was long past the time when he should have been in bed, but Stefan had overheard the castle steward talking to Brother Thomas. His father would be

coming home tonight, bringing with him his new wife. His younger sisters had willingly gone to their chambers with their nurse after supper. Instead of following, as he should have, Stefan had hidden, curled up in one of the embrasures which lined the passageway outside the solar, above the great hall. From here, he could see out over the courtyard of the castle, to the main gate. His excitement at the prospect of seeing his father, who had been away for nearly six weeks, was dwindling quickly, along with any feeling in his fingers and toes as a cold wind blew through the arrow slit and chilled him.

Despite the cold, he must have fallen asleep. The sound of footsteps approaching up the circular stone stairway leading to the solar startled him awake. Glancing outside, he saw that darkness had fallen and torches had been lit in the courtyard. Despite the long journey, his father's dark bay stallion was still fighting the groom who was trying to lead him to the stables, while the castle servants were unloading wooden chests from the bed of a wagon.

Cautiously he peered out from his hiding place. His father came into view first, a tall, heavy set man with dark eyes. His hair, which had once been the same red-brown colour as Stefan's, was clipped short, emphasising the grey in it; his chin and upper lip were clean shaven. He was dressed for the road, in a dark tunic and hose covered by a short travel cape. On his feet, he wore stout leather boots, the metal of the attached spurs glinting in the torchlight with each step.

A young woman walked next to him, her arm lightly linked with his. The hem of the long mantle she wore trailed on the floor behind her. From his concealed spot, Stefan took the opportunity to observe his new stepmother. She looked much younger than his father. Her skin was pale, like new milk, her face framed by dark hair, which fell in two long plaits over her shoulders and down past her waist. Dark eyes darted this way and that, but from the sour expression on her face, it appeared that she didn't find Gainsborough Castle, her new home, to her liking. His father was talking to her quietly and didn't notice Stefan as they passed.

Trailing behind them came three of the castle's servants, two of whom were carrying a trunk, while the other carried a tray with a flagon of honey coloured mead and a couple of drinking cups. Bringing up the rear were two of his father's squires. Both were a couple of years older than Stefan, the children of local landowners, sent into service with the hope of achieving a better station in life. With them walked another young man, a little older and some inches taller

than the squires, whom he didn't recognise. He had the same dark hair and eyes as his father's new wife, but unlike her, he looked around him with lively curiosity rather than distaste.

As his father pushed open the door to the solar and ushered the party in, Stefan slipped from his hiding place and followed.

"These are our private rooms, my dear," he heard his father say. The room was bright and warm. Not only were there lamps lining the walls, but a fire had been lit in the large carved stone fireplace. On the walls hung a series of heavy tapestries, helping to keep out the cold that seemed to seep through the masonry. The room was lightly furnished. A couple of overstuffed chairs on each side of a low wooden table had been placed in one corner, and along the opposite wall was a bench with a padded, fabric covered seat. The two servants carrying the trunk moved towards the far end of the room, separated by a decorative wooden screen, behind which was the door to his father's sleeping chambers.

His father led his new wife over to one of the chairs and solicitously helped her be seated whilst the third servant set out the flagon and glasses on the table in front of her. As his father turned round to address his squires, Stefan tried to dart sideways, to hide behind the open door. He didn't quite make it.

"Stefan!" his father exclaimed in surprise. Sheepishly, Stefan stepped out into the middle of the room, not daring to meet his father's eyes.

"Who is this?" The woman had risen to her feet and was staring at him with an unfriendly expression. The servants made a swift exit from the room, followed by the two squires, waved away by Stefan's father.

"Elise," his father said with a sigh. "This is Stefan—my son."

"Your son?" Elise looked angrily between Stefan and her husband. "But I thought you said you had two daughters. You never mentioned a son."

"No, I didn't. Stefan is my son, but not my heir."

"Oh, he's a bastard," Elise said dismissively, turning away from Stefan entirely and laying her hand on his father's arm. "He'll be sent back to his mother then," she said with finality.

"Father!" Stefan gasped in shock.

At the same time as his father said, "It's late. We'll discuss it in the morning."

"My Lord, perhaps Stefan can show me to my chambers?" the dark haired young man asked politely, stepping forward from where he'd been observing at the side of the room and laying a hand gently on Stefan's shoulder.

"Of course," his father nodded absently. "Stefan, the steward has put him in the north guest chambers."

"Thank you," the young man replied. "Good night, Sir, Elise."

Stefan found himself turned around and ushered gently, but firmly, out of the room. The stranger closed the heavy door behind them before letting go of him.

"Well, then, you're a surprise," he said with a grin.

"Who are you?" Stefan asked rudely.

"Allow me to introduce myself," he replied with a mocking bow. "I am Benedict fitz Robert of Gloucester, and given that my older sister has just married your father, I guess that makes me your step-uncle."

"Step-uncle?" Stefan frowned. "But you can't be more than a few years older than I am."

"I'm almost eighteen, which makes you, what? Twelve?"

"I'm thirteen," Stefan snapped, glaring at him.

"Of course, do excuse me. That extra year makes a huge difference." Benedict's eyes sparkled with mischief, but seeing Stefan's unfriendly expression, he stopped. "I'm sorry; this can't be easy for you. A new stepmother and all that."

Stefan shrugged. Truth be told he hadn't really thought much about it until now. His previous stepmother he barely remembered, his own mother not at all. His father's other women came and went without him really noticing. This was different though—a new wife, the daughter of an Earl. She'd have expectations and plans for their future, plans that clearly didn't involve him. He should have realised that.

"Hey," Benedict interrupted Stefan's thoughts. "Come on, you've got to show me to my chamber, remember?"

"Of course, this way," Stefan said numbly, leading him down the corridor to the stairs.

They made their way down and through the great hall, which was now deserted, save for his father's two large mastiffs which looked up lazily from

where they slept in front of the hearth as they passed. At the opposite corner, they passed through an open archway and began to ascend another flight of stairs.

“Here,” Stefan said eventually as they reached the top. Pushing open the door in front of him, Stefan led the way into a small chamber. The wooden framed bed, hung with curtained drapes, took up most of the room. To one side, a cabinet held a ewer of water. Beside it sat a dusty travel bag. A small door on the far side of the room led to the garderobe.

“Thank you,” Benedict said with a smile, and Stefan couldn't help but find himself smiling shyly back. “You'd best go find your own bed too. It's very late.”

“Of course, My Lord, Sir,” Stefan replied, suddenly at a loss for how to address the other man.

“Not a Sir, at least not yet, and definitely not my lord, that's my father's title.”

“Sorry,” Stefan said, trying to smother a yawn that crept up on him suddenly. “Goodnight.” He turned and headed towards the door.

“Ben,” Benedict said behind him. “My friends call me Ben.”

August 1204

Friends. Yes, they had been friends. When his father decided that Stefan had done enough book learning and the time was right for him to start learning the art of warfare, he had been put into Ben's charge. For nearly three years they'd spent most of their time together with Stefan acting as his squire. Ben had taught him how to handle sword and lance, how to ride in battle and how to shoot a long bow. They'd spent days out in the countryside hunting for game and nights sleeping under the stars.

Stefan suddenly jerked fully awake. Around him the woodland had fallen silent; all birdsong had ceased. Slowly and carefully he rose to his feet, keeping his back to the tree trunk and scanning the area around him. He heard the sound of the horses' hooves, dulled by the mulch of the fallen leaves that covered the ground, before he saw them. Three riders approached down the old game track.

Stefan's heart rate sped up at the site of the first of them. He would have recognised him anywhere. Five years had given Ben's body a chance to fill out. His shoulders were broad beneath his travel cape and the chain mail shirt he

wore was tight, giving an indication of the muscle beneath it. His face had lost the last of its youthful softness, but the features, and the expression of mild amusement, were as familiar as ever.

Ben drew his horse to a halt around fifty yards from where Stefan stood, still hidden in the shelter of the trees, and signalled for the other two men to wait, mounted, behind him. Nudging his own horse forward again slowly, he approached, alone. Stefan took a deep breath and stepped out from the trees onto the edge of the path.

It couldn't have been for more than a minute that the two men stared at each other, but for Stefan at least, it seemed like much longer. He found himself unable to speak; his mouth had gone as dry as the desert sands. Then slowly he drew his sword and sunk gracefully to his knee, the point of the blade in the ground before him. With his head bowed in submission, his long hair fell around his face, mercifully hiding the sudden and unexpected tears that had filled his eyes.

He didn't hear Ben swing down from his horse and approach. He jumped as a warm hand covered his around the hilt of the sword.

"Stefan," Ben's voice was deeper than he remembered. Staying on his knees, he looked up through his hair into the smiling face of the other man. "It is really you then?"

"It is really me." Stefan nodded as he slowly rose to his feet and sheathed his sword.

For a few moments they stood face to face, neither moving nor speaking. Stefan suddenly realised that he no longer had to look up to look into Ben's eyes.

"Five years, Stef. Five years, and not one single word," Ben said eventually, his tone chiding.

"I couldn't," Stefan replied with an apologetic shrug. "I wasn't ever going to be able to go back. I'd lost my family and my home. I needed to move on, to forget about my past."

"I didn't even know if you still lived. For months, I searched for you every time I left Gainsborough. I asked at every town or city I visited, but never once did anyone give me even the smallest hint that they knew you, that they'd even seen you." Ben's hand brushed Stefan's hair away, his thumb tracing across his

cheek. "In the end I gave up searching, but I never gave up hoping that you'd come back," he said softly. "Until yesterday that is."

"Yesterday?"

"Yes, you see when Brother Thomas asked to speak to me in private and then handed me the ring. Well, all I could think of at first was that you'd died."

"Oh," Stefan caught Ben's wrist and drew his hand away from his face, twisting their fingers together. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. Once he'd explained, told me you were alive and needed my help, it was all he could do to stop me riding off to find you straight away."

"And now?"

"Part of me wants to beat you into the middle of next week for frightening me like that," Ben confessed. "But more than that, I am curious as to what you need my help with. Brother Thomas wouldn't say."

"It's a long story, and it will be getting dark shortly. Perhaps we should go find somewhere to set up camp for the night first?"

"Fine," Ben nodded. "You came on foot?"

"No," Stefan replied, shaking his head. "My horse is back in Gamston village. There is no inn there, but your men should find shelter for themselves and the horses overnight. If they follow the track for another mile or so they'll reach a fork. If they take the left path that will lead them to the village. Ask for Dickon, the wainwright."

Ben nodded and beckoned the two men forwards. Swiftly he gave them instructions and after removing the travel bag from his saddle, handed over the reins of his own horse to one of his men. Stefan and Ben stood, side by side, watching until the two mounted men disappeared from sight.

Picking up his own pack, Stefan led the way off the path and deeper into the woodland. Eventually they came to a small, shallow brook, which they followed downstream until they reached a clearing where the trees were set back from the water's edge, leaving a small, grassy cove.

"Here." Stefan dropped his pack to the ground. "This will do. You dig a fire pit while I get some wood."

As Stefan walked back into the woods, Ben looked round the area before tossing his own bag to the ground and freeing his hunting knife from his belt. He then set to work, cutting the turf to make a safe fire place.

By the time Stefan returned, with his arms full of dry wood, the pit was ringed with smooth stones from the edge of the brook. Carefully he laid the fire and set about lighting it, striking the small flint he carried against his knife edge to create a spark. Ben dug around in his pack for trail rations of cured, dry meat, some hard cheese and even harder bread, which they shared as the sun sank slowly behind them.

As they'd set up their overnight campsite and eaten, they'd hardly spoken, but when they settled down, side by side, wrapped in their long travelling cloaks, Ben turned and asked. "Five years, Stef. Where have you been? What have you been doing?"

Stefan stared up into the night sky, where stars were beginning to appear, in silence for a few minutes before he started to speak.

"When I left I had no clear idea of where I should go; I just ran. I spent the first few days not far from the castle, but then I found myself heading northeast towards the coast. So I did what I told you I would and sought out my mother's family. I knew that she came from Glandford Brigg and that her family still lived there, so I set about finding them. It took about a fortnight to get there, by which time I was tired, hungry and footsore. I spent my first night huddled in the shelter of the Buttercross in the town square trying to keep warm and dry. It took me three days of asking before I came across my uncle at the market, trading bolts of cloth that his weavers had produced. I explained who I was, that I was his sister Hawsie's son, but he didn't want to know me. He told me that he had no sister, that my mother had been cast from the family for her shame, and that he most certainly didn't want anything to do with a by-blow like me." Stefan lapsed into silence, staring blankly into the flames as he remembered that harsh sting of rejection.

Ben shifted sideways, moving closer to him, their arms touching from shoulder to elbow, their legs from hip to ankle. "What did you do then?" he asked gently.

"I wandered, lived off what I could find, and when I couldn't find anything, I begged." Stefan turned his head away, suddenly feeling very ashamed of his past actions, actions that went against all that he'd been brought up to believe, actions no knight would stoop to, even in the harshest of times.

"You did what you had to," Ben said, as though guessing where Stefan's train of thought had taken him.

"I did," Stefan agreed. "I reached Tickhill at the start of December, but without a clue how I would survive the winter. There were others on the street, those who sold their bodies for food or a warm bed. I was afraid that I would have no option but to join them, but I was saved by an unlikely benefactor who took me under his wing and into his, well, home and family, of a sort. I have been working for him ever since." Stefan paused in his recounting, torn between wanting to tell Ben everything and not wanting to face his possible disapproval of Booker and his men. Instead, he asked, "So, what happened after I left Gainsborough?"

"Your father was furious when you couldn't be found the next morning," Ben began, pulling his knees up and wrapping his arms around them. "I didn't tell them I knew anything, just watched as his men searched the whole castle. The delegation from St Catherine's Priory had come to escort you back to Lincoln. They weren't at all impressed by your disappearance and made it quite clear to your father what they thought about the waste of their time. I believe he had to pay them a percentage of what he'd intended to send with you to the Priory to placate them. My sister was more pragmatic," he continued bitterly. "You were no longer there, so her problem was solved. She persuaded your father not to send men out into the countryside to search and not to inform the sheriff that you were missing. I thought you'd come back, you know. I didn't even believe you'd get as far as your mother's people. I just thought you'd camp out until you'd calmed down and then you'd return. I think it must have been about two weeks after you left before I realised that you had left for good."

"Was that when you went to look for me?" Stefan asked.

Ben looked sharply at him. "How do you know I came to look for you?"

"Brother Thomas told me a couple of days ago, when I went to Blyth Priory. I rather shocked him I'm afraid, turning up like that all of a sudden. He said that after I left, you went to him to see if he'd heard from me."

"Yes, one night I spoke to your father and suggested that you might have gone to your mother's family. I'm afraid he told me that they would not want you. He said that they'd been horrified when Hawsie had discovered she was pregnant and didn't want the scandal of a bastard child, so they had sent her back to him. The only other person I could think of, who you might go to for help was Brother Thomas. But you didn't?"

"No, I suppose that I could have done, but I was sure that his loyalty to my father would result in him sending me back if I did."

The fire crackled in front of them, behind them the leaves of the trees rustled in the gentle breeze and were accompanied by the occasional song of the night birds. For a while neither spoke, then Stefan asked tentatively, "My father, he is well?"

"Yes, older, obviously, and he suffers from stiffness in his joints in damp weather. He went with my father to the King's Lenten Council earlier this year and intends to travel to London for the Christmas Court. He intends to take Eleanor with him, she's fifteen now and he's seeking a husband for her. Marie was sent to the convent at Semperingham last spring as a novice." Ben turned his head to look at Stefan before adding, "Your father and my sister have three children of their own now. The eldest, called Isabelle after the Queen, will be five soon and after her came two boys, Henry is three and Arthur just a few months old."

"And you? What have you been doing?"

"These past five years I've been busy serving your father, and the King. I stayed at Gainsborough at first, but then my father summoned me to France to go with the King's army. After the French King summoned him to Paris, I stayed with his company as a man-at-arms. I fought at Mirebeau, when he captured Prince Arthur and the rebels, then I was part of the guard that accompanied the Lady Eleanor to Bristol Castle. By then I'd rather lost my appetite for warfare, so I sought leave to return to my sister. I've been settled there for the last eighteen months."

"You've a wife and children now?" Stefan wasn't sure why, but it felt like he was swallowing gravel as he asked.

"No," Ben replied softly. "Neither wife nor child."

Ben looked directly into Stefan's eyes as he finished speaking, and Stefan couldn't help but feel that there was more unspoken than said in that final sentence. For a second, neither could tear their gaze away, and heat bloomed in Stefan's cheeks. He suddenly felt he was sixteen again. His mind flashed back to standing in the stable of his father's castle whilst Ben held him fast against the wall and kissed him. The hoot of an owl from the woods behind them broke the tension. Stefan gave a shaky laugh and looked away.

Ben said, "So, why now? Your message said you needed help."

"I do need help. Or rather, the man I work for does." Stefan sighed, not sure how to explain what he had become involved in over the past five years, or what Ben would think of it.

“Go on,” Ben prompted.

“The man who rescued me that winter, well, he’s a good man, but an outlaw.” Stefan held up his hand to stop Ben from interrupting. “I am part of his group, and yes, an outlaw too. We have a base in the heart of Derby’s lands, and use the woodland there as cover. We have rules, we aren’t assassins and we don’t take anyone by force. We trade the goods we’ve... obtained, and try to survive that way. We also take commissions for retrieval work, normally jewellery or money.” Stefan didn’t dare look at Ben again; he didn’t want to see the look of what he feared would be contempt or disgust on his face. “We live simply as a community, as a family. There are a few who come to us with a price on their heads, but there are others who come to us because their families, villages, society doesn’t want them.

“My best friend was abandoned as a baby because he has a withered arm. His family had no use for a cripple and no money to feed someone who would be of no use to them. He was found out in the woods where he’d been left and brought to the group, who raised him, fed him and clothed him for no return. They taught him to read and write, and now he acts as both scribe and accountant for us. These men might be on the wrong side of the law, but it’s due to circumstance, not for sport or out of evil.”

“Go on,” Ben urged as Stefan paused. Stefan explained the situation that Booker and his men found themselves in and the plot by Somerset to have them kidnap the king’s natural sons and deliver them to Derby. As he finished speaking Ben whistled softly through his teeth.

“Dear God, what a mess,” he said, shaking his head.

“Isn’t it just,” Stefan replied. “And this is why I need your help. Your family is in good standing and their name known. I was hoping that you would help me get into Nottingham Castle to speak to the castellan, or whoever has charge of the children. I have to stop them travelling to York the day after tomorrow. If I can’t, then my friends, my new family, well, it will be the end for us all.”

“Hey!” Ben wrapped his arm around Stefan’s shoulder and pulled him towards him as he finished speaking. Stefan turned his head into Ben’s shoulder, breathing in the smell of chain mail on leather and the underlying scent of the man himself. Ben’s hand slipped from his shoulder and rubbed gentle circles around Stefan’s back, his fingers tangling in the long hair,

occasionally ghosting across the bare skin at the back of his neck, which made Stefan shudder.

“I’ll help you in any way I can, Stef,” Ben said gently. “Tomorrow, we’ll go to Nottingham and see what we can do.”

“Thank you.”

Stefan looked up into Ben’s face. His expression was serious, but his eyes, with the firelight reflected in them, were soft. Stefan brought his hand up to the side of Ben’s face, scraping his fingers on the short stubble that covered his chin and jaw. Ben’s hand slid up further around Stefan’s head, taking a handful of the long hair and holding tightly. Stefan gave only a shallow gasp before Ben’s mouth was on his, their lips clashing with no finesse and a great deal of sudden urgency. The kiss was hard, almost bruising to begin with, but it gradually gave way to something softer as Stefan parted his lips and Ben’s tongue took possession of his mouth.

Stefan pushed into the kiss, and at the same time Ben sank backwards onto the ground, taking Stefan with him. His other hand snaked round Stefan’s waist under the travelling cloak and hefted him up so he was lying half on top of Ben and half on the ground. Their legs tangled together as the kiss continued. When they broke apart, both found they were panting lightly.

Stefan pressed closer, rolling slightly and feeling the hard ridge of Ben’s shaft against his thigh. His own groin had a matching, aching hardness. As they began to kiss again, Stefan reached down and started to untie the fastening on Ben’s hose, working the laces loose enough to edge the garment down to his hips. As Stefan’s hand circled the now-exposed length of Ben’s cock and began to move lazily up and down, Ben pulled back out of the kiss.

“Stef!” He gasped, shaking his head slightly.

“You want me to stop?” Stefan stilled his hand.

“No, just, I want to see you too.”

“That’s not a problem,” Stefan grinned as he pushed away and sat up, turning his attention to unlacing his own hose and peeling the garment down his legs. “Better?” he asked, turning back to Ben, whose eyes were tracing up the strong muscles of Stefan’s calves and thighs before they came to rest on the shaft rising out of a nest of coarse red hair. He nodded and pulled Stefan back towards him, one hand returning to his hair, the other resting on the taut muscles of his arse.

Stefan rolled further onto him, gripping his hip with one hand for purchase, the other snaking behind Ben's neck and pulling him forwards so their lips met again. As their tongues duelled back and forth into each other's mouths, Stefan began to rock his hips, grinding their shafts together. Ben's hand tightened on Stefan's backside as he began to rock his own hips in response, thrusting upwards from the ground. Their rutting fell into a rhythm, gradually speeding up as the friction brought them both closer to release.

With a gasp, Ben broke the kiss, his head falling back heavily into Stefan's hand and his back arching as he sprayed cum between their bodies. Stefan continued to grind his own hips until he reached his own climax, and then he slumped down, his head resting in the crook of Ben's neck as he fought to catch his breath. As the sticky mess cooled between them, he could feel both their heartbeats hammering in their chests.

"Sweet Jesus," Ben cursed softly, his hands falling from Stefan's body and coming to rest on the grass. Stefan rolled over, coming to rest lying beside him on his back, staring up at the sky.

Sweat prickled on Stefan's skin as it cooled in the night air. His breathing slowly returned to normal. His mind wasn't quiet though. He'd had other lovers, but had never felt the sense of rightness that had come over him from being with Ben this way.

They set out at first light, after an icy dip in the brook. They headed first to Gamston village to collect their horses and Ben's squires, eventually reaching the outer ward of Nottingham Castle shortly after Terce. Passing through the wooden gate and into the outer bailey, their horses began the steep climb up to the castle itself, which stood high on the hillside over the town.

As they rode under the first portcullis of the main gate, they were halted by a troop of six heavily armed guardsmen.

"State your business," the lead guard demanded tersely.

"I am Sir Benedict fitz Robert of Gloucester, and I am here to see the castellan," Ben said, sitting, stiff backed, in his saddle and coolly staring the man down. He nudged his horse forward a couple of steps, causing the guard to give ground. He swiftly signalled to the other guards and the inner portcullis was raised, giving them access to the castle's bailey, busy with people going about their daily work.

"I think you'll find Sir Alexander in the great hall, My Lord." The guard gave a short bow as he stepped to one side to let them pass.

Stefan and the two squires followed Ben into the inner bailey. Almost immediately two grooms appeared at their sides and offered to take charge of their horses. Signalling for them all to dismount, Ben accepted the offer and instructed his squires to go with the grooms and see to their mounts.

"Sir Benedict? Since when?" Stefan asked with a raised eyebrow as soon as they were alone.

"A couple of years now," Ben said with a shrug. "But a knighthood is a pretty hollow thing when there is no land or money behind the title."

"What, and you've no thoughts of an heiress with land?" Stefan joked.

"After last night, I think you know the answer to that one," Ben said with a warm smile. "No, I think I shall be a hired sword for my liege lord for a while."

They crossed the courtyard and strode through the doorway leading to the great hall. At this time of day, the hall was busy with servants starting to set up the tables for the main meal of the day which, would take place in a couple of hours. High ranking lords and their ladies, judging by their clothing, gathered in groups here and there around the room. The high vaulted ceiling helped to make their footsteps echo as they crossed the stone floor, moving towards the fireplace, over which hung a large coat of arms.

Beneath this, an elderly man, his hair longer than was fashionable and almost completely white, was discussing something with a servant. As he noticed Ben and Stefan approach, he dismissed the servant and swiftly crossed the hall to meet them.

"May I help you?" he asked.

"I am Sir Benedict of Gloucester; this is my companion, Stefan. We are looking for the castellan, Sir Alexander. We have a matter of some importance to discuss with him," Ben said.

"You've found him," the old man advised dryly.

"May we speak in private, My Lord? It is a matter of some delicacy."

"Very well," Sir Alexander said. "Follow me please." He led them towards a low doorway at the side of the hall and through into a small antechamber.

A fire was lit in the hearth and in front of it, two young boys were playing jacks while to one side, partially hidden by an ornate carved wooden screen,

two men sat at a low table engrossed in their game of chess. Sir Alexander shepherded them to another vacant table on the opposite side of the room and bade them be seated. Once settled, he asked.

“So, Sir Benedict, what is this delicate subject you wish to discuss with me?”

“I am lead to understand that the king’s natural sons are currently within the castle walls and will shortly be travelling to York.”

“That is correct,” Sir Alexander replied. “The travel plans are well known, as their father intends them to spend some time this autumn in the tutelage of the Bishop of York.”

“Recently some information has come to my knowledge that there is a plot to abduct the boys, though I do not know to what end.”

“One moment please.” He paused as one of the two chess players rose and moved to the boys playing by the fire. With some general moaning, they abandoned their game and followed him out of the room. “Where exactly did you hear of this?” the castellan demanded once they were out of earshot. “Can you identify those involved? How long have you known this?”

“I was informed of it only yesterday,” Ben began.

“If I may speak, my lord?” Stefan interrupted. “It was I who informed Sir Benedict of this plot.”

“And you are?”

“I am Stefan fitz Warren of Gainsborough, though I am estranged from my family and have not spoken to them for five years or more. Sir Benedict is not only a very close friend but also my stepmother’s brother. Will you hear what I have to say?”

After a brief, ambiguous glance towards the remaining chess player on the opposite side of the room Sir Alexander prompted, “Speak on.”

“I was in Doncaster a few days ago, seeking work, when I was approached by a man seeking to employ me and my men.” Stefan began, carefully avoiding mention of Booker or any of his men by name. “He wished to contract us to recover two children, who he said were the Earl of Derby’s sister’s sons and who were being held against her wishes by an Irish lord. He offered us a significant amount of money, half in advance and half on delivery, to obtain the children and take them to his liege lord at Peveril Castle.

“He gave details of the boys as being Richard and Oliver and the lord as Lord Sans-Terre. I believe, because of my current status, he did not think I spoke Norman French nor that I was aware of his majesty’s other titles or the common surname of the king’s natural children.”

“Derby you say?”

“That was whose man he said he was, and that is who we were paid to deliver the boys to, yes.”

“But you don’t think he spoke the truth.”

“No, My Lord. After our meeting, I arranged for him to be followed, and before leaving town, he changed his apparel. He left the town wearing the badge of the Earl of Somerset.”

“I see.” Again, the old man glanced towards the other man in the room as he spoke. “Your man would be able to identify him again?”

“Yes, or I would be able to.” Stefan assured him.

“Very well, I shall take steps to ensure that the...” The castellan’s words tailed off at the scrape of the wooden feet of a chair being pushed backwards.

“I think I wish to hear more of this plot.” All three of them turned to the dark haired, well clothed, man who had spoken; Benedict gasped audibly.

“Your Majesty,” he said formally, making a low bow. Stefan immediately followed suit.

“Tell me, Stefan, was it?” the King asked mildly looking him up and down as Stefan nodded in response. “Who do you work for?”

“Sire, I don’t,” Stefan began but stopped almost immediately as the King held up his hand and shook his head.

“If I am any judge you are about twenty years of age, yet you talk as though you are the leader of a band of men. Come now, I am no fool. Again I ask, who do you work for?”

“I am one and twenty years old,” Stefan admitted, “and I work for no one of noble birth, Sire. I am part of a company of freemen who make a living by, shall we say, alternative means.”

“Alternative means?” The King smiled, and Stefan was put in mind of a dog curling his lip just before attacking. “Such as robbery, maybe banditry, murder for hire, that sort of thing.”

"No, Sire," Stefan hedged. They didn't murder, after all.

"So tell me, why should I trust you? You come here making accusations of treason against one, if not two, of the highest ranking noble men of the realm, with, I might add, no evidence to back you up."

"I came because it was the right thing to do, Sire. I will admit that to survive the past few years I have perhaps not always steered completely clear of criminal activity, but it was done for survival, a means to an end. Can you honestly say that you have never done something similar?" There was a challenge in Stefan's question. The King didn't reply, simply waited for Stefan to continue. "This though, this was not survival. This was politics, treason, and my men and I would be caught right in the middle. We have rules, standards if you will, as a group. What is more, there comes a point where a man must draw a line in the sand between what he will and will not do, and for me, I had reached that point."

"A point of honour, maybe," the King mused.

"Yes," Stefan nodded. "A point of honour. I could never be at peace with myself if I allowed this plot to go ahead, not only is it an act of treason, but particularly, I don't like the thought of your children being used this way."

"Even though they are bastards?"

"I am a bastard myself, Sire, so no, you could in fact say I have a sympathy for their position."

"Very well." The King nodded and returned to his seat, leaning back he steepled his fingers in front of him and continued. "So the question now is, how do we put a spoke in Somerset's wheel?"

"I think perhaps that simply delaying the boys' departure would work," Sir Alexander interjected.

"No Alex, I think not. This plot is clearly intended to make a breach in the regard I have for Derby, though what he has done to Somerset I don't know. I think we can do better than that. And I want the truth behind this. I am not prepared to leave loose ends."

"If I may, Your Majesty," Ben interrupted. "I have an idea."

"Go ahead, Sir Benedict."

"Why not let the plan go ahead and kidnap the boys?"

“Ben!” Stefan exclaimed at the suggestion.

“No, Stefan, let him continue.”

“Well Sire, I think that Stefan and his men should meet the coach and take the children as they are meant to do, then convey them to Peveril. I would question whether Somerset truly trusts them and may have set his people to watch. In which case, if they don't go ahead as agreed, and by that I mean they have to be seen to actively ambush the coach and remove the boys, they could be in trouble. I have no doubt that Derby will be surprised by their arrival in the Peak, but I am sure that Somerset will also have at least one person there to bear witness, intending to run to you with the tale. Only, perhaps if you were already there?”

“Interesting idea,” the King conceded.

“You would risk your sons?” Sir Alexander asked. “Perhaps we could use a couple of younger squires in their place?” The King nodded at this suggestion.

“No, absolutely not.” Stefan said flatly.

“What is your issue with the idea?” the King asked.

“My men's safety, I don't want to put them in danger.”

“I would guarantee their safety.”

“With respect Sire, not even you can make such a guarantee,” Stefan said hotly. Ben laid his hand on Stefan's arm and gently squeezed, reminding him to keep hold of his temper.

“Sire, if I may make a suggestion?” Sir Alexander interrupted, and when the King inclined his head to him continued. “Sir Benedict's plan has merit, but I can understand Stefan's reservations. Perhaps if Sir Benedict were to join the guards travelling with your sons it may help assure Stefan that we would try to ensure that no harm would come to his men.”

“Would that work?” Ben asked, meeting Stefan's eyes with his own. “Would you trust me to make sure that no harm came to your men?”

Stefan sighed, closed his eyes for a long moment and then opened them again before answering honestly. “Yes, I would trust you with anything.”

“Very good gentlemen, then let us hammer out the fine details of the plan and set things in motion.” the King said with satisfaction.

"Well?" Booker demanded as soon as Stefan set foot back on the Bluff.

"Really, Booker, can't you see the lad's exhausted?" Sarah bustled to the front of the group of waiting men. "Tait, take his bag and Nell, get him something to drink. Here," she guided him to a seat by the fire. "Rest your body while you talk."

The men gathered round him, waiting expectantly. Sarah was right; Stefan was exhausted. It had been a long and emotional couple of days since he'd left them. Parting from Ben earlier had been more difficult than he had expected, considering after five years apart they'd only been together for twenty-four hours. But in that time they'd spent a lot of time talking, catching up on the past and discovering the present. Neither of them had spoken of a future though, and that had left a gnawing, empty feeling within Stefan. Now was not the time to dwell on that. Now he had to try and sell the King's plan to Booker and his men. He took several long gulps of the watered down beer he was offered before he spoke.

"The job stands. Tomorrow, as agreed with Somerset's man. We ambush the coach and take the King's sons to Peveril."

"So you achieved nothing?" Drake interrupted. "Why does that not surprise me?"

"Patience, Drake, he's not finished," Aidan said. "Go on Stefan."

"At least, that is what it will look like to anyone who might be watching us," Stefan continued. "The coach will be guarded by six men on horseback, and driven by two others. Two boys will be alone inside the coach, not the King's sons but stand-ins. The aim is to make it look like an ambush, the guards know their job is to let the boys be taken, but at the same time not making it seem too easy. The boys also know what's planned; they will struggle, but not much. Whatever you do, do not harm them. When we've got them, we ride for Peveril Castle through the Peak Forest. Both the boys ride well, and are small enough to double up without slowing the horses. Most of the guards will chase us for a while, but they will really be making sure we aren't being followed, and if we are, will deal with it."

"Most of the guards?" Booker asked sharply.

"Yes, two will be joining us. One is my friend, the one I went to see, who arranged for me to get into the castle. They can be trusted. I give my word."

"And that's it? We just deliver the boys to Derby and walk away? Do we still get paid?" Drake demanded.

“Not quite. Yes, we get paid, but Derby will know we are coming.”

“What? You’re telling us that he knows he’s being framed with abduction of the King’s sons and you think he won’t try to warn the King or the sheriff beforehand?”

“The King already knows,” Stefan said drily. There were gasps of shock at this from some of the men. “Whose plan did you think this was?” he added before anyone spoke.

“You met the King?” Wilf’s eyes widened as he finally realised the implication of what Stefan had said. Stefan nodded and was about to continue when Booker spoke.

“Six guards and two other men, we’ll need at least eight of us then.” he said thoughtfully. “I’ll take volunteers. There are still risks to this and no one need join in if they don’t wish to. Stefan, I am assuming you will need to be there?”

“Yes, I will.”

“Okay then. So, six others.”

“I’m in.” All of the men, including Wilf, spoke at once and Booker smiled at his men.

“I’ll take Hal, Ralf, David, Edwin, Drake and Madoc. Aidan, I want you to stay here and take charge. You know what to do.” The words “if we don’t come back” weren’t spoken aloud. Aidan nodded his agreement.

“I want to come with you,” Wilf said stubbornly.

“Don’t be daft, you can’t fight. You’d be no use at all.” Drake sneered.

“You aren’t really fighting though are you? For once my arm won’t matter.” Wilf rose to his feet and glared at the older man defiantly, but Drake only laughed at him. “I want to come. There is no reason why I shouldn’t,” Wilf continued hotly.

“Enough,” Booker said wearily. “Wilf, if you want to come, you can, but you stay out of any fighting and keep well out the way.”

“Thank you,” Wilf said with a grin even as Drake started to protest. Booker held his hand up and continued.

“We leave at first light tomorrow; we need to be in place in good time. Cerdic, you and Aidan and the boys can get the horses ready for us. Sarah, you

and Nell pack us some travel rations. Now get to your beds, all of you, it's going to be a long day."

The horse fidgeted under him, scraping his front hoof against the ground and swishing his tail, as Stefan held him still amongst the trees at the side of the Great North Road. They'd arrived at Ranby in good time, riding from the Bluff in small groups and approaching from different directions. Now they waited and watched.

Beside him, Stefan could almost feel Wilf's excitement as he fidgeted nearly as much as the horse.

"Calm down," Stefan warned in a low voice, leaning forward and taking hold of the reins of Wilf's mount.

"Sorry," Wilf whispered, though he didn't look at all as though he meant it.

"Remember what Booker said; when we first go in, you stay here. Keep watch and don't get in the way," Stefan reminded him.

"I know," Wilf replied, rolling his eyes. Stefan held his hand up for silence as he heard approaching horses. They watched the road, but it was not their target. Instead two friars mounted on mules rode past without noticing their presence.

"What's he like?" Wilf asked once they were clear.

"The King?"

"No, the person you went to meet. The person from before you came to the Bluff."

"Ben? He's well..." Stefan paused as he considered how he could describe him. "He's a knight, and my friend," he said eventually, really not knowing how to explain what Ben was to him. Inside, just thinking of Ben, made him feel warm, safe. It was not something he could tell anyone else, even Wilf.

Wilf made a humming sound, his head cocked to one side and a slight frown on his face as he watched Stefan.

"What?" Stefan asked.

"Be quiet!" The words were hissed from about ten yards away, where Madoc waited with Edwin. Stefan grimaced but didn't press for an answer.

Stefan was dozing in his saddle when he heard the sound of approaching horses, and not just horses, the creak of a turning wheel accompanied them.

"This is it," he whispered, pushing his horse in front of Wilf's, and staring out into the road.

Two guards were at the head of the very small procession. Immediately behind them came the carriage, a fairly plain, wooden, enclosed affair, with the curtains at the windows closed. The two men seated on the driving platform were clearly armed. At each side, level with the door to the carriage, rode the next two guards, including Ben. The final pair brought up the rear, some yards behind.

As the carriage approached, Stefan drew his sword and pushed his horse forward, walking out into the middle of the road and turning to face them. From the other direction, Booker did the same. Beyond the last guards, he saw Drake and Hal take their positions behind them.

"Halt!" Booker called as he spurred his horse forwards. The carriage drivers pulled on the reins sharply, the horses rearing slightly in the traces and snorting as they came to a sudden standstill. The six guards drew their swords as the other four of Booker's men came out from the tree line. Drake whooped and kicked his horse forwards, brandishing his sword as he fell on one of the guards.

Stefan held his position as the guards at the front rode forward to meet them. None of the men carried shields, or wore more than light chain mail; a misplaced sword stroke could cause serious, if not grievous, injury. As he raised his own sword to meet the oncoming blade, Stefan felt a rush of adrenaline. As much as he knew this fight was only for show, suddenly it felt extremely real. The sounds of clashing steel, shouts of men and the occasional scream from one of the horses around him faded into the background as he concentrated on his opponent. They parried, stroke for stroke, using their horses as weapons as well as their swords. Stefan winced as his leg was hit by the powerful forequarter of the horse, pinning it to the saddle, even as he twisted his arm and slashed across the guard's upper arm. The guard backed off, a thin trail of blood running down to his elbow.

As he did, Stefan took the opportunity to look around. Booker was still engaged with the other forward guard, Madoc and Edwin were on foot, Madoc using a quarterstaff and Edwin a short sword, against the men who had been on

the coach. The horses that had been pulling the coach had been cut free and bolted from the scene. At the back of the coach, one of the guards was exchanging lazy sword blows with Hal, but Drake was slumped over his horse's neck, his sword hand empty. The guard he'd been fighting had dismounted and was holding onto not only his own horse, but Drake's as well.

Stefan trotted over to the side of the carriage where Hal and Ben were swinging their swords ineffectually at each other. At his approach, Hal fell back and turned his horse away, to cover them should anything interfere. Ben smiled tightly at Stefan but didn't speak as he sheathed his sword. Stefan did the same before Ben pulled open the door of the carriage. The two boys tumbled out onto the hard packed dirt, the smaller landing heavily on his knees and crying out.

"What the hell?" Stefan gasped, realising that these were no stand-ins.

"The boys had other ideas about someone else taking their places," Ben said sourly. "They can be quite persuasive once they set their minds to it."

"Father agreed, eventually," Richard said with a smirk as he reached down to help his brother to his feet.

"Here," Stefan said holding out his hand. Oliver grasped the offered hand and Stefan pulled him up behind him. His slender arms didn't reach all the way around Stefan's waist, so the youngster grasped onto the belt of his tunic.

"Richard, your turn," Ben said, holding out his hand to the older boy, who swung himself up with some self-assurance behind him.

"Ready?" Stefan asked.

The boys nodded as Ben said, "Yes, hold on tight."

Stefan turned his horse away from the carriage and urged it forward into a canter, at the same time he shouted over his shoulder, "Run!"

Wilf was waiting for them, and as they approached, he kicked his own horse on to join them. The three riders wove amongst the trees, chasing the sun, which flickered through the branches as it started to sink towards the west.

There was always the sound of horses galloping behind them. After a while, the horses began to tire and they slowed them to a walk.

"We need to find water for them," Wilf said.

"Yes, but not much. We don't want them bloating. There is still a way to go." Ben replied.

“You must be Stefan’s friend?”

“Yes, I’m Benedict.”

“He’s Sir Benedict fitz Robert of Gloucester, really,” Richard piped up from behind him.

“My Lord,” Wilf acknowledged looking slightly shocked.

“And you must be one of Stefan’s men?”

“Stefan’s men?” Wilf shook his head looking at Stefan in puzzlement.

“Long story,” Stefan replied. “Ben, this is my friend Wilf.”

“Pleasure to meet you Wilf,” Ben replied. “And what he means by long story, is that he told the King yesterday that they were his men to keep everyone else’s names out of it.”

“Typical,” Wilf snorted. Ben raised his eyebrow and Wilf continued, “He’s always had this really strong streak of honour. Which, when you’re part of a group of outlaws, can be damned inconvenient at times.”

“I do not!” Stefan denied hotly.

“You do. Why do you think Drake hates you so much? It’s not just the fact that you are both bastards of noblemen and that you were acknowledged and got brought up by your father with all the privileges, whilst he and his mother were turned out to beg on the streets by his father. No, it’s because you always do what you believe to be the right thing, not always the best thing, but the right thing.”

“Sounds like Stefan,” Ben said amiably.

“Quiet!” Stefan suddenly interrupted them, holding up his hand. “This way.” He pulled his horse deeper into the trees, the others followed.

“It’s okay,” Wilf said soothingly to the younger of the two boys, who was looking a little wild eyed.

“Boys, if I say jump, get down as quickly as you can from the horses and stay back here. Wilf, you stay with them. Are you armed?” Ben asked.

Wilf bit back the laugh that threatened to escape him at this question and shook his head.

“We are, Sir Benedict,” Richard said. “Father insisted we both carry knives just in case.”

Suddenly, an owl called, and Ben and the boys looked round in confusion as Stefan smiled. Dropping the reins, he held his hands up to his mouth and hooted in response and minutes later three riders came into sight.

“Booker,” Stefan said as they halted before them.

“Well done, lad, we’re safely away. They stopped following us about five leagues back. Hal and Ralf led some of them off in another direction. Madoc stayed to see to Drake.”

“Drake didn’t make it?” Stefan asked, his eyes widening in shock at the news.

“No,” Booker said with a shake of his head. “The guard was trying to defend himself and Drake’s horse shied; he took a blade to the throat. It would have been quick.”

Stefan’s throat tightened at the news. As much as there had been a mutual dislike between himself and Drake, he was still one of their group, of their family. Drake had never trusted Stefan, and all that he could think was that he had been right not to. After all, it had been Stefan’s plan that had led to his death.

“I’m sorry, Booker,” he said sincerely.

“No lad.” Booker shook his head sadly. “What’s done is done. He knew what he was getting into, he knew the risks. He went out fighting. We’ll mourn our loss and celebrate his life later. Right now we’ve work to do.”

“Come on, we should keep moving if we are to reach Peveril before nightfall. We will be out of the woodland soon and onto the open moorland once we pass Dore,” Ben suggested.

They rode, mainly in silence, across the heather and grassland moor. Imposing gritstone escarpments rose above them in places, as they followed the path of the Hope Valley toward Castleton.

The sun was sinking behind Mam Tor, the mountain that dominated the skyline to the west, as they started up the steep rise leading to the castle itself. Torches had already been lit around the bailey. They were waved through the gatehouse and passageway into the main courtyard by the guards on duty.

Ben and Stefan helped the boys from their horses and then dismounted themselves, as did the others.

"I'll stay with the horses," Edwin volunteered as they secured their mounts to a tethering post in the shadow of one of the curtain walls.

A young squire dressed in Derby's livery approached them, "Sir Benedict?" he asked and Ben nodded. "Will you come this way, the Earl is expecting you."

The group followed the man across the courtyard and into the great hall. They were guided out of the doorway to the side of the room, where Wilf and the two boys settled on a wooden bench with the other three shielding them from view.

"I'll inform the Earl you are here." The squire slipped away as soon as they were settled.

"I'm going to go help Ed with the horses," David said quietly, obviously uncomfortable with the number of people in the hall. Booker nodded as he slipped away.

"So, what's next?" Wilf said quietly.

"Hopefully, we hand the boys over to Derby, and then we can all go home again," Booker suggested.

"Something like that anyway," Ben said as he looked around the crowded hall, a slight frown creasing his brow.

"What is it?" Stefan asked

"There are more of Somerset's men here than we anticipated."

Stefan surveyed the occupants of the room, noting the prevalence of the Somerset badge on the cloaks of many of the men. Suddenly he gripped Ben's arm and whispered, "There, the man by the back wall, he's the man Booker met."

"Gentlemen, if you'd like to come with me, I will take you to the Earl," The squire said as he returned to them.

They followed him back out of the great hall and across the courtyard to the chapel, which stood on the opposite side. They were led through the chapel itself and up a set of stairs into a hallway, which Stefan estimated ran the length of the outer wall. Outside the second door along the corridor stood two guardsmen, and it was this door that their guide knocked upon briskly before pushing the door open.

"The men you were expecting, My Lord," he announced as they filed into the room after him.

The room wasn't particularly large, but it was light and airy, thanks to the arched window set in the far wall. A desk was set up to one side, and the walls were lined with a greater collection of books than Stefan had ever seen. When he heard Wilf gasp behind him, he couldn't help smiling, knowing exactly what he was looking at.

The man sitting behind the desk, who the squire had addressed, rose as they entered, looking confused. Two other men were also in the room, seated on the settle. One Stefan recognised immediately as the King, the other he didn't know.

"Papa!" Oliver shouted excitedly, racing from them into his father's arms. Richard followed him over more slowly to stand at the King's side. Stefan noticed with interest that the other man appeared to be in shock, slumped backwards in his seat, his face turning the colour of day old oatmeal.

"What is the meaning of this?" the man behind the desk asked.

"Not what you were expecting after all, Sir William?" the King asked.

"No, Sire. I don't understand, I was awaiting the delivery of a manuscript from the Earl of Chester. Not..." His words trailed off as he looked helplessly at the assembled group.

"Not my sons?"

"No, Sire, definitely not."

"Well, that's odd," Booker said, pushing his way to the front of the group. "If you'll permit me to explain, Your Majesty?" he asked the King, who nodded his consent for him to continue with a small, tight smile. "You see, I was paid by the Earl of Derby's man to recover these two boys for him. I was led to believe that they were your sister's sons, and were being held against her will by an Irish lord. It was suggested I should recover them from their carriage as it passed up the Great North Road, and to deliver them to you. You paid me a dozen silver crowns in advance, with a dozen to be collected on delivery."

"I did no such thing!" Derby said hotly, his ink stained fingers gripped tightly to the edge of the desk. "Sire, I give you my word, I would never do such a thing."

"And yet, they have brought my sons here," the King said in a dangerously quiet tone. "I can see no other reason for this other than they are telling the truth."

"No! Sire, I would not, I did not."

"Shall I fetch the guard?" The man who had been sitting with the King rose to his feet and moved towards the door without waiting for a response.

"I think not Somerset," the King said coldly.

"If I may speak, Your Majesty?" Ben asked, moving to block the doorway as he spoke.

"Of course, Sir Benedict."

"I believe this matter may be sorted quite simply. I've been made aware that the man who commissioned Booker and his men is in the castle. Perhaps we can arrange for some sort of identity test. If Booker recognises him and points him out for us, we will be able to discover who paid him for this undertaking. I would suggest that given most of the men will be gathered in the great hall we begin there.

"It's a sound plan, if you're agreeable, Derby? Somerset?" The two earls nodded their agreement, though both looked somewhat shocked. "Boys, if you could stay here. There is a guard on the door if you need anything," the King addressed his sons.

"Yes, Papa," the boys said in unison, moving to one of the settles.

"Papa, perhaps Wilf could stay with us?" Richard asked. Wilf blushed deeply at being brought to the attention of the King and the two Earls.

"If Your Majesty wishes," he managed to stutter. Stefan couldn't help but notice the way that the Earl of Derby was looking at his friend.

One of the guards who had been on the door accompanied them back to the great hall, where the visitors to the castle and most of the Earl of Derby's men had gathered for the evening. Upon entry, the buzz of chatter ceased as all rose to their feet, realising their King was among them. The King whispered something to the guard, who took up station alongside the two men already on the door of the great hall.

A space opened up down the centre of the room as the King led them forwards towards a small dais at the far end, where the high table would be set up for meals. Mounting the raised platform with the two Earls, the King turned to address the crowd.

"My Lords, Ladies, I shall only keep you for a short while. If you could please stay where you are whilst Sir Benedict and his companions walk the room; they are looking for something for me."

Nearly all the occupants of the room watched in fascination as Booker, flanked by Stefan and Ben, made a slow tour of the room. The occasional embarrassed giggle rose from some of the younger female courtiers. They had reached the end of one side of the room and had just started to work their way up the other when Booker paused.

“You, there,” he said, pointing at a man with a Somerset badge who was half turned from him, behind an older couple who moved aside. “Yes, you. Turn this way, please.” The man moved with reluctance, keeping his head lowered as much as he could. Although Booker had spoken in English, it was clear immediately that the man understood him.

“Step out here, please,” Ben commanded in Norman French. As the man came towards them, his eyes kept flicking towards the dais. “Is this him?” Ben asked Booker when the man stood directly in front of him.

As Booker looked the man up and down, he didn't notice Ben look to Stefan, who gave a small nod confirming that this was the messenger.

“That's him,” Booker said with confidence.

“Very well, this way please.” Ben took the man's arm and walked him up towards the King. The Earl of Derby looked both relieved and slightly confused, but the Earl of Somerset's face was a picture of naked fear.

“I don't think we need to do this in public,” the King said coldly to Somerset.

“If you'll follow me, Sire.” Derby led the way from the dais and into a small antechamber. The others followed, with Ben still holding the messenger's arm tightly. Once inside, Stefan shut the door behind them to shield them from the curious courtiers who waited in the great hall.

“Sire, I know nothing of this, of any plot to kidnap your sons. I assure you I would never do such a thing. There must be some mistake,” Somerset said quickly, but the King held up his hand to cut him off.

“Silence. I will have the truth of this matter,” the King declared. “This is one of your men, Somerset?”

“Yes, Sire, Gilbert de Clare, he's one of my household knights,” the Earl confirmed “But Sire, I dispute that either he or I have anything to do with this.”

“Master Booker, are sure that this is the man that commissioned you?” the King asked, ignoring the Earl's protestations of innocence.

“Yes, Sire,” Booker said with a definite nod. “We met in an inn in Doncaster five days past, only he wasn’t in that livery at the time. He wore Derby’s mark.”

“How can you be sure? You met the man who paid you just once. You say yourself that the man you met was Derby’s, which this man clearly is not,” Somerset interrupted.

“This is the man I met,” Booker repeated calmly.

“What proof do you have? Your word is worth nothing. You are an outlaw, a criminal for hire.”

“I would support his word,” Stefan said quietly. “What is more, I saw this man leave town after the meeting. He rode away under your badge, with four other of your men.”

“Your word is worth no more than his,” the Earl said, pointing between Stefan and Booker. “You’re one of his men, of course you’ll back him up. You probably weren’t even there.”

“Stefan’s word is good,” Ben’s voice was dangerously quiet. “As a knight of the realm I will champion him, in combat if necessary.”

“I am sure that will not be necessary,” the Earl blustered. “Anyway, I know nothing of this and, if my man has done such a thing, I would expect you to permit me to deal with this myself, Sire. I have the right.”

“No, I don’t think so,” the King said coolly. “May I remind you we are talking treason here? This is far too serious for me not to deal with it myself. I expect that once my gaolers have rung the whole truth out of him, he and any other conspirators he identifies will hang for their crimes.” He turned to the man himself, who had turned white, his gaze flicking between Somerset and the King. “Of course,” the King continued, “I may be persuaded to leniency should he speak freely of whose instruction he was acting upon.”

“Sire, I assure you...” Somerset began.

“My Lord Earl, Sire.” Gilbert finally said, his voice barely more than a whisper.

“Be silent, de Clare.” Somerset strode angrily towards his man, his fist raised as if to strike him.

“Enough,” the King’s tone was icy, stopping the Earl in his tracks. “I will have the truth of this. My Lord Somerset, you may consider yourself under

arrest on a charge of treason. I will arrange for you to be conveyed to the Tower shortly." The Earl turned white at these words, but the King ignored him and continued. "Derby, if you would be so good as to arrange for my guards to round up Somerset's men. They can take them, with de Clare here, straight away to Nottingham, I will be returning there in a few days, once I've seen my boys safely off to York. Inform them they are to be kept in close confinement."

"Of course, Sire." Derby bowed and, casting a look of disgust at Somerset, he left the room to carry out the King's orders.

"What of him?" Somerset spat, pointing at Booker. "He's a common criminal, thief and outlaw."

"So he is," the King said coldly. "It appears that he's also a man of honour, which is something that I don't believe can be said for you. The crown owes him a debt of thanks for what he has done today, for the risks he has taken in coming to us to unveil this plot."

"So that's it, he walks away without penalty?"

"There has been penalty, there has been cost. One of our men died today," Stefan said hotly before the King could reply. Ben laid a gentle hand on his arm, a reminder to keep himself in check.

"Talking of cost, I trust you have your purse on you, Somerset. I recall that you owe these men a dozen silver crowns. Wasn't that the rest of the agreed price for delivery of my sons to Peveril?"

"You can't think..." Somerset blustered.

"Oh, I do think. You talk of honour, yet have shown that you do not know the meaning of the word. It's hard to tell which of you is the criminal here." The King held out his hand expectantly.

As Somerset reached for the purse hanging from his belt, Booker said, "Sire, if it pleases you, I'd not accept further payment in exchange for your word of safe conduct for me and my men tomorrow when we leave."

The King gave Booker's request consideration before replying. "No," he said bluntly. Booker gasped in dismay before the King continued. "You may have your safe conduct, but I insist that you receive payment for your services. Further, the crown will also pay an additional dozen silver crowns in appreciation."

"Thank you, Sire." Booker bowed deeply to the King.

After Derby returned, Somerset was escorted through the main hall to the castle's gatehouse, where he was to be kept confined under armed guard until the King was ready to leave.

"Sire, I've arranged for rooms for you and your sons for the night, there is a servant outside waiting to escort you. I will send someone along with the boys as soon as I return to my library."

"Very well, I will speak to you further in the morning." As the King left the room, the others bowed deeply.

"Well, I never in my life thought I'd meet the King," Booker said, after the door had shut. "This is going to be some tale we'll have for Sarah and the rest, hey lad." He nudged his elbow into Stefan's side as he spoke.

"It certainly will," Stefan said with a smile that didn't touch his eyes. The words had reminded him sharply that this was not his place, not his world. The brief time he'd had with Ben would come to an end tomorrow as they went their separate ways, and who knew how many years it would be this time before they saw each other again.

"Sir Benedict. I've a room for you above the great hall."

"Thank you," Ben replied. "What of the others?"

"I'm afraid we've no further spare rooms. Most of the other guests will bed down in the great hall. We will be laying out sleeping pallets shortly, if your men would like to join them?"

"They aren't my men, Sir William."

"We'll be fine in the stables, My Lord," Booker replied. "I'll go out to my men shortly. If you could send Wilf along to join us?"

"Of course," Derby replied.

"Stefan can share my chambers. We've much still to catch up on," Ben said suddenly, and Derby nodded. It wasn't at all unusual for nobles to have to share a room, after all.

They lay on their sides, facing each other, beneath the sheets of the large bed that took up much of the room. The heavy drapes that surrounded the bed were drawn tightly leaving next to no light.

“Thank you,” Stefan said softly, placing one hand on Ben’s chest. “For coming to help us.”

“I came for you; I will always come for you, Stef,” Ben replied wrapping his own hand around Stefan’s and holding it close. “I can’t believe that this is all we get. That tomorrow you will ride off with Booker and the others in one direction, and I will ride off in the other.”

“I know, but that is the way it has to be. You are a knight; you have a great future ahead of you, particularly now you have the King’s favour. I am an outlaw; I am lucky to have got through this with my life.”

“You don’t have to be an outlaw; you could come back with me.”

“No, Ben, I couldn’t,” Stefan said gently. “My family doesn’t want me, I have no money and no title, and I won’t be reliant on you or anyone else.”

“I just wish we could have more time.” Ben’s tone was wistful.

“We have tonight.” Stefan pulled his hand away from Ben’s and wriggled closer.

Ben’s arm snaked around him, his palm lying flat over the small of his back. Stefan raised his arm and hooked it around Ben’s neck, pulling his head down to meet his. For a second they stared deeply into each other’s eyes before their lips came together. The kiss was hard and desperate. Stefan’s arm tightened, holding Ben in place as he nipped at his lips, his tongue forcing its way into Ben’s mouth as he gasped. Stefan backed away, planting small kisses along Ben’s jaw line and down his neck, spending time nuzzling in the hollow at the base of it.

Stefan’s other hand reached down between them, finding Ben’s cock and slowly stroking the developing erection. His own shaft was already plumping up in response. Ben’s hand roamed down his back to his arse, pulling him even closer, so that his hand became trapped between them.

“Ben.” Stefan seemed to breathe his name rather than speak it as he broke their embrace. “Turn over; I want to hold you when you come.”

“Like this?” Ben rolled over onto his other side and Stefan pulled him back, spooning up against him and wrapping his arms around Ben’s waist.

“Just like this,” Stefan said, kissing Ben’s shoulder. He covered Ben’s body with his own like a blanket and, with one hand, he reached down over Ben’s hip to his groin, taking the heavy weight of his erection into his hand. Rocking

his own hips slightly, Stefan's cock nestled in the grove between the cheeks of Ben's arse. Ben's hand closed over his as he continued to pump him. Soon they built up a steady pace, Ben pushing his cock into their joined hands and then backing off, putting pressure on Stefan's shaft as he did. Stefan continued to kiss and suck at the back of his neck, until Ben turned his head, allowing Stefan to stretch up and capture his lips. Their tongues mimicked the movement of their hips, flicking from mouth to mouth, gradually getting faster as their arousal built. Finally, Ben gave a small cry, falling out of rhythm as he released his seed over their fists. Stefan pulled away from him slightly. Resting his forehead against Ben's back, he took his hand from Ben's spent cock and gripped tightly to his hip. He increased the speed of his thrusts until he reached completion, his cum spraying between them on his belly and Ben's arse.

For a while, their ragged breathing was the only sound in the curtained enclosure of the bed. When they'd both recovered, Stefan slipped from the bed to clean himself up, bringing back a wet cloth to wipe away all traces of their actions from Ben's body. Discarding the cloth, Stefan slipped back into bed as Ben turned to him. Entwining their arms around each other, with Stefan's head on Ben's shoulder, they drifted off to sleep.

Morning seemed to come far too quickly. Neither Ben nor Stefan spoke much over the small meal that had been sent to them to break their fast. Afterwards they made their way to the courtyard where David and Edwin had prepared the horses for their departure.

"You ready, lad?" Booker asked as they approached.

"Yes," Stefan said shortly, securing the travel bag to his saddle.

"You need to take leave of the King and Derby before you leave," Ben reminded them.

"We also need to find Wilf," Booker grumbled. "He didn't come to the stables last night and the guard wouldn't let me past the great hall to go find him."

"Come on then, the sooner we do this the sooner we can be on the road." There was no happiness in Ben's words.

They made their way back into the great hall where the King was seated at a long table on the dais, his sons on each side of him. At the far end, the Earl of Derby sat talking quietly to, of all people, Wilf. At their approach, the King rose to his feet.

“Your Majesty,” Ben said with a bow, the others copying him. “We come to ask permission to depart.”

“Very well, but I have some things for you before you go.” The King moved round the table and descended the three shallow steps to the floor before coming to stand in front of them. “Booker, I believe I promised you this.” Booker came forward and took the small purse the King held out to him.

“I am humbled by your generosity Sire,” Booker said as he took the gift and backed away with another bow.

“Sir Benedict, you have the appreciation of the royal household for your assistance in this matter. I would ask you to consider the suggestion contained in this letter.” Ben looked puzzled as he took the small envelope from the King, but bowed and moved away.

“Stefan of Gainsborough,” the King began. “Please approach.” Stefan made his way to where the King pointed in front of him and stopped. “My family is in your debt for the honour and courage you have shown. I thought long and hard about how I could suitably reward you for such loyalty to your King and in the end I came up with only one thing. Please kneel.”

Stefan sunk to one knee in front of the King who stepped forward. Behind him, he heard several people gasp.

“For services to the crown which we deem you to have performed with exceptional honour, I name thee a knight.” The King declared, striking Stefan forcefully against the left side of his neck with his fist. “Come, Sir Knight, in the name of God,” the King declared solemnly as Stefan rose somewhat shakily to his feet.

“Thank you, Sire,” he managed to say.

“May I wish you all Godspeed on your journey,” the King said by way of dismissal as he returned to join his sons on the dais.

Stefan followed Ben out of the hall, his mind spinning with what had just happened. Just outside, in the summer sunshine, Ben stopped and ripped open the envelope he'd been handed. Inside was another envelope and a small note.

“Oh!” Ben exclaimed as he read it.

“What is it?” Stefan asked.

“A suggestion, and, if we wish to use it, a letter of recommendation from the King.”

“A suggestion?”

“Yes, the King points out an alternative life for two landless young knights.”

“Go on,” Stefan said cautiously.

“He’s recommending us for entrance at Temple Bruer, to the Knights Templar. He’s enclosed a note for the Master.” Ben looked directly into Stefan’s eyes. “Come with me. We can be together.”

“I don’t know Ben; it’s a big step, leaving my friends, my family.”

“Please,” Ben said softly.

“Ready, lad?” Booker called over from where he was mounted on his horse.

“No, can you just give us a minute?” Stefan asked. He didn’t wait for Booker to reply, taking Ben by the hand he drew him over to the curtain wall, where they had privacy.

“Why, Ben? Why do you want me to come with you?” Stefan asked.

“Why do you think?”

“I don’t know. Honestly, I don’t. I am a bastard, an outlaw. I have no money, no lands, and no title. That the King bestowed a knighthood on me was an empty gesture. I live in a cave with a band of criminals. I’ve begged, I’ve stolen, and I’ve killed.”

“Yes, but ...”

“Let me finish,” Stefan said gently. “You’re a respected knight and member of an important family. You’ve fought for the King. You may have no land now, but that won’t always be the case. You’ll marry, settle down, and raise a family. I don’t want to stop you from becoming what you are meant to be. I will only hold you back, tarnish your reputation.”

“You may be all those things, but you are also loyal, dependable, honest and a good man to have at your back. Yes, I am a knight, but so are you now. I am as landless as you, and I don’t want to marry and settle down. If I thought that Booker and his men would accept me, I would go with you in an instant.”

“But why?”

“Because you are my family. My home. For the last five years it has always felt like something was missing from my life. Finding you again, being with

you, I feel whole again. It may be selfish, but I do not think I can give you up again.” Ben reached out and took Stefan’s hand. “Come with me?”

Numbed by Ben’s words, Stefan could only nod his agreement.

“Good,” Ben said with a radiant smile. “Let’s go break the news to Booker. Oh, and I suppose I shall have to pay him for that horse of yours. I’ve told you before, you can’t just go taking other people’s mounts, unless you want to hang as a horse thief.”

“Finally!” Booker exclaimed as they returned. “Come on Wilf, time to go,” he called across the courtyard.

Stefan turned to see Wilf was still standing in the doorway of the great hall talking earnestly to the Earl of Derby. He nodded and the Earl smiled, reaching out and gently touching his withered arm.

Wilf walked purposefully over to them and looked up at Booker, taking a deep breath before he spoke.

“I’m not coming.”

“What?”

“You heard me, I’m not coming. You’ve always said we had the free will to come and go as we please, to be part of the group or not as we want. Well, I’m sorry but I am not coming back with you. I’m staying here.”

“Staying here?” Booker echoed.

Stefan stole a glance back to the Earl, who was looking pensive as he watched Wilf. Making the connection between Wilf’s disappearance the night before and how tired both men looked, Stefan began to laugh, “Busy night, Wilf?” he asked.

“He’s got so many books,” Wilf said, as if this explained everything.

“And that’s why you’re staying?”

“Well, that’s one reason.” Wilf blushed, his eyes flicking to the Earl again.

Turning back to Booker, Stefan said, “Wilf’s not the only one. I’m sorry, but I’m not coming back either.”

“You’re not?” Booker didn’t look too surprised. “I don’t know. I take you in, feed you, clothe you, train you and what happens? The first opportunity, you’re running off after a better offer. How’s a poor old man to survive?”

“Here.” Ben threw a heavy purse towards him, “this might help.”

“It’s a start, lad.” Booker gave Ben a nod of approval.

“Thank you, Booker,” Stefan said sincerely. “For everything.”

“You know where to find us if you need us,” Booker said gruffly. Stefan gave him a sad smile and nodded.

Booker, David and Edwin left first, Booker still grumbling all the way out of earshot about being abandoned by them as he rode away down the valley. Stefan and Ben followed shortly after, riding side by side, turning to the North East where they would head into Lincolnshire and seek entrance to the Knights Templar. They looked back just once, taking a last chance to wave goodbye to Wilf, where he stood in the gatehouse entrance, before they rode together into their future.

The End

Author's Note

This is a fictional story and as such, I make no claims whatsoever to historical accuracy—indeed the Earldom of Gloucester was one of the King's estates, held at the time through his first wife. The Earl of Derby was a favourite of the king though he didn't actually become bailiff of Peveril Castle until much later. The Earldom of Somerset was vacant at the time and would remain so until given to John Beaufort in 1397.

The Gainsborough title is wholly fictional as, at the time, Gainsborough itself was a small hamlet. Most of the other places identified—towns, villages, and priories—did exist, and some of the facts are real—Doncaster did suffer a devastating fire in 1204 and Litchfield Cathedral was in the process of being built. Elmton Bluff does not exist—but anyone who knows the area might note a similarity to the nearby Creswell Craggs.

There is virtually no record of same sex relationships in the period this story is set, and those that do have questionable provenance. However, there are some documents which indicate that homosexuality was viewed by the church in the same way as any other sin. With penances given out as they would be for say, heterosexual sex outside of marriage. It wasn't until the late thirteenth century that the church started taking a much harder stance and imposing severe sentences, such as castration and dismemberment. Sodomy did not become a criminal offence under statute in England until 1533.

For those interested, Wilf suffers from a condition called, these days, Erb's Palsy. It is usually caused at birth when too much external pressure is put on the baby's neck during delivery, damaging the brachial plexus nerves and causing deformities to the arm.

Author Bio

K works by day in the legal profession, at the insistence of the many critters that let her live in their house on the understanding that she provides them with food, warmth and entertainment. When they allow her any spare time, she reads (anything that is put in front of her), knits (mainly socks), bakes (usually cupcakes), and occasionally scribbles stories. She hopes one day to be allowed a large shotgun and a decent recipe for rabbit stew to deal with the damn plot bunny!

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