

Battle Song

About the Author

Ian Ross was born in England, and currently lives in Bath.

His six-novel ‘Twilight of Empire’ series, set in the late Roman world, was published in the UK and worldwide between 2015 and 2019.

More recently, he has turned his attentions to the medieval period, and in particular the tumultuous era of the mid 13th Century.

Also by Ian Ross:

‘Twilight of Empire’ series:

War at the Edge of the World

Swords Around the Throne

Battle for Rome

The Mask of Command

Imperial Vengeance

Triumph in Dust

Battle Song

Ian Ross


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1258: Magna Carta has failed to limit the power of the king, and England is once more in turmoil. Led by Simon de Montfort, Earl of Leicester, a band of rebel noblemen compel Henry III to put his seal to a new document, the Provisions of Oxford, and to swear that he will govern only by the consent of parliament and his council of advisors.

At first it seems that their demands have been met. But in the summer of 1261, Henry persuades the Pope to absolve him from his oath, then overthrows the new rulings and seizes back absolute control of his realm. Only Simon de Montfort refuses to bow to the king's will, and departs for France in disgust.

By the following winter, Henry appears secure on his throne once more. Few are aware of the clouds gathering on the horizon. Fewer still can foresee the coming storm that will burst over England and engulf the kingdom in the violence of civil war.

PART ONE

Chapter 1

January 1262

The forty-sixth year of King Henry III

Epiphany's eve, and snow lay on the slope of the castle mount. Boisterous, alight with spiced ale, the three young men scraped it up with their hands and packed it onto the steps that descended from the upper hall. With their heels they rubbed it to a smooth grey slick. Then they leaned against the railing of the bridge that spanned the moat, breath steaming, curbing their laughter as they waited for their prey.

A figure appeared at the top of the steps, lean and hunched against the cutting breeze as he emerged from the shelter of the hall. He was a squire like them, eighteen years old, with cropped hair and a short tunic. Hurrying down the steps, his arms burdened with folded linens, he did not see the trap until it was too late. Then his foot skated out from beneath him and he was tumbling backwards, the stone step cracking into his spine as he fell. Their laughter was raucous in the frigid air.

'Look at him!' the biggest of the three cried. 'Look at him, writhing like a worm! What's this worm called?'

'His name's Adam de Norton,' said one of the others.

'Adam de Nought!' the big youth said with a grin, dropping from French into the English of the common people. 'Adam de *Nothing* – he comes from nothing! Was his father a *nothing*?'

‘A Welshman killed his father,’ the third of them said, stamping his feet to keep warm.

Sprawled on the icy steps, Adam de Norton felt the pain bursting through him. The humiliation too. The clean linens he had been carrying were scattered in the dirt and the muddy snow; they were cloths for the feasting tables, and he knew he would be punished for spoiling them. Then he heard their words, and fierce anger flared in his blood.

‘Let’s see if this worm can swim,’ the big youth was saying, eager in his malice. ‘Perhaps the moat’s a good place for him?’

‘Leave him, Gerard,’ one of the others said. By his tone, he was already having misgivings about this game. Adam turned his head and blinked; he had considered that one a friend.

The second youth he knew as well, a fellow squire of the household. But the leader, the one who had clearly bullied them into this sport, was a stranger to him. Gerard was stocky and thick-fleshed, with a red face and a snub nose and very small eyes. On his white tunic was sewn a red diagonal cross-lattice. A heraldic device, but Adam did not recognise it; Pleshey was full of strangers who had come for Earl Humphrey’s winter court.

Gerard advanced a pace closer. Adam was still lying on the steps, his muscles bunched. He felt the pain in his back and head, but the ache was fading fast. He knew that Gerard wanted more. He wanted to assert himself, and intimidate his followers.

‘Leave him – someone’s coming!’ said the third squire, but his friend remained sitting on the bridge railing, watching avidly. Gerard took another stamping step towards Adam, reaching down to seize his shoulder.

With a surge, Adam pushed himself upright, darting clear of the young man’s clumsy grab and getting his feet beneath him. Anger drove him; without thinking, he was swinging his fist with the momentum of his movement, a wide reaping blow that smacked meatily into the centre of Gerard’s face.

For a few long moments nobody made a sound. Birds cried harshly from along the moat. Woodsmoke scented the air. Gerard was still standing, bent forward and clutching his face. Spots of blood spattered at his feet, jewel-bright in the snow.

‘By *dode!*’ he managed to say. ‘He boke by *dode!*’

The two other squires were motionless, staring in fascinated shock. Then Gerard straightened, let his hands drop from his bloodied face, and roared as he flung himself at Adam.

They went down together, locked in combat. Adam was numb to Gerard’s savage blows on his chest and face. He knew he had to win. His adversary was two stone heavier than him and driven by pain and outraged pride, but Adam was agile and angry. He dragged his right arm free of Gerard’s crushing grip and slammed two punches into the man’s face, bursting the remains of his nose. His third blow struck his eye, and his fourth struck the stretched column of his throat. Gerard had his thumbs clamped over Adam’s face, trying to gouge at his eyes. But Adam had rolled on top now, shoving himself clear. He swung his fist, and slammed another blow into Gerard’s right eye socket. Blood sprayed across the dirty snow, and he felt his attacker’s grip slackening. Again he struck, and again, fury powering his blows.

‘Enough!’ somebody was shouting. ‘Enough! Stop this!’ Men were hurrying from all directions, their cloaks and mantles flapping in the cold air.

Adam barely felt the arms that hauled him out of the fight.

*

‘You don’t know who that was, do you?’ the cook’s mate said, sitting under the back porch of the kitchen plucking geese. ‘Or rather, *whose* that was . . . Whose squire, I mean.’

‘No,’ Adam replied. He set another log on the block, straightened, then swung the axe down. His whole body ached, but he

would not let it show. 'I don't care,' he said. The air in the kitchen yard was so cold it hurt to breathe, but he was sweating.

'You should care!' the cook's mate said. 'That lad you mauled yesterday, young sir, is squire to Robert de Dunstanville, that's who!'

Natural John, Earl Humphrey's fool, was squatting beside the basket of goose down, trailing his fingers in the soft feathers. He raised his head at the name and whined like a dog.

'Dunstanville, hah!' said the porter, rolling a keg from the bakehouse door. 'He's here too, is he?' He paused in his work to make a holy warding sign.

'I said I don't care,' Adam told them. He swung his axe again, splitting another log into shards. Chopping wood for the kitchen fire was well beneath even the lowest of squires, but this was his punishment for brawling on the eve of a holy day. A morning of menial chores, while the rest of the household rode out to the hunt.

'Quiet down, Natural John,' the cook's mate snapped. The fool was still whining, rocking on his haunches. 'Robert de Dunstanville,' he said to Adam, gesturing with a handful of feathers, 'is not a man to cross. There are tales about him.'

'Tales?' Adam said, finally relenting. He propped his axe on the chopping block and leaned on it, breathing hard. A blizzard of splintered wood lay all around him.

'They say he murdered a priest,' the porter said from the doorway. 'Cut him down right on the steps of his own altar! He was excommunicated for that, and would have been outlawed except for the pleas of Lord Humphrey and his grace the Earl of Winchester. But his lands were seized anyhow, and now he wanders the earth like a carrion dog . . .'

'They say,' the cook's mate broke in, lowering his voice, 'that he was taken captive by the Saracens, and they forced him to renounce Christ, and now he is the Devil's Man! You see that red lattice he bears as his emblem? That's the devil's fiery flaming griddle, that he uses to roast sinners down in hell!'

Natural John let out a keening wail and buried his head in the basket of goose down. Adam was unmoved. He remembered the red-on-white lattice from Gerard's tunic – he had seen it on a shield as well. A simple heraldic design that he knew well from his lessons. *Argent fretty gules*. Something else too: a lion on a red quarter, and a blue charge. *In a quadrant gules a lion passant gardant or, with a label of three points azure . . .*

'So why does Lord Humphrey admit him to his court?' Adam asked. He stooped down, feeling the ache of his bruised ribs, and set another log on the block.

'Because Robert de Dunstanville is Lord Humphrey's bastard offspring, that's why,' the porter said. 'Or *so they say*,' he added hurriedly, with a glance towards the gateway. 'Lord Humphrey got him on old Saer de Quincy's youngest daughter, who was wed to the brother of Walter de Dunstanville, the Baron of Castlecombe.'

Adam sniffed tightly, not wanting to appear impressed. The porter prided himself on his intimate knowledge of family connections among the nobility.

'Well, he'll be leaving again soon enough,' the cook's mate said, going back to his plucking with renewed vigour. 'Soon as the feasting's done he'll be away, and his misbegotten squire and light-fingered servants with him . . . Off to wave a lance on the tourney fields overseas – that's how he gains his bread nowadays, when he isn't living off his betters . . .'

'And God be praised once we're rid of them all,' the porter muttered.

But Adam was no longer listening. He split another log, burying the axe blade in the block, then pulled the steel free with a savage tug. Heat was flowing through him, despite the chill of the morning. Gerard was equally to blame for the fighting the day before, and everyone knew it, but only Adam was being punished. The other squire was a guest at Pleshey, and had Adam not struck the first blow? Besides, a badly broken nose and two black

eyes looked worse than mere bruises. Adam had spied the young man leaving the chapel after mass that morning, and his face had been shockingly battered and livid. Gerard had even had trouble mounting his horse. But he and his depraved master would ride with Earl Humphrey on the hunt, and only Adam would take the blame. The injustice was sickening.

For nearly five years Adam had served in the household of Earl Humphrey de Bohun, riding with the retinue between the earl's many estates and castles, but still he was the lowest of the squires. Lord Humphrey himself had scarcely said a word to him in all that time, except to issue orders. Often he seemed uncertain of Adam's name. Then again, why should he not be? There were over thirty squires in the household, some of them from great and powerful families. Adam himself had no great name, no fortune or ancestral estate. His father had been a common serjeant, knighted by the king for valour during the fighting in Aquitaine; he had died in Wales, serving in Lord Humphrey's retinue, and the earl had taken Adam in as a favour to his widowed mother. Now his mother too was dead, and strangers tenanted his father's lands.

Earlier that morning, watching from the sidelines as Lord Humphrey's household and guests rode out to the hunt, Adam had been all too aware of his own insignificance. He was closer to the servants than to the other squires. The noisy swirl of horses and dogs, shouting men and screeching horns had poured from the bailey yard, out across the bridge that spanned the moat and away into the dimness of a cold winter's dawn, leaving the castle to the servants and the womenfolk, and to Adam.

He took a few moments to collect up the cords of cut wood, his fingers too numbed to feel the splinters. The knuckles of both hands were still grazed, the skin split and blackened. He stacked the wood, sucked at his thick lip, then picked up the axe once more.

Counting the earl's household, the castle servants, the guests, and the resident paupers, well over two hundred people lived

within the walls and moats of Pleshey. Adam knew he could make no claims for special treatment. But it angered him that he should have to toil like a common labourer, while Gerard was pardoned. While a murderous Christ-despising renegade like Robert de Dunstanville was treated as an honoured guest, merely due to some accident of birth. What sort of world was this, he seethed, when the godless and the vile were honoured and rewarded, and the honest must suffer for the crimes of others? It was not the first time he had mulled over these things. But now his grievance had a sharply personal edge.

He set about the stack of wood once more, hacking the axe down into the block with a cold destructive fury. Only when he paused, blinking the sting of sweat from his eyes, did he notice the stillness around him.

Voices came from outside the gateway to the yard, and the sound of horses and dogs. It was far too early for the hunters to have returned; barely an hour had passed since their departure. Then two men came shoving through the gateway, bearing something between them. A dog weaved around their legs, tail thwacking. Another two men followed; it was a plank they were carrying. A plank with a body tied to it.

‘. . . fell from the saddle when he was struck by a branch,’ one of the men was saying to the group at the kitchen door. ‘His foot caught in the stirrup and the horse dragged him at the gallop . . . was dead by the time we got to him!’

‘What did they expect?’ another man said. ‘State of him this morning . . .’

The yard was crowded now, a throng pressing through the gateway and surrounding the body as the bearers set it down. Adam pushed his way between them, his heart tight in his chest. He already knew what he would see.

The body was battered almost beyond recognition, the face a black and bloody mask. Adam’s throat tightened as he imagined what had happened: the rider dragged by the panicked horse,

whipped and smashed by thorns and tree-trunks, likely kicked by the hooves too. With any luck his neck had snapped immediately. The men crowding round the body hissed and sucked their teeth. Natural John was capering in the kitchen doorway, wailing in anguish.

But what drew Adam's eye was the badge stitched to the dead man's breast. A diagonal red lattice on white. *Argent fretty gules*.

'Poor lad could barely see where he was riding anyway,' somebody said. 'Eyes swollen half shut, and not in his right senses either. They should never have allowed it, after the pummelling he took yesterday . . .'

And as the guilt consumed him, Adam felt himself drawing back from the throng, letting them close in and block the sight of Gerard's mangled body. The axe hung loose from his fist, and when he glanced to his right he saw a group of riders outside the gateway to the yard, peering in. One of them, wrapped in a thick cloak, stared back at him with accusation in his eyes. A face like a blade, and a short pointed beard. Adam's blood slowed. He knew who this must be.

Robert de Dunstanville. *The Devil's Man*.

*

The great hall of Pleshey Castle was warm and smoky, the glow of the fire in the central hearth driving back the encroaching gloom of winter. Three long trestle tables stood around the hearth, each covered with linens laundered to fresh whiteness, and the household and guests filled the benches. Adam de Norton took his place on the fourth side of the long hall, between the doors, where the meats were laid to be dressed and carved. He was one of four squires appointed to serve the high table, where Lord Humphrey himself sat. Despite the tragic events of the morning, and the premature end of the hunt, Adam seemed to have been forgiven his lapse of the day before.

‘Did you see him though, when they brought him in?’ whispered the squire beside him. Ralph de Tosny was one of the few in the household that Adam considered a friend.

‘Briefly,’ he said, wincing.

‘I was away with the leading hunt,’ Ralph whispered. ‘But I heard what had happened. Lord Humphrey was not at all happy – they’d only just sounded the chase, and in the confusion the dogs lost the spoor—’

Then the steward hissed for them to be silent.

A blart of noise, and a group filed into the hall bearing the main course between them. Two servants carried the massive platter holding the roast boar, decked with festive holly and ribbons in the Bohun colours of blue, white and gold. Not a real wild boar, of course – such creatures were seldom to be found in England nowadays, even in the game parks of great magnates – but a huge pig dressed to look like one. Its bulging flanks dripped with honey, and its gaping snout was stuffed with a blackened apple. Musicians accompanied the platter-bearers on bagpipes, vielle and tabor as they made a round of the hall, circling the central hearth to display the boar to the diners, before taking it back to the table to be carved and dressed with piquant sauces. Adam was uncomfortably reminded of the dead man tied to the plank that morning; surely others made the connection, but none said a word about it. He tried to put the image from his mind as he carved the meat and carried the platter up to the high table.

Lord Humphrey de Bohun, Earl of Hereford and Essex, Constable of England and one of the greatest magnates in the kingdom, was in his mid-fifties, but still a powerful man and a famed warrior. He gripped his wine goblet with a corded hand, and scrutinised his assembled guests through hard and narrowed eyes. Only occasionally did his lips twitch a smile, as some words of jest or praise reached him. He spared not a glance as Adam stepped up with the platter and served the meats; Adam was glad

of that, and gladder still to return to his place at the far end of the hall.

Further courses were already arriving from the kitchens. Besides the boar-pig there were rolls of stuffed venison, a rack of roasted geese and ducks, veal rolled in almonds, roast herons and partridges, glazed sheep's heads and lark's tongues in jelly, and pies stuffed with game and fowl. A torrent of meats, as if all the beasts of the wild and the birds of the air had hurried forth to fill the gullets of the diners. Between courses, the squires made their rounds with silver ewers of water and jugs of wine, fresh white loaves still warm from the ovens, and the big voider baskets to collect the uneaten food and dripping trenchers. Lord Humphrey's collection of paupers were already gathered in the kitchen yard, waiting for their allocation of alms from the master's table.

Soon the feasting would be done. The hippocras and wafers would be served, Natural John would appear in one of his amusing costumes, and then Adam himself could eat. Perhaps before the hall was cleared there would be music, or a poet to recite tales of chivalry. Lord Humphrey enjoyed hearing singing after dinner, particularly rousing songs, so everyone could join in the chorus. But Adam had always preferred to hear stories; since childhood he had loved the romances of Arthur and his knights, of Roland and Alexander, and of Godfrey de Bouillon.

As a boy, listening to the poets in the warm shadows of the hall, he would let his mind drift to scenes of distant lands and great deeds of prowess, beautiful ladies and chivalric champions. Picturing the young Roland, knighted by Charlemagne on the battlefield of Aspremont and girded with the sword Durendal that he had captured from the King of the Saracens, he would imagine becoming such a champion himself. A true heart, he had told himself, and firm convictions could win great rewards on earth besides in heaven. Childish fantasies, they seemed to him now. Roland, he guessed, had never split his knuckles brawling

in the dirt. Godfrey de Bouillon had never been ordered to chop firewood either.

Even to be knighted, Adam thought, was a near-impossible dream. Knighthood had to be *earned*. And where were the opportunities for that, in the packed clamour of Earl Humphrey's court? He knew of men who had served twenty years or more as squires and had never been granted the accolade. That was his own likely fate, he told himself, and found a strange grim pleasure in the bleakness of his mood.

Ralph's nudge broke him from his thoughts. 'The lord's companions are running short,' the other squire whispered. 'I'll take the wine, you carve.'

Adam felt the heat from the fire on his back as he took up the knives and carved the slices of pork. His senses were flooded with the scents of roasted meat, and his empty stomach tightened. When the platter was filled he dressed it with a ladle of peppery sauce and carried it up to the high table. Lord Humphrey was listening to his wife, the countess, with his chancellor leaning across to offer advice. Adam hung back, waiting for their hushed conference to be concluded.

'But I'd heard,' a voice said across the hall, 'that the King of France had prohibited the sport – is that not so?'

'He did, last year,' another voice said, and Adam's shoulders tensed. He had been trying not to glance in the direction of the right-hand table, but he knew to whom that bitter, cynical-sounding voice must belong. 'At the time, King Louis believed that the Pope was about to call a new expedition to the Holy Lands. But now the Pope is dead, there is no new expedition, and doubtless the ban will be lifted before long. It only covers the French crown domains anyway – tournaments continue in the county of Champagne, and in Flanders and Burgundy, and the Empire too of course.'

'Well, I consider King Louis very wise in banning them,' one of the priests at the table primly declared, 'and our King Henry

likewise. As our holy father the Pope says, tournaments are nothing but vanity for the participants, and the cause of turbulence and unnecessary bloodshed too . . .’

‘And the Pope knows more than most about causing turbulence and unnecessary bloodshed, I suppose,’ Robert de Dunstanville said with a smile.

Before the priest could summon a reply, Adam saw that the countess and the chancellor had ceased their deliberations. He stepped up quickly to the high table and began serving the meat onto the dish that Lord Humphrey shared with his wife. After a few slices, the earl raised his hand, then gestured to one of the side tables. ‘Sir Robert,’ he called. ‘Some meat from my platter?’

Adam tensed, willing himself to appear unconcerned as he passed down the right-hand table to stand before Robert de Dunstanville. He looked down as he served the meat and caught the man’s narrowed eye. Then, as he made to step back, de Dunstanville flashed out his hand and seized Adam’s wrist in a clamping grip. He twisted his arm, turning Adam’s hand to expose the battered knuckles.

‘So,’ he said, with a sneer in his voice. He was facing the fire, but Adam’s shadow cloaked him in darkness. His large eating knife lay beside his trencher.

‘I was sorry to hear of what happened to your squire, sir,’ Adam managed to say.

‘Were you?’ de Dunstanville replied quietly, still gripping Adam by the wrist. ‘Perhaps you were. But perhaps you revelled in it a little too, hmm? Any man would, I think.’

Abruptly he released his grip, and Adam stepped back from the table. ‘Bring me wine,’ the knight told him, raising his empty cup. ‘And I want to see you pour it yourself.’

Quickly Adam paced back down the hall and took the silver jug of wine from Ralph. By the time he returned, the conversation had resumed along the table.

‘Lord Edward is in France now, I believe?’ one man said. ‘Or he will be soon – he’s been wintering in Gascony, I think. He’ll surely be in Burgundy for the tournaments.’

Adam stepped up to the table once more; Robert de Dunstanville ignored him as he poured the wine.

‘And you’ll meet with him while you’re overseas?’ another man asked the knight.

‘If our paths should cross, I shall not avoid him, no.’

The cup was filled, and Adam made to turn away, but de Dunstanville halted him with a raised finger, still not glancing in his direction.

‘And what of our other . . . *friend*, who is in France?’ Earl Humphrey said from the high table. The other voices around the hall fell abruptly silent. ‘Will you see him too?’

‘I cannot say, my lord,’ de Dunstanville said with a shrug. ‘I believe Simon de Montfort is currently a guest of the King of France, and keeps to his estates.’

‘Just be careful,’ Earl Humphrey said, with a vague circling motion of his hand. Adam recalled the story the servants had told, that Robert de Dunstanville was their lord’s bastard son. ‘Avoid becoming embroiled in any schemes,’ the earl went on. ‘Avoid *mischief*, Robert. I can say no more to you.’

The knight inclined his head in polite acknowledgement. Adam was already backing away along the table, the wine jug clasped before him.

‘Well, you need not worry,’ de Dunstanville said with a laugh. ‘I shall not be tourneying at all in my present condition! As you see, my lord, as of today I have no squire. What use is a tourneying knight without a squire?’

‘A sad business,’ Earl Humphrey gruffly agreed. ‘Unfortunate! I feel, of course, somewhat responsible. No, really . . .’ he went on, as a chorus of dissenting voices came from the other tables. ‘Really, I would not allow a guest to leave here inconvenienced or unprepared, after such a sad event. That one – you there!’

With a tight shock, Adam realised that the earl was gesturing towards him.

‘We might hold him too at least partly responsible,’ he said to Robert de Dunstanville. ‘Would he serve as your squire in the place of the other?’

Adam turned in surprise and the knight’s searching gaze caught him once more.

‘Maybe,’ de Dunstanville said. ‘He looks a little scrawny for his age. But he bested my squire Gerard, who was no kitten. How clever is he at his duties?’

‘Not for me to say,’ Earl Humphrey replied. ‘Marshal,’ he called down the table, ‘how proficient is the lad?’

The marshal of the household gave Adam an appraising squint. ‘Oh, he knows a horse from a hound,’ he said. ‘And his skill at arms is no worse than the rest. Which is to say, good enough.’

‘Then maybe he’ll suffice,’ de Dunstanville said with a shrug.

And Adam stood motionless, conscious suddenly of the gathering silence around him, the throng at the tables all staring at him, the faint crack and hiss of the burning wood in the central hearth. And he knew, as the pulse quickened in his throat and his chest grew tight, that his life was now in the hands of Robert de Dunstanville.

Chapter 2

They left Pleshey before daybreak and rode westwards on lanes of frozen mud. The pale light of dawn exposed a flat landscape under hoarfrost, bare black trees scratching the sky, mist rising from the thawing fields. A few hooded figures in the middle distance gathered wood or hacked at the soil, but otherwise the world appeared deserted. Robert de Dunstanville rode at the head of his little retinue on a palfrey, with his iron-grey destrier thudding along beside him. Adam followed, on a plain rouncey that Lord Humphrey had provided from his own stable. Two sumpter horses came behind him laden with baggage, led by a weaselly-looking servant named Wilecok. At the rear upon a heavy cob was de Dunstanville's serjeant, a weathered man-at-arms of uncertain age called John Chyld. His chin was thick with greying bristles, he wore a grimy linen coif pulled down to his eyes, and as he rode he chewed on a roasted pig's foot taken from the kitchens.

There had been no ceremony to their departure. The castle had still been in darkness when they left, most of the occupants wrapped in their bedrolls. Only Natural John had come forth to bid Adam a stammering farewell – fitting that Lord Humphrey's fool was the only member of the household to do so. Adam was strangely moved all the same. In the four days since the Epiphany

feast, he had felt himself frozen out of the community at Pleshey. Even former friends like Ralph had seemed to avoid him, as if he were already tainted by whatever curse or malediction Robert de Dunstanville bore. As if his soul were already blackened.

Now Adam could observe him more closely, he saw that his new master was around thirty years old, and as lean and hard as a rawhide strap. He was dressed in cloak and tunic of common dark blue serge, but the sword belted at his side had a silvered hilt and fittings. As he rode he tugged and teased at his short beard, or stroked at his moustaches with his thumb, as if he were lost in complex thoughts. He said nothing, to Adam or to anyone else, for the first few hours. Only when they were passing through Roding did he call a halt to rest the horses and break their fast.

‘So,’ he announced, as they sheltered in the lee of a black-thorn thicket and chewed on their tough bread and smoked ham. ‘You’ll have heard folk talking about me, back at Pleshey. What did they say?’

Adam merely shrugged. He heard John Chyld make a kissing sound against his teeth, and Wilecok was grinning to himself. But if the knight could be taciturn, so could he.

‘You’re right to be wary of me, boy,’ Robert de Dunstanville said, in a low tone. ‘I’m a man of fierce and bloody temper, and I do not like to be crossed. But if there are lies being told of me, I want to know of them. So – I asked you a question. Speak.’

I will not fear this man, Adam told himself. I will not let him intimidate me.

‘They say,’ he replied, the words drying his mouth, ‘that you murdered a priest. And you’re excommunicated.’

Sir Robert barked a laugh. ‘That priest deserved what he got!’ he said. ‘He disrespected my late wife’s memory. The excommunication I paid off with a pilgrimage to Pontigny last year. What else?’

‘They say you were a captive of the Saracens. And they forced you to deny Christ.’

For a moment Sir Robert appeared to consider this. 'True enough, I was,' he said with a sniff. 'But the Saracens never tried to break my faith. The clergy of this very kingdom have tested it sorely indeed though.'

John Chyld let out a wheezing laugh and shook his head again.

'And they say . . .' Adam blurted out, feeling an angry heat rising through him, 'that your lands were seized from you, and you roam the earth like . . . like a carrion dog.'

Robert de Dunstanville gave no reply. He stood plucking and teasing at his beard, frowning. 'A carrion dog, eh?' he said at last. 'Who says this? The household knights? The other squires? Who?'

'Everyone says it,' Adam told him quietly, hoping that none would catch the lie.

'Well, damn them all to hell then!' de Dunstanville said, baring his teeth in a mirthless grin. 'God's death, let them say what they like! My lands were seized unjustly, and against all laws and liberties – they know it, and Lord Humphrey knows it too.'

Wilecok was already packing the food and adjusting the baggage. John Chyld had swung himself back into the saddle. But Sir Robert was not finished. 'A barony I had of my late wife,' he told Adam, in a strangely mild tone. 'But I lost it when she died. My own estate though, a sweet manor that was my birthright, was taken from me by the connivance of the Bishop of Hereford – a shepherd who devours his own sheep! – and William de Valence, Earl of Pembroke, the king's half-brother . . . You know of them?'

'I've heard their names spoken,' Adam replied, uncertain.

'Foreign vermin, both of them,' de Dunstanville said, 'that infest the court of our king, snatching whatever they can. Vermin, who should be hunted with dogs! And yet good men are blamed for their wiles and ruses.'

Then before Adam could respond he gave an abrupt gesture and mounted his horse. 'Many miles to Ware yet,' he declared, 'and dusk falls early.'

They rode onward, an hour and then another, their horses' hooves thudding on the road while the wind blustered around them and rattled the thin branches of the trees. They were almost at Wydford before Sir Robert spoke again.

'You must be disappointed, I suppose,' he said over his shoulder as he rode. 'You must have expected better prospects, eh? Maybe thought you'd be squire to some great lord in time, one like your own father maybe, with wide estates to inherit?'

'I have no estates,' Adam said bleakly. 'My father died, and my mother married Hugh de Brayboef. Now she's dead too, and the lands my father held of the king were granted to him and his sons.'

'Brayboef?' Robert frowned. 'I know of him. A creature of Peter de Savoy, is he not? Another foreign court favourite! Well, so we're well suited – a landless knight and a landless squire, quite alike.'

'I'm not like you at all,' Adam said, anger tightening his shoulders. 'I never murdered anyone, let alone a priest!'

'I didn't *murder* the priest – Christ's bones! I said he *deserved to die*, not that I'd killed him. His death was an accident, as the inquest found.'

Adam grunted, uncertain. He still could not tell whether de Dunstanville was genuinely angered or just taunting him.

'Anyway, what of my squire, Gerard?' the knight said, a little further down the road. 'You murdered him, didn't you?'

'I did not!' Adam said. 'His death was an accident – everyone knows it . . .'

'But if you didn't kill him directly, you'd have liked to have done, isn't that so? It felt good, didn't it, beating him like that? Think of it – all those years of anger and frustration breaking forth . . .'

'No!' Adam said, appalled by the suggestion. 'It wasn't like that at all! He mocked me . . .'

'Oh, he mocked you!' Sir Robert said with a laugh. 'And forbearance is no longer considered a virtue?'

‘He mocked my *father!*’ Adam said. As the chill wind carried away his words he felt a sudden remorse pouring through him. He should not have allowed himself to be provoked. De Dunstanville had turned his head, and Adam was sure the knight was laughing at him. But when he looked back again a little further down the road, his face was grave.

‘Listen to me,’ he told Adam. ‘I don’t blame you for what you did. Maybe I’d have done the same. I’m not much good at turning the other cheek. But we’re more alike than you’ll admit, you and I. And there are plenty more like us.’

His voice was bitter, every word sawing like a notched blade. ‘Justice is dead in this kingdom,’ de Dunstanville said. ‘King Henry pours gifts and favours into the hands of his family and his foreign courtiers, and squanders the kingdom’s wealth on foolish schemes, while honest men must live in shame . . .’

Sir Robert bit a curse between his teeth, then punched his fist into his gloved palm. ‘There’s a fury growing in England now,’ he said. ‘A fury that none shall suppress – and by God’s death, when it breaks forth it will shake the throne. And the man who sits upon it.’

Adam sat upright in the saddle, surprised by the passion of de Dunstanville’s words. He had heard such things said now and again by the knights of Earl Humphrey’s household, but always in mutters and never with such force and clarity. The political strife that had raged through the kingdom these last four years, the struggles for supremacy and control between King Henry and his barons and great magnates, had seemed far above his head. But to speak such treason openly was surely reckless, even dangerous.

‘Lord Humphrey was of a like mind once,’ de Dunstanville went on, ‘but he’s too canny to speak of these matters now. No, these days he keeps his jaw clamped tight against anything that might sound like sedition. Only fierce loyalty to the crown will pass his lips! The times are “too delicately balanced”, he likes to say. But there are others with more fire in their marrow.’

And Adam recalled the talk around the tables at the feast of Epiphany – of Lord Edward, the king’s son, and of the other ‘friend in France’, as Lord Humphrey had called him. Just for a few moments, he sensed the distant loom of great events and felt a nervous thrill pass through him. When he glanced over his shoulder he saw John Chyld watching him with a hard and calculating eye.

‘However,’ Sir Robert announced with a forced grin, ‘we shall see none of this, as we’ll be far away overseas, eh! Now let’s get on, there’s only an hour or so until dusk.’

Adam thought on his strange speech as they rode. The words stirred something in him that he did not recognise, a yearning for something he had never known and could not quite discern. But still there was a cold savagery in Robert de Dunstanville’s attitudes, in his scorn for finer feelings, that repulsed Adam. No, he told himself – the knight was a ranting fool, blaming others for his mistakes and misfortunes. Never would Adam accompany him to France, or anywhere else. Lord Humphrey had committed him to indentured service as a squire, but at the first opportunity he would slip away from de Dunstanville and his little retinue and take his chances alone, far away from here. He had relatives in Hampshire and Wiltshire, and during his time in Lord Humphrey’s household he had seen a lot of the Welsh Marches – the marcher barons were always eager for trained men-at-arms and would ask few questions about his background. Fate had made him an outcast, but from now on he would make a new fate of his own.

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The daylight was almost gone by the time they reached the town of Ware, and a cold hard wind was buffeting in from the north. Adam had passed through the place several times with Lord Humphrey’s retinue, but never stayed the night there. The bridge

at Ware spanned the river Lea and carried the old straight road to London; Robert de Dunstanville took a few moments inspecting it, muttering to himself, and then they rode on through the marketplace towards the priory. In gathering darkness they turned off the road and through a gateway, and Adam saw the shape of a large house before him, a hall with a two-storey chamber at one end and kitchens and outbuildings at the other. As they dismounted in the yard, men came from the porch to greet them. There was firelight from within, and the smell of food; but when he made to follow the others inside, Sir Robert snapped his fingers and pointed towards the stables.

‘You’ll tend to the horses,’ he ordered. ‘You know how to do that?’

‘Of course,’ Adam muttered grudgingly, then gathered the reins and followed one of the servants across the gloom of the yard. Wilecok was already attending to the baggage animals, the cob and his own pony, but Adam was left with de Dunstanville’s destrier and the other two saddlehorses. In the gloom of the stable, lit only by a single covered lantern, he unsaddled the animals, removed bits and bridles, combed and rubbed them down, then saw to their feed and water. He had worked with horses most of his life, and he knew enough to be careful around the destrier. The animal seemed as restive and ill-tempered as his master, and it took some time before Adam could win its trust sufficiently to complete his chores. By then it was fully dark outside, and the wind was whining around the eaves of the hall as Adam ran hunched across the yard to the warmth of the porch.

He found Robert de Dunstanville already at his supper, seated at the long table at the far end of the hall, beyond the central hearth. There were two young ladies with them – or girls, perhaps, Adam realised as he approached. Both were well dressed, in fur-trimmed clothes, and he bowed to them as he approached the table. A shield hung on the wall behind them, painted with a device he did not recognise: red with a white cinquefoil.

‘This is Adam, my new squire,’ Sir Robert said to the ladies, with a brief gesture. Then he motioned Adam to sit at the far end of the table and ordered the servants to bring him food and drink.

A pair of friars, the steward, and the bailiff of the estate were already seated, and shunted along the benches to give Adam room at the table. There was an older woman as well, dressed like a nun in plain clothes and a tight headscarf. The servants brought Adam a thick bread trencher, a white roll, a dish of potage with pork and venison, and a heavy flagon of fresh ale. Nobody spoke, and for a while Adam ate in glad silence, feeling the fire’s warmth on his back and the food spreading comfort through his body.

‘The bridge is damaged again, I see,’ Robert said to the steward, pushing his empty dish aside. The fire crackled behind them, and his voice echoed slightly in the dark hall.

‘Yes, sir – it was the men of Hertford,’ the steward said, with an apologetic wince. ‘They often come in the night and try to dig up the roadway or collapse the parapets. They argue that our bridge drains all the trade from theirs, and their tolls are suffering.’

‘Your bridge is far better placed, that’s why,’ de Dunstanville said. ‘And this manor needs those tolls. I’ll ride over to Hertford in the morning with John Chyld and pull their ears, and see they give you no further trouble.’

Now that his immediate hunger was sated, Adam turned his attention to the two women that sat with Sir Robert at the far end of the table. They appeared to be sisters. One was only a child, twelve or so, with flaming red hair in a thick plait and an open, frank expression. The other was perhaps two years younger than Adam. She wore her hair bound in a simple linen fillet, with twin braids the colour of dark copper hanging to her shoulders. There was something aloof and rather distant in the curve of her lips and her hooded eyes. On one finger she wore a gold ring,

enamelled with the same white cinquefoil on red as the shield on the wall behind her. Clearly neither girl was married, though both were of an age to be wed. There was no sign of a senior man around the house, no father or uncle to watch over them, and the older woman was apparently not their mother. What, Adam wondered, were they doing here, living alone in such a place? And why was the disreputable Robert de Dunstanville looking so comfortable at their table?

He felt a spike of quick jealousy, and wished it were he that sat with the women so companionably. He was watching the older girl, almost nervous, hoping and fearing that she might glance in his direction. But instead it was the younger one who spoke.

‘What happened to your other squire?’ she asked Robert.

‘Sadly he suffered an accident,’ the knight said. Adam could almost detect the sneer in his voice. ‘He went on to his eternal reward, I’m afraid.’

The younger girl peered at Adam, lips pursed. ‘I didn’t like the old squire,’ she said. ‘He resembled a pig, and made a panting sound through his mouth when he breathed.’

Her sister turned, frowning, and flicked the girl on the shoulder.

‘My dear and well-beloved cousins,’ Robert said to Adam, in a weary drawl, nodding to them both. ‘The ladies Hawise and Joane de Quincy. Hopefully we will not have to abuse the hospitality of their house for too long.’

Adam stood up, the bench shunting noisily from beneath him, and bowed again. The younger girl, Hawise, stifled a laugh. Adam’s jealousy at de Dunstanville’s ease and confidence redoubled.

Shortly afterwards the servants came to clear the dishes from the table, snuff the candles and lower the cover over the hearth fire for the night. The two ladies climbed the stairs at the back of the hall to the solar; Adam almost expected Sir Robert to follow them, but instead the knight kicked out his bedroll on the floor

beside the hearth and wrapped himself in his blankets with his sword at his side. Soon enough he was snoring, with the snores of Wilecok, John Chyld and the servants echoing from the far end of the hall.

Adam lay a while in wakefulness, feeling the ebbing heat from the hearth and the black cold seeping in from the winter night. When he closed his eyes, he saw in his mind the young woman's pale oval face, the hooded eyes, the simple elegance of her gestures. She had not spoken a word, and it grieved him that he had not heard her voice. Snapping back from the brink of fantasy, he told himself not to be foolish. Weariness fogged his mind, and he slipped down into sleep.

A screen of leaves opened before him like a curtain, and he walked from dense darkness into sunlight. He was in a meadow beside a brook; a moment later he recognised the place. Here was the mill, and the lower paddock, the strip fields and the wooded flank of the hill dark above them. Years had passed since he was last here, but Adam knew it all so well: his father's old manor, where he was born and grew up. Joy flooded through him as he saw the path through the meadow leading him up towards the moated enclosure. There was the manor house, the little chapel and the dovecot, the stables and barn. And inside the house, Adam knew as he hurried closer, his mother would be waiting for him. His father would be in the upper paddock, perhaps, exercising the horses, or out hunting along the valley, but soon he would return.

Adam's mind stilled, and he noticed the silence all around him. No figure moved in the sun-drenched countryside. No bird flew overhead. No smoke curled from the thatch of the kitchen or the main house. All was empty – all was dead. Gripped by sudden horror, Adam tried to turn back. But the dream was carrying him onward, towards the dead house and the darkness within, the scene of all he had lost . . .

He awoke with a cry choking his throat. *Ware*, he told himself – he was at Ware, sleeping on the floor beside the dying fire in the hearth. The strange surroundings had conjured the dream from his disturbed mind, that was all. But his heart was beating fast, and he lay a long time in the cold gloom before sleep engulfed him once more.