



AN ENDLESS EXILE

A NOVEL BY
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Present

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Chapter 1

“Hereward is dead.”

Whatever I had expected of my husband’s nephew, rousing my household in the middle of the night to throw his dripping person and its accompanying blast of cold air at my feet, it was not that. Even though there can have been few men more likely to die.

Just for a moment, I could only stare at the bent, agitated head, watching the rivulets of water run down his hair to join the thousand others on his sodden cloak. By the trembling, almost sinister flame of my porter’s lamp, I could even see the little pool of water forming between us. Just for a moment, that fascinated me too.

Hereward is dead. Was this news, then, already galloping and spreading under the night-stars? Northwards, perhaps, to York and beyond, to his sister and to his erstwhile Danish friends of Northumbria. West too, to the old rebels of the Welsh marches – would Edric the Wild weep for the ally he had never met? South, probably, to the King in London or Winchester or wherever he was, and

whatever pity was in his heart today. And eastward – was it eastward? – among the fens which had always been his. Were his people, the lost and despairing, loud in lament for their last great hero? Wildly – or silently – inconsolable? Or did they close their eyes in peace, breathe a mighty sigh of collective relief and say, “Thank God it is over at last: Hereward is dead.”

Perhaps, in the end, it would even be the Normans who mourned most for their new and prestigious friend. Or were the present masters of this land too full of such an unexpected triumph over their one-time enemy? An enemy who could never, after all, have become one of them; only a dangerous rival. Perhaps they would be unable to believe their luck, passing on the news in superstitious whispers through the great estates and courts of England and Normandy, that Hereward the Exile, the Outlaw, was dead.

There is a dreadful finality about that word. Even through the detached ramblings of my mind, I was aware of it. Gradually too, I became aware of the pain in my hand where Siward, my husband’s nephew, was pressing it into his face. He was kneeling still at my bare, icy feet as though begging forgiveness for the news he bore, and in his own torment of grief – or his completely misplaced fear for mine – gentleness was forgotten.

Still distractedly, I began to draw my fingers free. They were wet. Releasing me, Siward dashed his hands across his eyes, and rose slowly to his feet,

sword clanking dully at his belt and brushing against the fur cloak I had dragged around my chemise to receive him. In the dimly flickering light of the lamp that my porter held unsteadily above us, the skin of his still young face looked taut and sickly, the hollows around his exhausted eyes black. The tangled mass of fair hair, palely imitating his uncle's, fell damply forward over one cheek; then, impatiently, he pushed it back, the better to peer at me, I think, for signs of emotional disintegration. Baffled, I gazed silently back at him until in pity he lifted both arms for me.

Instinctively, I stepped backwards out of his reach, and as his arms fell again, a frown of puzzlement creased his low brow.

“Torfrida, he is dead,” he repeated deliberately, as if to a child, or to an imbecile who could not understand simple words. “Hereward, your husband, is dead.”

And at last the breath seemed to seep back into my body.

“Good,” I said with satisfaction. “Then I can go home to Bourne.”

* * * *

In the first light of a grey, wintry morning, I prepared with some care for my ride from Lincoln to Bourne. I dressed in a warm woollen gown of bright, sky blue, over a fine yellow under-dress. Beneath my veil, which was circled with a braided ribbon of the same blue and yellow, my hair was as neatly and becom-

ingly pinned as I could make it. I had no intention of being surprised by anyone at any time.

That done, I drew the sable travelling cloak about me and regarded my reflection in the sheet of polished bronze which was the one extravagance of my solitary, sterile bed-chamber. My face was too thin now, marked by life like the grey streaks in my once jet-black hair. I looked, in fact, disconcertingly frail. My eyes, too large and bright for that face, stared back at me, half-frightened, half-excited; and in my breast my heart beat and beat and beat.

“Stop it, Torfrida,” I whispered. “Stop it . . .”

Then, taking a deep breath, I rose and went to collect my children. I was thirty-two years old, and felt as if I were waking up after a long, expectant sleep.

* * * *

The journey was accomplished mostly in uncomfortable silence, at least after we had drawn away from the children. Siward the White, torn between his own grief and an increasingly desperate, if covert, search for signs of mine, began to withdraw even further into his own private misery. I could not help that. It was not the time to try. For my own part, I think I sang a little, snatches of a merry French song that brought Siward’s eyes round to me with an astonishment that was far from admiring.

I smiled at him, beatifically, and twisted back in the saddle to give one last wave to the children. They

were riding two ponies – Frida on one, the two little boys together on the other – in company with their nurse and most of the men-at-arms. We had agreed that they would go directly to Folkingham, to Gilbert of Ghent, their father’s godfather, while I insisted on riding ahead with Siward the White, to visit Bourne on the way. Siward said it was not fit for me. It was where Hereward had been killed.

“Do they know?” Siward asked abruptly.

“Know what?” I asked vaguely, straightening in my saddle, and adjusting the warm, soft cloak at my throat.

Siward said sharply, “That their father is dead, of course!”

“Oh no. I see no point in spoiling their treat. They are going to see their grandmother and Aunt Lucy, and stay at Uncle Gilbert’s hall; and Aunt Matilda will spoil them mercilessly. Now, Siward, add to *my* personal well-being: *who* had the ultimate honour of killing Hereward?”

This time he did not even try to keep the accusation out of his face or voice.

“The *honour* of killing your husband? Some treacherous Norman knights, purporting to be his friends! They were dining with him – it was the lady Aediva’s birthday feast – when their servants, who had hidden weapons under their clothes, fell on his men and . . .”

“Yes, so you told me last night,” I interrupted, waving that aside. “But who were they?”

“I don’t know,” Siward said bitterly. “I was not there. The assassins had fled by the time we came to his rescue. But it was Deda who escorted Aediva and Lucy to safety at Folkingham.”

My lip twitched as I regarded his averted face. “Deda,” I said with blatant mockery. “*Deda* killed Hereward?”

“Hardly!” said Siward sharply, displeased all over again by the flippancy of my tone. Well, what did he expect? “From all I can gather, Deda did everything possible to try and stop the fight. But I doubt the same could be said for that swaggering fool, Asselin!”

I had no quarrel with that description, but glancing up at him from under my lashes, I pointed out, “You told me they fled before you got to them.”

Siward’s pale skin flushed, but his eyes met mine squarely. “I heard from those who survived.”

“Yes,” I agreed evenly. “I expect you did.”

“Torfrida!”

I lifted my brows at him, watched him take a deep breath. Then: “Torfrida, I know this is hard to take in; after all he has done, God knows I never thought he would die like that, foully, in his own home . . .”

“That’s just it, Siward,” I murmured. “It wasn’t his home.”

Siward blinked his pale eyes once. “Wasn’t his . . .?”

“No. He gave Bourne to me, in trust for Frida.”

Siward was staring at me. In truth, the contempt in his eyes hurt me far more than it should. What in

the world did he imagine I still owed to a troublesome and adulterous husband I had cast off four years ago? Bourne was all I had had of him, and that I had looked after mainly for his mother and widowed sister who still lived there! My own efforts, my own reviving of my father's trading ventures, had fed and clothed my children and me . . .

But Siward was angry now. I tried to make allowances for his grief.

"Are you really counting property while he lies cut to pieces not twenty-four hours since?" he said harshly. "He may have behaved ill to you once, Torfrida, but before God, he was still your husband!"

There was a short pause. Then: "Was he?" I actually sounded amused. Mind you, I had not been, although I had tried quite hard, when I first heard the song linking Hereward's name to Aelfryth's, and calling her his wife. It had been yelled out joyously by a couple of drunks in imperfect harmony one market day in Lincoln. Well, being young and fair and Saxon, she made a better heroine for the story than I – well past my first flush of youth, Flemish, and endowed with rather dubious knowledge for a Christian.

"There seems," I remarked judiciously, "to be some doubt."

Hereward is dead. What would she do when the news got to her? Was someone else – one of the twins perhaps, or Leofric the Deacon – even now riding across the country to tell her what Siward had already told me? Would she come crashing into Bourne,

claiming to be his widow? Well, Bourne was one place she would have no such rights. Bourne, as I had just reminded Siward, was mine. Mine and Frida's.

* * * *

Avoiding the village and the monastery, and the wide, stricken eyes of the few frightened people we encountered on the road, I came home to Bourne. His presence there, unexpected and uninvited, had prevented me returning at all for the last month, even for Aediva's birthday, and I had missed it. I acknowledged that as my tired horse picked its way daintily across the stream which flowed from St. Peter's Pool, the natural fountain close by. Above the stream rose the earth mound and stockade that protected my hall.

Whatever occurred here yesterday, Hereward's people had not deserted his ancestral home. The gates were closed and guarded by a man I knew well: he had a sword-scar on his left buttock. I tried to bear that in mind as he greeted me, disconcertingly with tears rolling unchecked down his rough, pitted cheeks.

While I stared carefully between my horse's ears and urged it through the gates, I heard Siward quickly questioning the man.

"Where is he?"

"In the hall . . ."

"Is he fit . . .?"

"As he can be."

I rode carefully on, and my heart beat and beat and beat.

* * * *

There had certainly been a battle here. The whole yard and the burned and damaged buildings around it bore unmistakable witness to that. For the first time, foolishly, I wanted to weep, because in all the years of war, for all the halls and towns and castles I had seen destroyed by one side or another, Bourne had never before been one of them.

But *they* were there, Hereward's 'gang'. Just as in the old days, they would have had word this last half hour and more of my approach. And as my horse picked its way slowly into the devastated yard, they emerged from the hall and the outbuildings, pausing in their tasks of clearing and burying and putting to rights, to stand and move silently towards me, united as one in their enormous loss, in their pity, and in the great grief they assumed, despite everything, that I would share.

"Fools!" I thought, with a sudden fury that could never be free of affection. "Fools, fools!"

Forcing myself, I picked out with my eyes those of them I had known and loved best, marked with my mind those who were notably absent.

"In the hall," the soldier had said. And since I had no words to offer the men I had laughed with and suffered with for so long, I half-turned, till I could see the hall door. It lay open, half ripped off its hinges,

and the twins, Hereward's cousins Outi and Duti, stood on either side of it, shoulders sagging with fatigue, mouths drooping with misery. And yet they tried to smile at me.

I did not know what was going on.

My limbs were trembling slightly, and not just with the cold. Lifting my head, I drew the sable close around my throat and moved forward to the hall. Men moved respectfully to let me pass. Behind me, I was aware of Siward saying urgently, "Torfrida, wait a little. At least let me ensure . . ." But I heard no more. At the door, Outi embraced me, briefly, and because I could not stop it, I let him. And then I was past them, in the hall itself.

The battle had been in here too. They had made some effort to clear it up, but broken benches and tables lay piled on both sides and hangings had been torn down or shredded. The walls were scarred and pierced by weapons, stained by many liquids, some of which, at least, must have been blood. There was always blood. And at the far end, even the high table had been damaged: one of its legs was propped up now on a broken chair. I could see that, although I could not see what was laid upon it. In front of it stood Leofric the Deacon, a stained, ragged bandage askew about his head, and Siward the Red, friend and cousin of the White Siward who had followed me inside. From the footsteps I heard, so had the twins.

For a moment, we stared at each other. Then my eyes flitted beyond them, and around the hall, and

back to Leofric. It was he, inevitably, who moved first, stepping down from the dais, and coming straight towards me, a thousand expressions flitting across his open, gentle face.

I decided to strangle the pity at birth.

“Very well,” I said sardonically. “Where is the body?”

Shock brought him to a standstill. Beside him, I saw Siward the Red’s eyes fly to his cousin’s. I even felt the movement of Siward the White’s tired shrug.

Leofric said, “It is here; but I have to warn you, lady . . .”

“I have seen dead bodies before,” I interrupted drily. “You must remember *that*, Leofric – you were generally there.” And I moved forward, brushing past him. At the last moment, he reached out and caught my arm. He was strong enough to force me, but I did not struggle. Instead, slowly, I looked back at him over my shoulder. His dark eyes gazed at me, serious, intense, *pleading*.

“Torfrida, don’t . . .”

I laughed. “Don’t what? Don’t look? Why do you think I came?”

I think it was the laughter that shook him off. At any rate I was free, with no inclination, or time, to think about what was in his face. There was only one obstacle left, on the dais: Siward the Red, planted firmly in front of me. On his left, on the table, I could see someone’s up-turned boots.

“Stand aside, Siward,” I said quietly, and reluctantly, slowly, he did.

I took my time. There were the boots, and leggings, and a short tunic worn without armour, save for the red painted shield still slung around his body like his sword-belt. There was a black dragon on the shield, with fierce, jewelled, emerald green eyes. My lips parted.

For the first time, I acknowledged the stale smell of burning that came off the body. His hair and head had been badly burned, beyond recognition. That should not have surprised me. I think it was the isolated clumps of thick, golden hair clinging still to his shoulders and chest that threw me off balance. Siward was right: he had been hacked to pieces. Bits of limbs were missing, there were massive, gory wounds in his legs and body, and his face, dear God, was enough to make seasoned warriors cringe.

I had seen enough. Sickened, I was already beginning to turn away when something on the body caught my eye: something frail and small and stained, but once, unmistakably, yellow. It shone through the singed, filthy, bloody rags of his clothing, somewhere between his chest and his left shoulder. Involuntarily, my hand reached out and touched it.

A braided ribbon, sewn with tiny gems.

My mouth opened, soundless at first, then gasping, and gasping again. Another storm filled my ears, rushing, swelling, endless. “Jesus Christ,” I whis-

pered, twisting with the awful, unbearable thing I had found. “Jesus Christ . . .”

Leofric said urgently, “What . . .?”

And Siward the White interrupted him savagely, “She did not know! She would not believe me!” Blindly, I looked at him while he strode up to the dais and seized me by both arms. “You didn’t, did you? That is why you behaved so – said all those things! For God’s sake, Torfrida, what do you take me for?”

A queer, animal noise burst from my throat.

Leofric said sharply, “Leave her!” And as soon as the fingers slackened on my arm, I was away, bolting for the door, away from the tragedy I had not foreseen and would never be able to run from. The dreadful finality of death was upon me at last, and now, *now*, I was lost.

Hereward is dead.

Chapter 2

They let me run, as if they knew it was the only thing I could do, as if they knew I had done much the same thing before, over another, less terminal parting. And I suppose they knew I would come back.

And I did. Not so very much later. And I was calm, with the calm that can only be induced in me by fixed purpose. Yet, mostly, I felt detached from my surroundings, as if I were somebody else entirely.

Walking sedately back across the yard, I was aware of the men watching me with varying degrees of subtlety. Only Wulric the Heron, slumped in the open doorway of what used to be the men's house, had no such pretensions. His white, ugly face looked wrung dry, his muddy eyes huge as they stared at me unblinkingly. His arm was roughly bandaged, and there was blood all over his coat.

Abruptly, I changed direction and walked over to him. Some habits are hard to break, whatever the circumstances.

"You are hurt, Wulric," I observed, much as I had on many occasions past.

“I am alive,” he corrected me, without noticeable pleasure.

“I would like you to stay that way. May I see your wounds?”

“If you like. It’s nought to me.”

Taking his less bloody arm, I led him into the house. I said carefully, “You are grieving for him.”

“For him,” Wulric agreed. “Who is not? And for the lesser men.”

The lesser men. I remembered one, notably absent from the crowd in the yard. Why was it, I wondered with detachment, that one all-consuming pain could not dull the many lesser griefs? Instead, it seemed to sharpen them, so that I could not speak again until I had sat him down upon the nearest bed and unwrapped most of his filthy bandages.

“Have I taught you no better than this?” I asked severely, dropping the rags with exaggerated distaste.

“I did not care,” he said without emphasis.

“Wulric the Black is also dead?” I asked calmly, and the dead man’s friend nodded once, dumbly. His Adam’s apple wobbled precariously, making him look so ugly that I wanted to put my arms around him. However, since I didn’t think either of us could bear that, I stood up and went to fetch the water bowl lying on the table under the window. It looked clean.

Wulric the Heron watched me return to him, and when I had begun to wash, he said without flinching, “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to add to – to . . .”

“They will all be added, Wulric.” My voice sounded perfectly calm, a little tight perhaps, but calm. Somewhere, I could still wonder at that, that I could still act and think as before.

Wulric’s eyes had lifted to mine, widening. A faint light even gleamed there, briefly. “God must have spared me to be revenged . . .”

Ignoring this slightly unlikely interpretation of God’s will, I said only, “What happened here, Wulric?”

“*They* were here,” he said. “Visiting the lady Aediva, or her daughter, I don’t know. But Hereward asked them to sit down for dinner. Again.”

“Who?” I asked. “Who did he ask?”

Wulric frowned. “That parcel of Normans. Asselin, Ralf of Dol, Hugh of Evermouth, Ivo de Taillebois . . .”

I glanced down at his face. “Ivo was there?” I asked quickly.

“Yes, and Deda. They all had their retinues of servants and soldiers, and they were all given hospitality.”

“Siward told me the servants carried weapons hidden in their clothes.”

Wulric stared unseeingly at the gory arrow-hole in his shoulder. “They drank with us. I think there was something in the ale. Or in some of it. I think they brought more to Wulric when he was on watch outside the hall, for he fell asleep. Wulric never sleeps on watch. They could have stepped over him to do

their work, but they didn't. They killed him anyway, when he could not fight back.”

I frowned at him. “You know this?”

“No, I'm guessing that part. I was inside the hall, with *him*. The first I – the first any of us knew, was when the door burst open and the Normans' servants and soldiers rushed in. As if it was a signal, the others rose to their feet, swords were out, and the fight began. If you can call it a fight. With Hereward there was only Wynter and Martin and Leofric and me – and the two servitors who could not fight off their own grandmothers . . . Hereward saw at once we were lost and ordered me to bring the others – they were hidden in the old forest camp – but someone saw me opening the door and shot this arrow that pinned me there some time before I could get it out . . . And when I did, and I got out of the door, I tripped over something. They told me later it was Wulric the Black . . . I ran till I thought I would burst, giving the whistles as I went – they met me half way, but even so, we were too late . . .”

I wanted to close my eyes, as if that would shut it all out, make it unreal. I said prosaically, “That will be more comfortable. I'll bind it for you now. Tomorrow I'll put some ointment on it that will keep infection away and help it to heal faster.” Binding it with torn linen from the other bed, I said determinedly, “So the Normans' servants conveniently began it. Did Hereward turn on their masters? Did any of you?”

“Hereward drew his sword,” Wulric said, after a moment’s frowning thought. “It was instinctive, and you know how quick he is . . . Was. He leapt over the table, to meet those charging into the hall, and they were upon him in a trice.”

“Who were?” I asked patiently.

“The boy who came to Ely once – Ralf. Hugh of Evermouth. Asselin. Chiefly.”

“Not Deda?” I asked, because I had to.

And even like this, Wulric could spare a faint upward tug of his torn lips for Deda. “No, not Deda. He was shouting furiously at the others, trying to push up their swords, but no one paid him any attention. All he could do was hustle the ladies away before they got hurt. Unless he’d been prepared to join *us* – a gang of Saxons fighting his own people!”

“And Ivo de Taillebois?”

Ivo, who would marry Hereward’s sister, if he could, yet who could not keep his black, sparkling eyes away from me . . .

Wulric frowned. “He’s a cool bastard. He fought if anyone came near him. Otherwise, he stood, or even sat, and watched. Sometimes, often when Hereward confounded the others, he laughed. I had an idea he disapproved of his countrymen, but he did nothing to interfere. I suppose he wouldn’t. Anyway, all that was at the beginning, before I got away . . . I wish I had never left him.”

“You could have changed nothing,” I said dully. “And you would be dead as well.”

He looked at me bleakly. "I know."

* * * *

Leaving Wulric, I resumed my journey to the hall. My feet felt heavy and reluctant. I did not want to go in there. Not because I was afraid of the awful thing on the high table that had once contained the huge life of Hereward, but because I was afraid of his friends, of their effect on me, of their need of me. But I had to go to Folkingham. My children were there.

The door still hung crazily open, so they did not hear me come in. For a moment, I stood in the shadows, more from an inability to act than any desire to hear what they said.

And they were talking about me.

"... don't care!" Siward the Red was exclaiming, violently punching his own leg as he half-sat on one of the trestle tables. "Why should you lie to her?"

"She didn't think I had," said Siward the White tiredly. "She thought I was – mistaken."

"Why, in God's holy name?"

"I don't know. I think – probably – because she did not see it in the stars."

There was silence.

Then: "But she cannot have imagined he was playing some trick!"

"I think that is exactly what she did imagine."

"Dear God . . ." Dutu said, sagging into an empty bench. "With what possible purpose?"

“Well think about it!” Siward the White said impatiently. “He arrived here over a month ago, giving no reason and making no attempt either to go to her in Lincoln or to bring her back to Bourne. She must have thought, like the rest of us, that he was seeking reconciliation at last. She must have thought he wanted her back, that he was too proud to beg or to chase, so she played along with his game, as she thought, to get her home. It probably suited her pride as well. White Christ! I don’t know what goes on in the minds of those two . . .”

This was unbearable. I found my eyes were closed, tightly, till some movement in the hall made me open them again in alarm.

“Well what convinced her you *weren’t* mistaken?” Outi was demanding, coming down from the dais with his quick, nervous tread. “That none of us were?”

The Siwards exchanged glances. This time, I would have intervened, but my tongue had got stuck, cleaving to the dry roof of my mouth.

“The ribbon,” said Siward the White at last, reluctantly, finally revealing the secret that he and his cousin had kept so long. “The ribbon that’s tied around his shoulder. He always wore it in battle, under his shirt – ever since Flanders. It was the first token she ever gave him.”

I moved forward then, suddenly, because my body could not bear to be still. Almost as one, they swung round to face me, and I saw without surprise that Deda was there too, now, seated at the table and half-

hidden still by Siward the Red. He rose, abruptly, coming towards me and then, helplessly, pausing, as if he did not know how he – one of the party of Frenchmen who had killed Hereward – would be received.

“She doesn’t blame you,” Siward the White said quickly.

“Of course I don’t,” I said, just as hastily. “Later, later I will thank you for your care of my mother- and sister-in law. I am ready to go to Folkingham now.”

“Of course,” said the Siwards at once, and the twins too prepared to accompany me.

But I had seen Deda’s face, and when my enquiring gaze did not leave it, he said slowly, “Ivo de Taillebois is at Folkingham.”

A snarl that was only half pain writhed across the twins’ identical faces.

I said calmly, “Then Gilbert had better keep him away from my cousins. Shall we go?”

* * * *

I had done this before, ridden this path up to Folkingham Hall, just before dusk, with fear of the future in my heart. We had come into this very yard, and someone had helped me to dismount. Just as then, I did not look at the man who was setting me on my feet, for I was busy trying not to remember.

The yard was full of men, soldiers, gathering and drilling in expectation of the trouble Hereward’s murder was bound to inspire. Somewhere inside, in

the hall probably, were my children, waiting to be told that their father was dead.

And coming out of the hall door, Gilbert of Ghent, Hereward's god-father, wearing a breastplate over his rich tunic, and a sword at his belt. Gilbert in martial mood, though with what purpose I had yet to find out. At his heels came his son and heir, a worried frown creasing his serious brow, and beside them, the lady Matilda, who had been weeping.

Weep, Matilda, weep . . .

I think I would have coped if she had not smiled. But though the tears still glistened wetly on her puffy face, she tried to pull herself together when she saw me. Her hand lifted in sorrowful welcome, and yet she tried to smile, a quite inappropriate, almost grotesque effort in all its false brightness. Just so, flanked by her husband and a son, had she smiled at me when I had first come here twenty years ago, a furious but determined child of twelve, sent from Flanders by my own parents with the incomprehensible purpose of marrying me to Matilda's eldest son.

Inevitably, the memories burst on me, overwhelming me until my breath rasped in my throat, and I gave up the fight, and let them come.

Past

Into Exile
April 1056 – January 1057

Chapter 3

My betrothed was not a handsome man. Gangly to the point of gawkiness, his mousy hair already thinning, although I knew for a fact he was only nineteen years old, he stood hunched between his fixedly smiling parents. The unpleasing contours of his face were only emphasized by the general mottled redness of his complexion – to say nothing of the even less becoming hue of his puce, bulbous nose, above which rather weak, sullen eyes regarded me with a depressing mixture of desperation, dejection and straightforward dislike.

I didn't blame him for that. I was not much of a bargain myself from a physical point of view. Besides being only twelve years old, plain and short, with the odd sort of pre-adolescent body that humorously manages to combine skinniness and lumpiness, I showed little promise of improvement.

On top of which, I had a cold.

“This,” beamed Gilbert de Ghent, the sleeves of his long, heavily embroidered tunic rustling expensively as he cast one arm around my intended, “is my son, Robert. Robert, make your bow to the fair lady

Torfrida who has come to us all the way from my good friends in Flanders.”

Robert obediently bowed, a jerky, graceless motion that held neither courtesy nor respect. Even his dress, muddled and plain and short, and quite unadorned save for a rather grotesque, wrought silver buckle at his belt, spoke of neglect that amounted to insult. Obviously he had been among English Saxons too long.

He still was, for the yard in which I was met by this daunting threesome seemed to be teeming with young men engaged in wrestling or contests of arms or other manly sports, while several ladies watched from the edges, or from the great doorway of the low, sprawling house facing me.

The fair lady Torfrida, seeing nothing worthy of comment, sniffed with watery disdain.

Robert, surreptitiously pinched by his still smiling mother, forced himself to speak, muttering ungraciously, “I trust I find you well?”

Inevitably, I sneezed. I made it loud and enthusiastic, although I glared balefully at him over the top of my handkerchief.

“Do I look well?” I demanded.

There was a short silence while they all stared at me in blank dismay. Even without the cold, it must have been apparent that I didn’t look too well.

I sniffed again. Some of the young men, grubby and panting still with their exertions, and most of the

observing women, were gazing in our direction. I expect it was the sneeze. I am good at sneezes.

The lady Matilda said smoothly, “You will be exhausted after your long journey.”

I did not answer at first, for a wink of startling golden hair, gleaming among the many paler heads around it, had caught my attention – probably because it was the brightest thing I had yet seen in this grey, dreary place. It belonged to a fair youth in a rough, sleeveless leather tunic with a sword belt slung over his broad shoulder. Wild, beardless and dirty-looking, with the barbarically long, tangled hair favoured by Saxons of a certain type, he was strolling among the combatants in the yard as if they were so many flowers in a field; and though it was hard to tell – for his eyes seemed to dart constantly and his whole body was somehow *unstill* – I thought he was looking mainly at us.

Then, abruptly, he dropped out of my view – felled, I perceived, by several other young men at once. The one at the top looked as dark as the victim was fair, but indescribably neater and cleaner. It crossed my mind that the golden youth was probably the sort who invited such unequal attacks. Or perhaps it was all part of their silly games. I didn’t care. I already disliked the entire country.

Looking away, I realized that the lady Matilda, still determinedly smiling, was holding out her arm, dripping at the wrists with fine, English lace, in the

direction of the house. The invitation was obvious, but I made her say it.

“May I give you some refreshment in the hall? Or would you prefer to retire and rest before supper? Come, I shall take you myself.”

I glanced coldly at the men of the family. Robert, my betrothed, bowed again, jerkily. I ignored him. His father, a powerful, handsome man not yet forty, idly fingered the fine gold filigree brooch at his shoulder, and smiled. It was a distracted smile, as if he were thinking about something – or someone – else entirely. Why then was I so sure he disliked me? Apart, of course, from the fact that I had done nothing so far to be liked.

“I hope you don’t mind this rabble, by the way,” the lady said brightly, guiding me safely round a pair of worryingly inept young archers. “My husband encourages all the young men of the neighbourhood to practice sports and arms here – a sort of informal tourney. We do it several times a year, but I assure you it is not constant!”

“I have just been fortunate,” I said sardonically, stepping over a fallen wrestler in my path. “Again.”

She did not take me into the hall – the main house, long, large, single-storied, flimsily wooden – but as we skirted it, a sudden commotion above my head startled me into glancing up at the roof with extreme apprehension. Somebody was pulling himself up the thatch from the other side, throwing one bare,

brown leg over the ridge of the roof, and perching there like a weather vane.

It was the same golden-haired youth I had last noticed vanishing under an apparently irresistible onslaught of fellow brutes.

The lady Matilda stopped. So did I. The boy on the roof, a little battered about the face, drew one deep, reviving breath, and grinned. It was an insolent, provoking sort of a grin, though there seemed to be genuine laughter there too, and it was aimed at someone below him on the far side of the hall.

“Oh no,” the lady uttered – involuntarily, I thought.

Then the youth said something I didn’t catch. It sounded deep and sharp, like a command, and immediately two dark boys near us – whom I hadn’t even noticed before – started throwing things at the roof. Or no, not *at* the roof, but *to* the youth astride it. Sticks, stones, tree-branches, hats, buckets, old bits of broken armour – it seemed they were not choosy – and all tossed up with blood-curdling, martial yells.

And the golden youth, catching most of them, at once began hurling them at some unseen foe, or foes, on the other side of the building. Sometimes he called out a name before he threw, as if giving an impudent warning. Once I heard him laugh, quick and clear and incongruously joyous.

All around us now, like some noisy nightmare, I could hear people cheering and laughing and shouting out advice. One or two others moved

disgustedly away, some calling warnings to friends or to the agitated women on the fringes, but in the main, all over the yard, men were dropping their weapons and their opponents and running over to watch the fun. Or to join in.

And they said this was a civilized country. I didn't understand how the lady Matilda could tolerate such behaviour.

Apparently she couldn't. When I looked at her, her face was still turned upwards; but her eyes were closed, as though praying for strength. It made her human for the first time.

Ineffectual, but human.

"Where," uttered the lady, opening her eyes at last, "is Gilbert?"

Looking about me, I saw no sign of him. Instead, I found two young women beside us, the smaller open-mouthed and scared looking, though her eyes still sparkled with some sort of delighted anticipation. Stupid, I judged. It was to the other maiden, tall, spotlessly clean, that Matilda spoke.

"Emma," she said, and I remembered that Emma was the name of her eldest daughter. "Emma, fetch your father or we'll have blood before supper . . ."

"You'll have it any way now," the tall girl returned, managing to convey both resignation and annoyance. "If you *will* invite him, you must expect trouble."

"Well I could do without it today!" Matilda snapped. She wasn't smiling any more. She hadn't been for some time. "*Will* you fetch your father when

I tell you? You shall meet Torfrida at supper. Come, my dear . . .”

I cast another glance at the roof. The opposition appeared to be fighting back to some purpose, for the golden youth now sat among a positive hail of missiles hurled from the far side of the hall, many of which struck their target. On the other hand, more men were climbing up to join him from our side, while others again ran in with fresh ammunition. Even as I watched, I saw the boy’s far leg jerk violently. The thud and the scream from the other side of the building, told me the rest – that he had just kicked some would-be interloper off the roof.

“Two in one blow!” he yelled triumphantly, confirming my prognosis. “One slitherer, one flyer!”

A rousing cheer went up from his own side. Behind me, I heard the smaller, sillier girl gurgling with laughter. “Isn’t he splendid?” she demanded, followed by a decided slap and an aggrieved, “Ouch!”

By quick thinking, I managed to turn my hysterical laughter into a sneeze. Hastily following the lady, I observed, “You appear to be hosting a battle.”

“Oh no, my dear, nothing less than a war,” Matilda said with suppressed savagery as a rock fell alarmingly close to us. I stepped over it, and paused.

“Do you want him down?” I offered. “This stone, scientifically aimed . . .”

“By whom?” she interrupted bitterly. “My husband or my son?”

I stared at her. “By me, of course.”

Matilda closed her mouth. Swiftly, before she could recover, I bent and took hold of the rock in both hands, lifting it and walking away almost in the same breath. It wasn't easy, for the stone was heavy, and now that I had it, I was no longer quite so sure of my ability to bring the golden barbarian down. However, since that was of purely secondary importance to me, I kept going, ignoring her alarmed, "Torfrida! In God's name, come out of there!"

By the time I was in among those who were trying to dislodge the boys on the roof – there were three of them up there now – I had planned my angles and my distance. Stolidly, I was ignoring the blunt objects that whizzed past my ears and flew over my head. Once in place, slightly aggrieved that no one but the lady Matilda seemed to be paying me any attention, I hefted the stone to my shoulder, and took aim.

Only then did the golden youth perceive me. Laughing aloud, he said something to the boys behind him, while still hurling sticks and a particularly nasty looking stone – fortunately not in my direction. At the same time, he appeared to be impudently offering me his yellow head as a target. Accepting with alacrity, I altered my aim slightly, and let my hand fall back to throw, but then, before I could, I was suddenly pulled unceremoniously aside and only just managed to avoid dropping the stone on my own foot.

* * * *

There was an ante-chamber with sweet-smelling rushes on the floor; small but furnished with several stools and a chest in the French style. Beyond it was a large chamber, full of beds. My step faltered. Was I to have no privacy, even at night? I didn't know whether to scream or weep or wrestle my mother-in-law to the ground in what seemed to be the fashion of her adopted country.

In the end, I did none of these things, which was just as well, for my fate was really not quite so bad. She had given me a corner of my own, curtained off from the others by bright, heavy hangings. I even had a window.

“You will not mind the others,” the lady told me in a way that made me want to mind them very much. It was the first thing she had managed to bring herself to say to me since dragging me away from the battlefield. She was smiling again. “They are all young, like yourself, and well-born. Now I shall leave you – but I'll send someone with a posset to make you feel better.”

“Please don't trouble,” I said coldly, but she was already half way across the main chamber. I don't think she even heard me.

I stood still, counting silently to twenty. Then, in the heavy silence – someone must have stopped the battle in the yard – I let my shoulders slump. Slowly, I unfastened my sable-lined cloak and dropped it on the bed. I hoped no one had seen me shaking. Now, remembering vividly the recent tedious hours at sea,

spent mainly with my stuffed and runny nose pressed into my knees, and a few brief glimpses thereafter of endless grey skies and vast, dreary marshes beyond the river's shores – to say nothing of the bumpy, lonely ride here after my people had abandoned me to the servants of my betrothed – I just felt cold.

I sat down on top of the cloak, and tried to think.

I hadn't got very far when the hanging moved and a bright voice in the gap said, "Hallo! You must be Torfrida."

I looked round to see a pretty girl just a year or so older than myself; she was smiling at me. Her hair was long, loose and gleamingly fair, confined only by a braided circlet of blue and red ribbon around her forehead. She wore a simple gown of fine, sky-blue wool – woven in Flanders, I rather thought, by the new processes which were making my father so wealthy – fastened with small, old-fashioned snake-shaped brooches at either shoulder. Between, she wore a string of pretty but inexpensive glass beads.

In her hands she held an ornate, silver cup. Without enthusiasm, I looked from it up to the girl's open, merry face.

"So I must," I agreed. "Who are you?"

"Lucy," she said amiably. "Lucy of Bourne. One of the lady's ladies – if you see what I mean!"

"I expect I can work it out. Given time and a sharp pen." I sneezed again, accusingly. "Lucy is hardly an English name."

“I was named after my lord’s – that is, the Earl of Mercia’s – grand-daughter, but the lady Matilda always calls me by the French form. I don’t mind – it distinguishes us! And anyway, my sister in Northumbria is English enough for both of us – Aethelthryth, after the saint of Ely. And her son is Siward, to please the Norsemen, I suppose, though I can’t see that any of that stuff matters. And I must say,” she added, coming further into my corner, “I am very glad that *you* speak Saxon, for my French is atrocious and I don’t have a word of Flemish. This is for you,” said the girl, as if she had suddenly remembered the cup in her hands. “To help your poor cold.”

“Thank you,” I said distantly, turning back towards the window. “Please leave it on the side.”

She did as I bade her, but the unspoken command – namely to take herself off and leave me alone – was obviously too subtle for her. Dropping familiarly on to the bed beside me, she said cosily, “So! How do you like your betrothed?”

“At a distance,” I said shortly. With luck it would get back to him, suitably embellished. However, instead of looking shocked, the girl only smiled.

“You must not mind Robert. He will have been nervous of meeting you. Really, he is very amiable and very gentle. You are lucky.”

I stared at her. “Then you marry him.”

She only grinned again, impishly, but in a way that disturbed her angelic beauty not at all. She reminded me of someone.

“I could do worse,” she acknowledged regretfully. “But I have other plans. So do my parents, more to the point! The lady said, by the way, that I should let you rest before supper – old people are always saying things like that. Do you *want* to rest?”

“Would you go away if I said I did?”

Rudeness, like subtlety, seemed to float right over her head. She said distractedly, “Of course, if you asked me to,” quickly followed by, “Are you missing your home? Or perhaps, like me, you’re just glad to escape parental restrictions!”

I turned away from her again, quickly, saying coldly, “I was never much restricted.” Until now . . .

“Lucky you! *I* was, quite horribly, I assure you! Life is much better now – although at times my parents are still too close for comfort. When we are here at Folkingham, the lady can complain of me too easily! Bourne, my father’s favourite hall, is only eight miles from here.”

Eight miles. What would I give for a mere eight miles? And eight years . . .

“Still, at least I need seldom be home-sick,” the strange girl comforted herself, belying her previous joy in her escape. “Nor, more importantly, need I listen to the perpetual quarrels of my father and brother!”

At that I did regard her with only slightly distracted fascination. “Your family *can* quarrel?” I had more or less given up trying to provoke one with her.

“Oh yes,” she said blithely. “Hereward, you see, is my brother.”

Lost but not yet despairing, I enquired, “Is that a matter for congratulation?”

And she laughed. “I hardly know! Certainly, it gets one noticed, but as for congratulation – well, you will have your own opinion by now. You must have seen him on your way across the yard.”

I looked at her. “One of the wrestling young men?” I hazarded, without much hope; there was a certain inevitability about all this.

“No,” she said apologetically. “The one on the roof. The first one on the roof.”

Chapter 4

The main hall at Folkingham, as befitted the home of so close a kinsman of the Count of Flanders, was a large, well-proportioned chamber, hung with rich, Flemish tapestries. The wood panels and beams, high tables and chairs and benches, were all decorated with wonderfully detailed, yet fantastically ugly animal carvings, and the high-backed chairs on the dais seemed to be studded with gold. Already, the high table had been set with fine plate and coloured glass beakers lying at every place. To me, it was a very alien mixture of luxury and grotesque barbarity; but I took a perverse pleasure in the knowledge that my mother would not approve of it. I would describe it vividly in my first letter. Tomorrow.

Now, for supper, the hall was laid out with lots of trestle tables and benches, and it seemed the entire floor was covered with people waiting to take their seats. I could no longer, with justice, accuse the company of dullness. My eyes were quite dazzled by the sea of brilliantly coloured silks and wools adorning the ladies. Much gold and silver winked in

the fading sunlight that still peeped in the many windows.

I would not have been surprised to see the men sitting down to supper with swords and scramasaxes at their belts, shields and bows slung at their backs and spears propped against the tables. I hardly knew whether or not to be disappointed by their restraint. Some of the assembled noblemen certainly wore swords, but almost as decoration, and the hilts on display were all of fine wrought metal; some were even jewelled. Otherwise, the only weapons in evidence were the painted and bossed shields on the walls, much as you would expect.

No one could say our entrance upon this surprisingly glittering scene was not effective. I chose to stand for some time just inside the door, in the full glory of my violent red gown, ridiculously festooned with every item of clashing jewellery I could find; and Lucy, perforce, had to wait nervously with me, while heads turned in our direction, one after the other, more and more of them in rapid succession – including the lady Matilda's, gratifyingly appalled before the smile managed to resurface. The babble of voices and cheerful laughter sank, paused in near silence for what seemed to be several seconds, and then rose again with renewed vigour.

The first voice I heard clearly came from a woman standing near me at the door. With a tinkling, very feminine little laugh it said to her companion, "Oh my dear, is that the bride? Well, what can one expect

from the biggest swamp in Europe? Poor Robert! But what a charming couple they will make!”

I did not mind the opinion; it was the one I was seeking after all. It was the calculated malice behind it that threw me, so that although I turned my head boldly to look directly at her, I could think of no words. She was young, tall and graceful, slender and plump in all the right places, with bright, sparkling blue eyes that were used, I thought, to laughing, even if only at other people, and a charmingly full-lipped mouth. She wore amber silk, finely embroidered with green and gold leaves, and fastened with rather beautiful gold inlaid brooches. Necklaces of gold and pearls hung between her breasts. And though the veil of the matron was apparent, it hung loosely on her head to reveal the luxuriant chestnut locks beneath.

And at her side, surely, the husband: tall, dark, short-haired, good-looking. He had the grace to blush for his wife, whose smirk had become slightly fixed under my continuous stare.

Lucy whispered breathlessly, “The lady Edith. Ignore her. Her husband, Godric of Lincoln, is an important man, so the lady tolerates her. No more.”

Here she pulled me physically forward to greet with enthusiastic affection two people whom I took to be her parents – a still pretty but tired looking lady with a permanent frown, called Aediva; and Leofric, a tall, fierce man in the Saxon-Danish style, whom I thought not incapable of causing and maintaining that frown of his wife’s.

From old habit, I accepted Lucy's introduction courteously enough. Then Aediva's polite, "Let me present my son . . ." made me glance hastily at the figure beside her.

Not the golden youth from the roof, but a much younger lad, barely my own age, with hair as fair as Lucy's – and his tongue protruding charmingly in the direction of his sister. Under my gaze, it vanished sharply, and the lips around it grinned.

"Alfred," said Lucy with resignation, as if she had long ago accepted that she was not to be fortunate in brothers.

"Is Hereward here?" Alfred demanded by way of greeting. "Is it true he started a battle from the hall roof and split open Roger FitzGeoffrey's head?"

Lucy cast a quick, nervous glance at her father, who muttered something under his breath and glared ferociously back at the heads that had turned sharply at the sound of his delinquent son's name. Or perhaps at the injured man's.

Alfred said impatiently, "Well? *Did* he roll Roger off the roof?"

Lucy hissed, "Alfred, be silent!"

I said helpfully, "I understand he flew off. Or perhaps he was the slitherer?" And Alfred let out a crack of delighted laughter. Aediva closed her eyes. Leofric muttered something enraged that sounded like, "White Christ!"

I was seated beside my betrothed at the high table. More surprisingly, on our hosts' other side sat

Lucy's parents, clearly special and honoured friends. I was still digesting this when Robert sat down clumsily at my side.

“Did you win all the contests?” I enquired amiably. “Or just the archery?” In the pregnant silence, I at last spared him a glance. His weak eyes had narrowed, and there was a spark of irritation there that convinced me that this time his reply would be blistering. My breath caught.

And then, infuriatingly, the outer door burst open and someone erupted into the hall, and at once, by his very presence, caused a violent stir: the golden youth, Lucy's brother, Hereward.

I had the feeling that this wretched boy would always draw attention to himself, even without such nefarious exploits as this afternoon's. It was something in the powerful urgency of his step – like some unpredictable beast whose ferocity is only temporarily contained – combined with the careless pride of his tilted head. And the weird, irregular beauty, for that was there too. I had noticed no such thing this afternoon, but it was certainly glaring at me now, beneath the bruises and the half-scrubbed grime.

He had not even bothered to change his dress for the occasion. Only his slightly discoloured face and grazed, powerfully muscled bare arms appeared to have been anywhere near water, and he still wore the battered leather tunic, spattered with mud and blood and God knew what else.

Everyone looked, and everyone saw. And heard, for after a sudden upsurge in noise as he strode in, the chatter all dropped away to an expectant silence, into which we could hear his shoes thud across the floor, scattering rushes, and his sword and barbaric knives clank at his hip as he brushed past the tables. He could only have been sixteen years old.

Suddenly, Robert's chair scraped back. I thought he rose involuntarily, appalled by the late and unwanted guest. But Hereward saw him immediately, and swung round in our direction.

It was only as I watched it vanish from his face that I realized he had been angry. Then he grinned, the same radiant, impudent grin I remembered from the roof.

In his own language, he called out, "Where is she then, Rob? Is she hideous? Does she squint like a bag of nails? Does she screech like a shrew with toothache?"

This time, the silence was definitely appalled – not least, I suspected, because there was more than a grain of truth in Hereward's unflattering description. Only I was unperturbed, for the spite was not inspired by me but by whatever hidden anger was churning him up; I understood that perfectly.

Somewhere, somebody giggled. The lady Edith again? Robert's hand lifted and floundered helplessly. The youth Hereward, coming to a halt before us, continued to gaze up at him innocently, the laughter slowly dying in his stormy eyes – strange, mis-

matched eyes, I could see now that he was close enough. One was a sharp, wintry blue, the other a definite, boiling grey; like two shades of the same violent sea.

An embarrassing scene beckoned. Deliberately, I stood up.

I said, "I believe I don't squint. I do, however, have a facility for languages."

The strange, intense eyes shifted quickly to me, and rested without blinking – or apology.

He said mildly, "Do you, by God?"

He had, I saw, very long, almost womanly lashes, darker than his hair and slightly incongruous in that hard, curiously asymmetrical young face. I had no way of telling if he recognized me from the afternoon.

Robert made an odd, strangled sound in his throat. On his other side, I could hear the lady Matilda furiously whispering.

Hereward, still examining me, said consideringly, "You're very small."

I blinked. "Yes? But then I am twelve years old. What is your excuse?"

His height, in fact, was neither tall nor short. I only picked it as a point of insult because he brought the subject up and I aimed to shock. I succeeded too, though not, it turned out, for quite the reasons I was imagining.

At my words, startlement leapt out of his brilliant face. His eyes sprang involuntarily to Robert's, and he uttered, "*Twelve?*" in accents that left me in no doubt

of his amazement, or of the fact that he expected Robert to share it.

And abruptly, all the tiny things fell into place. The shock of my arrival, which could hardly, after all, have been entirely unexpected; the fixed smiles of the lady Matilda; the elusive anger of her genial husband. They had been misled by my own desperate parents. They did not want me. They wanted someone who could be married *now*, to allow Robert, and therefore Gilbert, some real control in my father's affairs *now*. The knowledge should have brought me hope; so why was it I just felt smaller and more isolated than ever?

The entire hall seemed oppressive, unnaturally dark with the sinking of the sun; and the grotesquely ugly wolves, or dragons, or whatever they were, carved into the beams above my head, and the walls on either side of me, seemed to take on expressions of extreme malevolence, as though closing in upon me for the kill. I could not imagine ever wanting anything as much as I wanted to be out of there . . .

I started violently as cool fingers touched my hand. They were Hereward's, quickly and efficiently prising mine off the table. Only then did I realize I was gripping it so hard that my knuckles shone white.

And Hereward himself, vitality still blazing out of his wild eyes, was grinning at me with more amusement than anything else. I found, pathetically, that I was grateful to him.

"Lady," he said, as he raised my hand and soundly kissed it. "*Young lady* – I salute you."

Falling back into my seat, I took time to gather my breath and my wits, and what was left of my poor pride. And when I could take an interest again, I realized that Matilda was talking, lightly and easily; yet with morbid sensitivity, I sensed the nervousness behind it.

She was saying, "I have a most fitting punishment for you! I send you from my table, Hereward! You lose your place of honour as champion, and are banished forthwith to sit with – your brother! And that only on condition you greet your parents with proper respect and affection."

Beside me, Robert muttered something under his breath.

Hereward's eyes turned slowly, as though reluctantly, upon his mother, then quickly on to his father.

I leaned back in my chair in order to see better, but there was no visible emotion in the boy's face, or in his voice as he said, "If my parents wish to receive it, then they have it."

Perhaps if there had been the remotest trace of contrition or appeal, he might have got away with it, for the words themselves were not ungracious; but as it was, their coldly spoken tone acted as tinder on his father, who suddenly exploded.

"I am *sick* of receiving it, for it is worthless!"

"Leofric . . ." The word formed soundlessly on Aediva's faded lips; but Hereward didn't even flinch. He just shrugged.

“Then don’t,” he said carelessly, and turned away from them.

“You see?” said Leofric with contempt. “What is the point in continually forgiving him? He crowns every sin with another until this of yesterday!” His voice rose, like that of a priest pronouncing damnation. “Well, *this* time, I swear before you all, before God Himself, that I will accept him back now only on *my* conditions. Namely, his *abject* apology, the return of all he stole from me, *and* the surrender of his sword.”

There was a universal ripple, almost a gasp – of shock, or dismay, or just insatiable curiosity.

“What do you want with my sword?” Hereward said insolently into the still rising buzz of comment. “You already have everything else I own.”

“You own nothing!” Leofric flashed. “Nothing that is not given by me!”

“I do now,” said Hereward provokingly – referring no doubt to whatever it was he had stolen. I thought his father would burst. So did Gilbert, apparently, for our host said hastily, “Get to your place, Hereward. We are all hungry.”

Hereward shrugged and sauntered with deliberate impudence on his way.

“What,” I said curiously to Robert, “has he done?”

“Ask him,” said Robert shortly.

I stood up purposefully, and at once several eyes turned on me in surprise. The servants with the

washing bowls paused, eyes flying to their mistress for guidance.

Robert's hand jerked me back into my seat. "Be still, in God's name," he breathed.

"Then tell me."

"I would need *days* to tell you all he has done!"

"I only want to know why his father won't forgive him. He said he stole from him."

Robert said reluctantly, "I suppose he did." Quickly looking about him, he added low, "They have been quarrelling for years over Hereward's behaviour. They say he provokes discontent among the lesser people, taking their sides against their lords, defending their every minuscule right. Which inevitably leads his parents into all sorts of fights with their noble neighbours. Periodically, Leofric gets fed up and throws him out."

"Ah," I said, pleased to have the mystery of the unchanged clothes solved at least.

"This time, " Robert continued, getting impatiently to the point before the washing bowl came to him, "he threw out all Hereward's friends and companions with him. Hereward had nothing with which to support them, so yesterday . . ." He paused and drew breath, then lowered his voice still further, so that I had to bow my head to hear him at all. "Yesterday he went and collected some of the tributes due to his father and distributed them among his own men."

I felt my eyes widen. “An ingenious and amoral youth,” I observed.

“You know nothing,” said Robert contemptuously, submitting to the hand-washing ritual. Interestingly, Hereward’s confrontations seemed to have abolished Robert’s tolerance of me. I supposed hopefully that it was progress. Until we sat down I hadn’t even managed to elicit a mild retort from him. And supper was not over yet.

Poor Robert.

Chapter 5

It was a bright, pleasant spring morning to be riding. Maddeningly enough. I would have preferred rain and fog, so that I could, with some justification, wallow in my hatred of the place. With my melancholy betrothed as escort, I was being taken on an expedition to Crowland Abbey, a remote monastery in the midst of the fens, founded, so the lady Emma had informed me, by St. Guthlac.

“Who was he? Some masochistic hermit?” I had demanded rudely.

“Actually,” said Emma coldly, “he was a prince of the Mercian royal house.”

I did not like their fen. It resembled too closely the marshes of home, only it was poorly drained, largely unreclaimed, and stretched as far as the eye could see. It’s sheer size alone made me feel small, which hardly improved my temper.

When our horses had left the old Roman road and began to pick their way through damp marsh paths, skirting hamlets of tiny, sunken huts, I determinedly paid no attention to the big over-hanging willows or

to the really quite attractively glinting pools which could be made out in the distance. From the corner of my eye, I did catch some odd, isolated sights, including a man striding over the marshy land on stilts, and another who vaulted over obstacles in his path by means of a long, wooden pole, but those I refused to acknowledge. Instead, I noted with interest that Robert was riding very close to Lucy.

And then, quite abruptly, a group of men seemed to rise threateningly out of the reeds ahead of us.

I heard Lucy gasp.

Then I realized that two of the men, who must have been bending down for some time to have remained hidden from us until now, had reached back to pull a third up to join them, as if from some way down. And almost immediately, this third was enthusiastically clapped on the back by the rest of the group, not withstanding his almost total covering in mud.

It became clear to me then that none of them even saw us, let alone threatened us.

The third man shook his head like a dog, causing mud to fly in all directions, and through it, I saw the shining gold of his hair – some small patch freakishly saved from the filth – caught in the shaft of sunlight which wriggled through the trees on our left.

I laughed.

Matilda turned sharply in the direction of my gaze. So did the others. Emma muttered something under her breath. At the same time, the fenmen

became aware of us. One of them laconically pushed Hereward's shoulder, and the youth, breaking off from some explanation that involved much gesticulating, looked round and saw us.

Interestingly, I thought he swore. Certainly there was no response to Lucy's joyful cry of his name. Relief seemed to be flooding out of her very pores now, as if she had been imagining him shivering himself into an ague in the night.

I couldn't imagine any such thing. The last I had seen of him, he had looked massively healthy and almost outrageously comfortable, lounging back on his bench, feet up on the table and tipping wine haphazardly into a drinking horn with his toes, while he called out irreverent and frequently ribald remarks to the Saxon poet who had entertained us during supper with stirring and melancholy verse. His antics had appeared to inspire annoyance in some quarters, amusement in others. Even the poet himself hadn't seemed clear as to whether or not to be offended.

Now, Lucy began the surge towards him, Robert at her side; but rather than meet it, he actually turned his back, quite deliberately.

"What are you doing out here so filthily?" Robert demanded amiably, apparently undeterred by the other's blatant rudeness. I suppose it explained his imperviousness to mine.

"Sewering," said Hereward shortly over his shoulder. With extreme reluctance he half-turned back

towards us, though his eyes were wintry, unwelcoming. Some northern, icy sea.

Closer now, I could make out that the fenmen stood beside a channel dug through the watery land around them, and stretching in both directions as far as I could see.

“It doesn’t work,” I observed flatly, and the hard, disconcertingly different eyes flickered over me without interest.

“It will now,” he said briefly. “We unblocked it.”

“With your head?” Robert asked humorously, and the youth smiled in a cold, perfunctory sort of a way that didn’t get near his eyes. He was irritated by our presence here. Whether because of his company, or his dirt, or his behaviour yesterday, or some other cause, I didn’t know. Or care.

“The lady Matilda of Ghent,” he observed off-handedly to his companions. “Better make your bows to her before she goes.”

And he jumped deliberately back into the ditch, reaching into the murky water to fish out some long, spiky tool on a wooden pole. This time he leapt up again unaided, with the same peculiarly wild grace he seemed to bring to everything physical. Overdeveloped muscles in his arms rippled through their coating of mud. His legs, bare and brown and wet, were like tree trunks.

“And to the child-bride,” he added, causing my eyes to fly resentfully to his. They were smiling now, maliciously. Following Matilda’s example, I sniffed,

though much more productively than she. In fact, I didn't mind in the least being the scapegoat for his ill-nature. It made my own simpler.

"What about Emma and me?" Lucy was demanding indignantly. Her brother lifted one arched eyebrow at her.

"Why should they bow to you? You don't frighten me in the least."

"I wish someone did," Matilda retorted. It seemed she was ready for the fight now. "Before you turn the whole of Mercia against your parents!"

"Oh oh," Hereward mocked insolently. "You are going to beat me – verbally but mercilessly – over yesterday afternoon."

"Don't you think someone should? You know perfectly well your behaviour was *abominable*! What have you got to say for yourself?"

Hereward appeared to think. "It wasn't my fault?" he suggested, with no pretence whatever of truth. "Or – it was in self-defence?"

"Rubbish!" Matilda said angrily.

"Actually," I said delicately, for I had spied a new means of annoying her, "it probably was. Self defence."

Inevitably, all eyes swung on me, with varying degrees of surprise. Gratified, I deigned to explain. "Just before the – er – war, I saw some five or six men fall on him from behind."

Though I wasn't looking at him, oddly enough it was of Hereward's unblinking regard that I was most

aware. Robert was frowning. Emma's mouth had fallen open. Matilda turned sharply towards me.

"I expect," I said kindly, turning my gaze at last upon the delinquent himself, "I expect they eventually cornered you against the back wall of the hall, forcing you on to the roof for your own safety."

There was a pause, during which I tried and failed to read the expression in his strange, intensely mismatched eyes. Then he said obligingly, "I expect they did."

I heard Matilda breathe in deeply. "Is this true?" she demanded.

"I couldn't dispute the word of the child-bride," Hereward said apologetically. Having caught my eyes, he seemed reluctant to release them, and I wasn't going to back down.

Matilda repeated, "Is it true?"

And at that, he let me go to turn to her; but even then, instead of answering her question, he posed another, quite abruptly. "Will you tell Gilbert?"

She stared back at him. "Why didn't you?"

The ridiculously long lashes swept down over his smooth cheek, then flickered up once more. "A previous quarrel got in the way."

Matilda's brief softening was over. "And that's another thing," she fumed. "What are you going to do about your father?"

Hereward smiled dazzlingly through his mud. "Send in the child-bride to make my excuses?"

“If,” I said pleasantly, into the sniggers of the fenmen and the servants and the men-at-arms, and the slightly shocked giggles of my companions, “*If* you call me that once more, I shall cut out your tongue. Through your ears.”

“Torfrida!” cried Matilda, properly shocked this time, but she was drowned out by Hereward’s shout of laughter.

* * * *

Hereward refused to come to Crowland with us – on the presumably reasonable grounds that the Abbot was liable to clap him in chains – though he did come with us part of the way, striding along in the midst of the horses, exerting himself to entertain. In fact, he turned out to be rather funny.

He made no effort to speak to me, though, and I made no effort at all, except to be nasty whenever opportunity offered. Only once, as he swung along beside Robert, did I hear my betrothed exclaim, “*Spirit? You* try sitting beside her for two hours! The girl is *relentless!*”

I managed to look away before Hereward’s gaze found me, but I don’t think I had wiped the smile off my face.

Emerging from a thick clump of trees onto much more marshy paths, we finally saw the abbey. It stood on an island – little more than a green hillock, I thought disparagingly – rising out of a murky lake. Some people might have found it picturesque, for

there was a sort of still, lonely distinction to the scene; I wasn't in the mood to appreciate holiness.

"Bourne is that way," Lucy informed me, pointing vaguely away from the river. "Just on the edge of the fen." She looked at me expectantly. "So, what do you think?"

I curled my lip.

"I think there will be flies," I said shortly.

"Optimism," said Hereward, appearing suddenly between our horses, "is such a blessing in the young."

Without invitation or instruction, his hands were on my waist, lifting me out of the saddle. He was little more than a boy, yet the strength rippling through those brawny arms made me feel like a piece of straw plucked helplessly out of the air by a mischievous wind. It did not improve my temper.

As my feet landed, I glared at him with quite genuine irritation, and he paused, holding me still while he regarded me, his fair head slightly on one side. I suspected that, young as he was, other people found it hard to withstand that peculiarly forceful gaze. I was glad to be made of sterner stuff.

Unexpectedly, he lifted his hand from my waist and touched my one eyebrow with a large, unclean thumb, unhurriedly tracing its long, thick line from one side to the other, and then returning to its middle across the bridge of my nose, where the thumb stopped, and lightly pressed.

“What is it,” he wondered, “that pulls down this frown of yours so constantly? The weight of the splendid eyebrow?”

My mother had tried to pluck it before I left. I had only got away by swearing I would do it myself on the journey. I think that was what brought the blood seeping up to my cheeks. That, or the fact I did not care to be laughed at.

Hereward’s finger fell away, but his other hand did not release me.

He said lazily, “There is no need to be so frightened, you know. You might even find that your parents have not made such a bad bargain for you.”

Stricken. So much armour, so much effort, and all it took was the careless, mismatched eyes of a delinquent boy.

I closed my mouth, still bereft of words, still bombarded by a mass of confused emotions, the chief of which seemed to be that he had no right to say I was frightened, no right at all.

Still he was not finished with me. Leaning forward so that his breath actually tickled my cheek, he whispered, “Besides, they won’t send you home, however ill you behave. They are too honourable. I should know.”

“Torfrida?” It was Lucy, pushing my pony out of the way to get to us. “Hereward, leave her alone; she’s not used to you.”

“Oh, I think she is,” Hereward said, stepping back. A smile danced across his face. He closed one

eye – the blue one – so quickly that if I had blinked myself, I would have missed it, and then he had turned away, saying regretfully, “On the other hand, I think it’s time I stopped teasing all of you. I’m off, back to my lair. See you next week, Rob? In Lincoln ...”

“Lair?” said Lucy revolted, while I let out my breath and wondered in panic what had just happened to me. “Wait, Hereward!” she shouted after his grimy, retreating back. “Hereward? You’re not – you’re not going to *rob* someone?”

He didn’t even turn, though his laughter came back to us clearly enough. So did his carelessly called reply: “Not unless I come upon a fat abbot, or a sleek Norman. Or, even better, a fat, sleek Norman abbot!” And then he was striding back the way we had come, leaving me to wonder distractedly what peculiar grudge he could possibly hold against fat abbots.

But I was glad at his going. I felt quite strongly that I never wanted to set eyes – or ears – on him again.

* * * *

Bourne, the hall from which Lucy’s family held together innumerable scattered properties, was a pleasant place, comparable in size if not in comfort with Folkingham. But here were no Flemish tapestries. All the decoration was quite fiercely English – crude hangings, animal-like carvings and rough wall-paintings of brilliant reds and blues and yellows. But

at least the feast to which we were bidden was unstinting in both quantity and quality. And to my relief, there was no sign of the errant elder son, invited or otherwise, so I felt able to relax, just a little.

In the interests of a peaceful meal, no doubt, the lady Aediva had separated me from my betrothed, placing me between the youthful Alfred and a plump clergyman of uncertain years who was introduced with casual disrespect simply as Brand. I wondered if I were being punished. The clergyman, however, persisted through all my monosyllables and silences and curt replies of undisguised boredom, until, pushing my bread away, I turned my head to look at him.

He smiled peacefully, and a small piece of fish tumbled off his lip to join a considerable proportion of the previous courses on his chest. He had a round, smooth moon-face beneath a shiny tonsure, and large, amiable eyes, blinking sleepily at me. I may be slow, but I am not stupid.

“You are not, I think, the family chaplain,” I observed. His disordered eyebrows heaved themselves up in surprise, then collapsed again with the effort.

“Oh no.”

I waited, but the old buffoon was determined to make me ask. Nothing loathe, I said bluntly, “Who are you then?”

Brand wiped his fingers on his habit. Some bread-crumbs leapt up in alarm and resettled themselves

more comfortably about his person, or on the table or the floor nearby.

“Brand,” he said, holding out his hand to me. We had done this already. I wasn’t sure whether or not he was joking, but I chose to take the hand – gingerly, for I had no idea what lurked there.

“Torfrida,” I said gravely. For a moment I thought I would have to ask again, but he had obviously tired of the game.

Dropping my fingers, he said, “I have the honour to be Aediva’s brother. Aediva,” he added kindly, “is your hostess.”

“Thank you,” I said politely. “It is more comfortable to know.”

“Exactly. I have also,” he continued ponderously, “the *almost* as grave responsibility of being Provost of Peterborough Abbey. Which is why I am here today, visiting our cell by the village.”

I blinked. I said curiously, “Do you get on with your elder nephew?”

Again the eyebrows lumbered up and fell with a silent crash.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” said the Provost of Peterborough mildly. “No one gets on with Hereward. Why do you ask?”

“Fat abbots,” said Alfred, unexpectedly and succinctly on my other side.

“I am getting on in years,” Brand said peaceably. “I am allowed to be fat. I may even be allowed to be an abbot one day. But still, in my current, lowly

position, I am allowed – nay, positively *encouraged* – to beat boys for impudence.”

Alfred cast me a careless, Lucy-like grin, though I noticed he ducked rather swiftly back to Emma.

“Ah,” said Brand with satisfaction. “Roast duck. Excellent. Now then, young lady – tell me the gossip from Flanders. What is the opinion there about the English succession?”

“Indifference, I should think,” I said dryly, and watched his eyebrows struggle briefly. Apparently deciding it was not worth the effort this time, he only twitched them.

“Really?” he marvelled. “Yet surely there would be untold advantages for your people if William of Normandy became king here?”

“Maybe,” I allowed. “But I doubt it keeps them awake at night worrying. King Edward is hardly on his last legs, is he? The next ruler . . .”

“*Next?*” Alfred interrupted again. “King Edward doesn’t rule now! He prays and builds abbeys. Harold of Wessex rules.”

“Hold your tongue, ignorant boy. The King,” Brand added to me, “is advised by his chief nobles . . .”

“Harold of Wessex!” Alfred repeated triumphantly.

“And our own Earl,” Brand said mildly. “Only a silly boy would write off Leofric of Mercia.”

“Leofric is old,” Alfred said stubbornly.

“He has Aelfgar to succeed him.”

“Aye, with boat loads of Irish or Welsh at his back! Or even, God forgive him, Norwegians!”

Half-heartedly, Brand swiped some unsuspecting crumbs off his chest and reached for his duck. “You have been listening to Hereward,” he observed.

“No I haven’t!” Alfred protested, and when his uncle looked at him speakingly over a duck leg, he added defensively, “It is my father’s opinion that Mercia is no longer capable of balancing the ambitions of Wessex. It is my opinion too!”

“Oh well, if it’s *yours*,” Brand said sarcastically. “But we were not discussing over-powerful subjects. We were discussing kings.”

I said quickly, “What is there to discuss? If King Edward has no children . . .”

“He won’t,” said Alfred irrepressibly. “It would involve lying with his wife.”

“Well,” Brand confessed, distracted, “I’d as soon lie with a snake myself as with one of Godwin’s brood.”

I looked at him. “But then you,” I reminded him, “are a monk.”

A smile flickered through his round face. “So I am.”

“And Edward might as well be,” said Alfred. “So – no children.”

I said, “Then there is only William to succeed, his nearest full-grown relation of any standing. And he is promised it, is he not?”

“So, they say, was Eustace of Boulogne,” Brand said apologetically. “And I don’t see the King of Norway sitting still when the throne of Canute’s kingdom is vacant again. And then there is the Aethling . . .”

“Who won’t leave his comfortable home in Hungary,” I said wryly. “Forget your Aethling. Actually, you would be wise to. William the Bastard is an ill man to cross. But what is the point of guessing? Who knows what will happen in ten or twenty years or whenever King Edward dies?”

“God and the astrologers,” said Brand flippantly. He slapped his lips over a minutely clean bone and dropped it on the table. “I can’t speak for the All Mighty, of course, but the astrologers seem to be in favour of William the Bastard.”

I looked at him sideways. “How many astrologers do you know?”

“Oh, two or three,” he said vaguely.

I laid down my duck wing carefully, gazing at it as if I expected it to fly off at any moment. I said, “Can they really predict the future that way?”

“Some of it. If they ask the right questions.”

I looked up at him thoughtfully through my lashes. It was an idea I had had before. Something told me it could not be mere chance that brought it to my attention again here. At any rate, I saw no harm in testing it.

I said shrewdly, “Do *you* ask the right questions?”

He smiled faintly. “My studies involve the prediction of nothing more or less momentous than Easter or the matins bell.”

He was not, of course, being strictly honest. Even then I knew that no one of intelligence could cut such studies off there. Smiling back, I pursued him.

Chapter 6

I was so used to being clever. I had thought I could study astronomy for a week or so, and then work it all out for myself. After my first visit to Peterborough, I felt very childish and foolish. But more determined than ever.

Of course, I could not keep visiting the Abbey in isolation if I did not wish to excite too much curiosity. Even though the adults were increasingly distracted by tidings that the Bishop of Hereford was marching against the turbulent Prince Gruffydd of Wales – apparently an ally of the Earl of Mercia’s son Aelfgar – I still felt obliged to cover my tracks with other expeditions and visits, and yet still deny any pleasure or interest in the country. Which was how we came to be in the city of Lincoln on a market day.

I liked Lincoln. Big and bustling with noisy prosperity, it reminded me a little of Bruges: stone churches and large wooden halls with gardens, neatly laid out with more haphazard arrangements of lesser houses and sunken huts in between; noisy streets alive with animals and people, and clusters of booths

selling everything from meat and bread to cloth and jewellery. In the market square, gaudy tumblers and jugglers throwing brightly coloured balls and plates walked among ceorls and fishwives and well-to-do burghers. Drab serving men and women, buying for their masters, rubbed against brilliantly-gowned ladies in search of silks and lace and new trinkets. Rich scents of spice and fish and fruit filled the air.

It all made me so wretchedly homesick that I had no difficulty at all in appearing bad-tempered and sullen for all of the first hour. But it was a warm, May morning, bidding fair to be positively hot by the afternoon, and I found I did not mind the press of people, the raucous calls of the street pedlars or the close stench of over abundant humanity. It made me feel comfortingly anonymous – so much so that I had bought some lace for no better reason than that it was pretty, before I realized I could never wear it here. Not if I was to keep up my dismal role.

“It’s for my mother,” I told Lucy shortly when she pounced admiringly upon it. After which I made a point of haranguing Robert into buying me a particularly large and vulgar garnet brooch set in gold with which to fasten my cloak. I wore it immediately, with pride.

Robert, having obvious difficulty in dragging his eyes from this new piece of gaudery, was conducting us away from the seductive smell of a pie-seller’s booth towards some more respectable alehouse for dinner, when I saw Hereward again.

He was in a smaller square formed between the church and the inn, with a crowd of other young men, and he was crouched on the ground playing dice, his head bent in concentration so that his face was invisible to me. But still I knew him as soon as I saw the shock of bright gold. It didn't need the shout of laughter or the quick, upward toss of his fair head as he grinned across at his companions.

I looked away at once. I didn't want to meet him again. I didn't like him. I didn't like the way he *bothered* people. And if I was honest, which I generally was, I didn't like the way he bothered *me*.

Besides, I had learned rather more of him now: normal, decent people did not just disapprove of him, they feared him, because his behaviour was not simply wildness, it was *rebellion*, a rebellion that struck at the heart of all civilized societies. He obeyed nobody, appeared to consider that neither he nor anybody else owed loyalty to any lord, and his only purpose in life seemed to be anarchy. All of which would have been bad enough, but he swept others along in his wake: the youths who had joined him on the hall roof, by name Wynter and Leofric the Black, were apparently just two of the boys of good family who were in his thrall.

So it was with dismay that I belatedly recalled his casual arrangement to meet Robert here, and I could only hope that it would be forgotten.

However, Robert and Lucy had both heard the distinctive, wild laugh, and inevitably Robert was

already starting across the square towards him, Lucy trotting delightedly at his heels. Short of stamping into the alehouse on my own – which I considered quite carefully – there was nothing I could do but trail after them.

Of course, he showed no surprise at seeing us. An engaging smile broke out, but otherwise he might have been meeting us for the third or fourth time that day. At first he did not even rise to greet us, merely stretching up one lazy, brawny arm to shake Robert's hand. He said something to Lucy, but I didn't catch what it was, for his attention had already returned to the dice, and with it went everyone else's.

Hereward, dressed for summer, apparently, in a short, belted tunic of some light, frayed material carelessly open at the throat and chest, and his brown legs still bare, was flanked by two youths of about his own age: one sinewy, wispy, impassive and rough; the other not much taller, but considerably stronger looking, with a massive tangle of black hair and fluffy young beard, and a continually fierce glower. His eyes were a sharp, unexpected blue. After a moment, I recognized this latter as Wynter, one of the boys from the hall roof. And a little way off, sitting on a barrel and idly swinging his long legs, was the other rooftop culprit, the dark, gangly and slightly distracted Leofric the Black.

All four of them were hung about with an impressive array of weapons, some of which I still lacked names for, but the only ornament between them was

the intricately carved dragon buckle on Hereward's belt.

The others of the group, some five or six of them, appeared from their dress to be wealthy burghers and noblemen, also young, though rather older than Hereward himself; some even wore long tunics and short hair. Civilized men, I thought with some surprise – apart, of course from their youthful folly in playing dice in the street with a delinquent of Hereward's reputation. Having hastily greeted Robert and Lucy – I was still dragging my heels on the outskirts of the group – these worthies all directed their eyes expectantly at Hereward's hand, which was almost idly shaking the dice.

Perhaps it was that – the game, for stakes that no doubt none of them could really afford – which explained the tension in the square. But it seemed to me that no one, except he who held the dice, was free of it.

Hereward threw. All eyes followed the dice. Hereward smiled. One of the men groaned. Another muttered. Hereward scooped up the dice and rose in one clean, easy movement.

He said provokingly, "See?" his voice maddeningly self-satisfied, even smug.

"Too well!" exclaimed one of the men in inevitable retaliation. Hereward paused in the act of turning towards us. Instead, he glanced up at the speaker through his long, golden lashes.

"Meaning?" he asked gently.

And the other, looking slightly taken aback to be taken up so quickly, took a deep breath before he replied boldly, “Meaning you have all the luck. *All* the luck.”

It was alarmingly plain, even to me.

Robert said hastily, “What are you playing for, anyhow? Surely not money!”

“Oh no,” said Hereward. “We’re playing for honour. Godric has just lost his.”

Someone laughed. Others smiled, as though too nervous not to make a joke out of the words; and it was only then I realized that Godric was not the man who had accused him, but the man he had just beaten, the most respectable of the whole group, by his appearance. I had only met him once before, through a haze of anger against his wife and the rest of the world, but after a moment, I did recognize him. Godric of Lincoln.

Flushing under Hereward’s limpid gaze, Godric’s eyes narrowed, and I knew instinctively that this was a far more dangerous man to provoke than the first. And that this was the fight Hereward really wanted.

Now why, I wondered, was that?

Godric’s mouth snapped open to retort, “It is not *my* honour which concerns us!” But again, before he had even finished speaking, Robert intervened.

“We’re dining across the road, if you care to join us,” he said quickly. I didn’t know whether to feel relieved at escaping this suddenly fraught situation,

or simply appalled at the prospect of Hereward's further company, though in the end it didn't matter.

Hereward said, "Thanks," but neither his eyes nor his smile ever left Godric. His hand lifted, carelessly, indicating the barrel under Leofric's lanky person. "I have my dinner here."

Then, quite without warning, he moved, taking me by surprise. "Is that Torfrida? Can you dice?"

And I, finding his erratic yet intense attention suddenly upon me, could think of nothing to say except, "I can try."

"Good girl." Without hesitation, he held out the dice to me, but abruptly Lucy slapped his hand away.

"Don't be ridiculous! What will people say if she's seen dicing in the street?"

"They'll say I'm a child," I said prosaically, "who knows no better. What's the matter?" I asked Hereward, boldly stretching out my hand. "Don't you have another set?"

Hereward's eyes smiled disarmingly, dropping the dice into my palm. "I'd hate to split them for nothing."

Withstanding the intense gaze, I realized the storms were back. If he was not angry, he was certainly restless, profoundly reckless. And with a jolt, I caught that mood from him, feeling it rise up like a torrent.

I said breathlessly, "What if I win too?"

"I fully expect you to. God is on the side of angels and child-brides."

“You’re drunk,” said Lucy contemptuously.

“Give them back, Torfrida,” Robert said commandingly. And then to Hereward, more enraged than I had ever seen him, “She’s not a toy in your games, Hereward, and I won’t have her . . .!”

“I believe the young lady has already spoken,” Hereward interrupted, mildly enough. “Do you know our opponent, Torfrida? Godric, noble coiner of this town.”

I glanced impatiently at the respectable young man, who really looked old enough to know better than this. He also looked decidedly uncomfortable suddenly, as if he wished he had never started this; which, of course, he hadn’t – his friend had. Only Hereward, for reasons of his own, had crudely turned the confrontation against him . . .

“We have met,” Godric said with difficulty. “At Folkingham.”

“My betrothal supper,” I agreed cordially. “You are husband to the beautiful Edith.”

He smiled. “As a reason for fame, I could do worse.”

I doubted it. However, keeping that to myself I crouched down as I had seen the others do, and somewhat inexpertly rolled the dice.

“Torfrida!” Lucy wailed. Some people had come out of the inn and were staring across at us. I smiled and waved to them. A breath of surprised laughter broke from Hereward, feeding my pleasure in rebellion.

I hoped very much that this would get back to Gilbert and Matilda. In fact, Robert should tell them, in his best tones of very genuine outrage.

Hereward, who had been standing above me, leaning one elbow negligently on the ale barrel beside Leofric's thigh, swooped down upon the dice and dropped them into the purse at his belt.

"There now," he said amiably. "Is your peculiar honour satisfied?"

"Of course not," Godric snapped. "How could it be?"

"Did I win?" I asked with interest.

"Of course you did," said Hereward, reaching down unexpectedly to draw me to my feet. "Even though Wulfstan here moved it with his toe."

For no reason, I laughed. Robert groaned. Wulfstan, a rather shifty looking individual, did his best to appear affronted.

Godric said angrily, "You are impossible!"

"I am victorious," said Hereward flippantly. "And you have still to apologise. So has Edwin, who first voiced your rude suspicions."

"Leave it, Hereward," said Robert sternly. "You are drunk, and Lucy and Torfrida . . ."

"Take them away then. Godric wants a fight."

"I do not," Godric said at once; and then, because there was no other option for a man of standing, he added, "But I am prepared for one, since your pointless little play has proved nothing – except that anyone may win with your dice!"

“Trial by combat,” said Hereward happily, and abruptly my rebellion was over. “Martin, fill the horns first. Have a drink, Rob, or go away.”

Lucy had me by the arm. “Come,” she said nervously. “There’s no doing anything with him in this mood. Just pray he doesn’t kill anyone . . .”

I would have gone with her tamely enough now, my silly recklessness vanishing into so much dust at the prospect of real violence, but Robert, oddly, would not leave it, even though he was still rigid with anger.

“You want to be taken up by the Sheriff’s men?” he demanded. “For fighting in the street? You especially cannot afford such an outcome, Hereward! Can’t you solve your childish quarrel by less lethal means?”

I regarded my betrothed with new respect. So, I think, did everyone else.

“Such as?” Hereward said thoughtfully.

“Ah . . .er . . . a . . . a race!” Robert said, floundering at the last, and Hereward let out a crack of laughter.

“Oh, tame stuff, Rob,” he mocked.

“All right then, a race on *stilts*, if you will!” Robert retorted. And a light of pure mischief began to blaze in Hereward’s strange eyes, blocking out whatever ugliness lay underneath. Leofric’s gaze came back into focus; he had begun to grin.

“On stilts,” Hereward repeated thoughtfully, as though the suggestion showed promise. “On stilts! A

three-legged race on stilts, the stilts to be made by each team. If I win, Godric apologises. If Godric wins, I'm a rotten, stinking cheat and he can have my loaded dice. Fair?"

"Ridiculous!" said Godric indignantly. "And I have better things to do!"

"Don't be feeble. Just because you're an old married man these days, and scared of your wife, doesn't mean you have to be boring too. What do you say? Two couples in each team?"

I'm sure Godric would have backed out. Certainly he wanted to, but his own supporters would not let him. In no time, Martin – the roughest and wiriest of Hereward's three present henchmen, who seemed to stand somewhere unclear between friend and servant – was filling drinking horns, and the men were all sitting or lounging about the barrel, drinking and arguing over the rules of the contest till even Robert had recovered his temper.

They decided in the end to start from the front door of the alehouse, to race across the road to the church, then once around the square and back again. If everyone fell before the end, the couple that got farthest would win. And Leofric the Black, for some reason, was appointed the race judge. Somebody had suggested Robert first for this task, but Hereward claimed indignantly that Rob was his partner, at which Robert looked distinctly alarmed, although as the ale went down he appeared more reconciled to it.

By the time all this was established, Martin and a couple of the townsmen, who had disappeared round the back of the alehouse, returned with armfuls of long logs – once clearly intended as fire wood – and a couple of axes. So we split into two camps. Leaving Godric and his cronies in triumphant possession of the square, happily chopping logs into usable sizes and shapes, Robert and Lucy and I accompanied Hereward and his henchmen back across the road to the alehouse – where Hereward led us straight through to the yard, ignoring the protestations of the keeper, who flapped his arms helplessly at us as we passed through his house.

“Tactics of surprise,” Hereward explained. “We have to make our stilts bigger.”

Robert transferred his doubtful gaze from our logs, which Martin had just dropped with some relief into the yard, up to Hereward.

“Why?” he asked succinctly.

“Bigger strides, of course,” Hereward said, crouching down to pick up a log and measure its length. “What’s the matter with you? We used to be good at this as children, in the fens – don’t you remember?”

“I remember *you* being good at it. I remember *me* falling off.”

“We’ll make them stout so no one falls off. What do you think, Martin? Could we keep our balance if we made all the stilts the full length of this log?”

Martin shrugged.

“You and I could,” he said ambiguously, and Lucy laughed. I swallowed my own sudden mirth back down, for it felt too wild. The recklessness was back.

“Excellent,” said Hereward, reaching to his belt for a knife. “Set to then. We’ll need to match the stirrups quite carefully.”

I brushed past him, thoughtfully picking up one log and then placing another rather precariously on top. The result was several inches taller than me.

“What are you doing?” Robert asked uneasily.

I looked at Hereward. “What,” I said, “if you used two, end to end? No one – but no one – would then have bigger strides.”

Chapter 7

Hereward's lips twitched. Regarding me, head slightly on one side, he said, "We could splice them together. They might be strong enough if we left them this broad. But it would be quite a weight."

"Who cares? With legs this long, you'll have won in about four steps."

I heard another breath of his laughter – reward enough for my creativity – but he was already setting to work with quick, deft fingers. Robert looked at me without affection.

Lucy said severely, "You're as bad as he is. In fact, you make him worse!" Yet I had the impression her mischievous soul was actually delighted, now that the prospect of lethal violence between her brother and Godric had been commuted to mere horseplay.

Not that Hereward wasn't taking his game seriously. While he worked, issuing practical advice with increasingly outrageous humour, till even Wynter was grinning, Robert was sent to spy on the others, to make sure no one else had the same idea. Leofric the Black, excused work on the grounds of his supposed

impartiality, had little to do but watch and smile his faint, slightly dreamy smile, contributing little to the repartee beyond an occasional blasphemous, "Bless you, my son," whenever Hereward requested it.

"Why is it your task to bless?" I asked curiously. "Are you destined for the Church, or something?"

"Terrifying, isn't it?" said Hereward. "Your soul in his hands."

Leofric smiled amiably. "It is my ambition to join the Church," he said peaceably. "Not as a monk, but as a priest of the world."

"It would have to be the world," said Hereward irrepressibly.

"Why do you mock him?" I demanded. "I thought it would be an untold advantage for you to have a tame priest to grant you absolution!"

Hereward shot me an upward grin from behind his hair, and carried on working. Once, I remember, he laid down his knife to concentrate more on his ale and on some hilarious argument with Leofric and Robert which, I thought, went over Wynter's head as well as Martin's. Yet I noticed Wynter's blue gaze rose frequently from his well-fashioned stilt to his friend.

Thinking aloud, I said abruptly, "Is he really as carefree as he seems?"

Wynter had no difficulty working out who *he* was. To his men, even then, there was only one *he*. But he appeared unoffended. With a quick shrug, he said, "Needs to go home, I suppose. Needs something to do."

“Perhaps you all do.”

“The fun wears thin after a bit,” Wynter confessed. “But Hereward’s as stubborn as his father.”

“Would not the lord of Bourne take you back now, if you came home without him?”

Wynter stared. “I would not go without him. None of us would.”

I looked at him curiously. “You would do anything for him, I think.”

“I would die for him,” Wynter said simply. Then, under my clear gaze, he flushed with rough embarrassment and looked away. “It’s the way things are,” he muttered.

And then Hereward rose to his feet, holding up the new stilts to their full, impressive height. Robert broke off in mid sentence; his mouth remained open, his eyes fixed in horror on the completed stilts. Slowly he swallowed, lifting his gaze to Hereward’s.

“No,” he said with finality.

“Don’t be a baby. It’s not so high.”

“Supposing I could get on, I’d only fall off! Aye and that’s another thing! How *do* you mean to get on? Exactly?”

Hereward looked at me.

I said promptly, “From the roof. You like roofs.”

Hereward’s eyes danced. “There you are then.”

Only Hereward and Robert had the long stilts. Martin and Wynter made do with more moderate models. “In case we fall off,” Hereward had explained.

“You’ll still have a sensible chance to save my honour – and my dice, more to the point.”

The shorter stilts were mastered encouragingly quickly; practice on the others, however, did not go so well. Amid increasing hilarity – fostered among the men, I have to say, by further draughts of ale – Hereward and Robert got up on the low inn roof, and sat with their legs dangling down the wall, while Lucy and I held the stilts for them, and I tied their legs together at the ankle.

“Ready?” said Hereward. “Now!”

Lucy and I let go. They both heaved their outside feet forward – and fell off. The third time they got two steps before they fell in a mirthful heap, and by then it was clear that it was Robert’s balance which was the problem. Still laughing, Robert offered to swap places with Martin or Wynter, but Hereward, apparently determined to make him suffer, wouldn’t hear of it. Which is why they tried a fourth time, got three steps and fell again, this time spraining Robert’s ankle in the process. Fortunately, he found the whole thing so funny that he was able to grin through what must have been considerable pain, and when Lucy bound the ankle for him, he was so far enchanted as to be quite reconciled to his injury.

Not so Hereward. When Wynter said, “Do you want my place?” he answered, “I do not!” quite roundly.

“Martin should go with you,” Robert suggested. “He has much better balance than me anyhow.”

“Yes, but he and Wynter are used to each other now . . .”

Speculatively, his eyes flitted from them to Leofric, then regretfully on to Lucy, to the alehouse keeper, trotting off with further orders, and finally to me.

He smiled.

“Torfrida. How is *your* balance?”

“No!” said Robert and Lucy together. But I knew only a wild desperation for the fun I had been deprived of for so long; the reckless laughter was back in me now with a vengeance, gurgling up and spilling over. And Hereward’s wicked eyes were answering me, urging me on.

“It’s all right,” Hereward assured the others, although I didn’t think he was even listening to them. “I can carry her weight so easily that even if she falls, I’ll make sure it’s on top of me.”

“I won’t fall,” I assured him breathlessly, anxious now only to begin.

Scrambling on to the low roof was easy. The hardest part, surprisingly, was the embarrassment of Hereward’s arm around my waist, and his warm, muscled leg moving against mine. I was not used to being this close to any man, let alone one so physically *intense*, and if I was not yet a woman – well, I was not a child either, and for several moments I lost my concentration in trying to cover my confusion. However, the threat of toppling from such a height does focus the mind wonderfully, and since Here-

ward's manner to me did not change in the slightest – except, perhaps, in increasingly rollicking humour – I quickly lost my unease and re-entered the spirit of the game.

The stilts were heavy. On the first step, Hereward was obliged to heave me forward, which upset our balance so far that I still don't know how we kept upright. However, arms stretched outwards on either side, like some monstrous, two-headed bird, we found we could *swing* our steps, which had the added advantage of speed.

“A lady of experience, I perceive,” Hereward observed. He seemed to be laughing inside, constantly, which was just as I felt, now that my childish embarrassment was over.

“I was only nine,” I said breathlessly, remembering a wild summer with my cousins. “And I confess I was not this high. Nowhere near! Do you think they can see us over the roof?”

“Who cares? Can you turn? We'll have to go round the side of the house.”

“Are they ready to start the race?”

“They'd better be: I haven't worked out how to stop yet.”

Martin and Wynter led the way. Lucy, taking over my role, had tied all the necessary legs, and Robert, hirpling through the inn to the front door, with Leofric's aid, prepared to supervise all.

Through my concentration, I heard the catcalls and laughter as the two teams reviled each other's stilts and prepared for the race.

"Where are the others?" one of the townsmen demanded. "If Robert is here, *where* is Hereward?"

"Here," said Hereward, as we swung to the front of the house in perfect harmony. I heard the dazzling smile in his voice before the deafening silence, save for our own breathing and the deliberate thud of our stilts. Someone swore, long and admiringly, and then the laughter came.

A group of people in the square were pointing at us, open-mouthed. "Now, Leofric," Hereward said significantly, although we were not yet abreast of the others. And Leofric, doubled-up with Robert in the throws of helpless laughter, waved one desperate hand.

"Go," he managed, obligingly, and the race began.

The first stride brought us close behind the others, although Godric and his partner were still well ahead. On very short stilts, they seemed to have an excellent and speedy system that made them look like bouncing rabbits. The effect was so ridiculous I wanted to howl with glee, but even I had to confess it worked rather more efficiently than our spectacular lumbering.

Our second stride took us almost to the road, where Godric's second team fell, much to the vocal joy of the watchers. We swung past them amidst great cheers. However, the force of the movement was now

propelling us so fast that I thought my legs would break with the effort of controlling them; and yet Hereward's hilarious commentary on the proceedings – some to the world, some for my ears alone – ensured that I could barely see for the tears of laughter clogging in my eyes.

Now only Godric was in front of us. Behind us, Lucy's wail – she was nothing if not partisan – told us that Martin and Wynter had fallen. A bad time, for we were negotiating the turn of the square and the open-mouthed, frequently ribald spectators were too close for comfort.

“If you're going to fall,” said Hereward, “aim for the fat old bore in red.”

I said breathlessly, “I was thinking more of his wife.”

“Less padding,” he said judiciously. “But I suppose such po-faced disapproval does deserve to be squashed. Will you hate me for this?”

“I hate you already. My legs are breaking. Look! Godric's over!”

“What are you laughing at? He's right in our path, the bastard, and we have to get past to win . . .”

“Can't we veer round them . . .? But that's not fair! He's deliberately getting in our way!”

“Can you stop?” Hereward asked with interest.

“Not unless I fall off.”

“Then it's over the top. Ouch,” he added as my fingers involuntarily pinched his waist in fear.

“Can we?” I breathed.

“We’ll soon find out.”

I had a glimpse, through my mirth and terror, of Godric’s suddenly horrified face, of Edwin’s open-mouthed resignation; and then they seemed to pass underneath us, between Hereward’s swinging legs. And Hereward’s laughter was no longer just inward. His whole body was shaking with it, and so was mine. We never stood a chance after that.

It was his own fault in the end. I think he was trying to knock Godric back over as he passed, and the unnecessary force upset his balance even more. We veered drunkenly, out of control.

“We’ve won,” Hereward gasped, with another lurching step. “It’s all right.”

“From whose point of view, precisely?” I demanded, and was suddenly yanked aside.

I was falling from a great height, on Hereward, and nothing in the world had ever been quite so funny before. I heard the warning cries of the crowd. I heard Hereward make a sound like “Ouf!” as the air was shot out of him by a combination of the road below and me above. And then we were a tangled heap of arms and ridiculously long legs, weighed down by impossible weights. I was laughing so hard that the tears streamed down my cheeks, into my mouth and my hair, as I raised my face to Lucy’s frightened concern and Robert’s white-skinned guilt.

“Here’s to Godric, beaten by a girl!” Hereward said ecstatically, when he could breathe. I turned my

wet head in the rubble to find his wild eyes blazing at me with a joy like lightning. “Torfrida, I love you!”

Chapter 8

The Earl of Mercia was old – so old that the son at his side was already middle-aged. Yet Aelfgar seemed to be one of the eternally youthful – all restless eyes and charming smiles. And only half the man his father was. Of course, even his mother, the lady Godiva, was the stuff of legends, her beauty being famed as far afield as Flanders. But she was not here.

She was the only one, I thought, amazed, as I slipped into the hall with Lucy behind some eminent lord and his wife. Half of Mercia seemed to be present at Folkingham, to discuss Prince Gruffydd and Earl Harold and the militia of all England. For Gruffydd of Wales had soundly defeated – and killed – the over-confident Bishop of Hereford, resulting in the calling out of the militia of all England against him – with Mercia’s bug-bear, Harold of Wessex, at its head. Which was why most of them were here. Lucy, on the other hand, was more concerned about her brother.

“Is he here?” she hissed at my back.

“He could be,” I said noncommittally. “My own mother could be here and I wouldn’t see her in this

throng . . . Here's your father, though, and Alfred." And behind them, the lady Aediva. Nothing, I supposed, would keep her from seeing her son, from the reconciliation I prayed was about to be effected. I was sure, you see, that this reconciliation was Hereward's only chance of salvation, whether or not he saw it that way. Without it, he would just grow worse and worse until everything good, even his loyalty, his care for his own people and for the unfortunate, was lost.

"You are not meant to be here," Leofric of Bourne growled at his daughter. Penitently, she stood aside for him and her mother to pass, but she looked up in time to exchange grins with Alfred, and to be ushered exaggeratedly in front of him. For once, they were in alliance to meet their brother and reunite the family. And I did not intend to miss it. Fortunately, Alfred seemed to be in favour of that, for I was allowed to go before him too.

By jumping and peering over heads, I could make out the Earl with Gilbert and Matilda, and some of the greatest men, over beside the high table.

"I suppose," said Lucy disappointedly, "that if we stood on each other's shoulders, they'd send us both home."

That jolted me. For the first time, going home had not been my first motive. Of course, by then my astrological studies with Provost Brand were encouraging me to believe in my father's eventual recovery; and although, in order to postpone the marriage, I

had resorted to the untruth that I had not yet reached womanhood, Robert and I had achieved a much better understanding since Lincoln. We were now allies in the cause of our ‘detrothal’.

Assuming us to be one of Leofric’s party, the crowds were still parting to let us through in his wake. And I peered around them to the best of my ability. And then Leofric stopped. I know because I bumped into him; and Alfred promptly walked up my heels.

“Ouch!” I said loudly, and Alfred and Lucy both giggled. Only then did I register the sudden silence in the hall.

Into it, before I could even be alarmed, a familiar voice said blandly, “I hear you brought the children. How nice.”

“Hereward!” roared Alfred. Unceremoniously, I was pushed aside as the boy raced past, round his still father and Gilbert, who had materialized in our midst, and into the arms of his brother. Lucy seized my hand and squeezed.

Craning my neck, I saw Alfred bury his face in the other’s tunic – an almost respectable one of good burgundy wool – his fingers gripping fiercely. For the briefest moment, Hereward’s hand touched his head; I saw his lips move as he said something into his hair, and then Alfred laughed and hiccupped together, allowing himself to be pushed away. Over the boy’s head, Hereward’s eyes met his father’s.

I watched with the anxiety of a mother hen. I found myself praying afresh that he would not say

anything insolent or flippant and lose this chance . . . If he wanted it. I realized I wasn't even sure of that.

The pause was long and pregnant. Hereward's lips stretched into a faint smile, parted so that I knew he was going to speak – *Please, God, let it be conciliatory!* – and then the Earl himself stood between them.

“I see,” he said with dignity, “that you have found each other. Shall we step into the lord Gilbert's private chamber, and deal with this matter first?”

Someone, I could not see who, said, “Why in private? The world knows his sentence though no court decreed it! Let the justification or withdrawal at least be done in public.”

There was a rush of agreement around the hall. But Hereward himself frowned, irritated for once by this vocal support.

Leofric of Mercia regarded his namesake of Bourne, one white eyebrow raised in interrogation. Hereward's father squared his shoulders. “We have nothing to hide, and nothing, I hope, to be ashamed of. Let it be in public then.”

The Earl inclined his head, the picture of ancient, yet still powerful grace.

“Very well. Hereward.” The Earl turned to the youth, who met his gaze directly, fearlessly. But his face was serious now to the point of sternness. “This long-running dispute between you and your father is so damaging that it affects not only your family but

the whole earldom, and as such, I have seen fit, as your lord, to intervene.”

Hereward nodded. It was accepting, but also curiously impatient: he wanted the Earl to get to the point, while the rest of us – I was not the only insatiably curious observer – simply drank in his every word.

“You know,” the Earl went on in his stately way, “that I have cause to value your father, as I hope in the future to value his son.”

There was another pause. This time, Hereward spoke into it, without flattery or affectation.

He said, “I have every desire to be of service to you.”

Leofric of Mercia took it as his due, merely nodding. “Yet the crimes you have committed against your father and his neighbours – no, you need not dispute them, they are common knowledge and irrefutable – are so serious . . .”

“I do not dispute I did them,” Hereward said impetuously. “I dispute only that they were crimes.”

“Do not interrupt me!” Leofric uttered, his face changing suddenly, reminding the world of his power in it and how it was he had hung onto it for so long. “I have brought you here to answer for your crimes, not to a court that would undoubtedly find you guilty, but to your father, who is prepared to forgive you.”

I let out my breath with relief. That was the first hurdle. Leofric’s forgiveness.

Hereward's eyes left the Earl's for the first time since the conversation began, moving directly to his father. A faint, half-mocking, half-rueful smile lurked about his mouth.

Echoing his father's words of months ago, he said, "For my submission, and what I took from you, and my sword?"

"For your submission," the Earl said. Leofric of Bourne said nothing at all. I shifted my position to try and see his face, but it was impossible. "And my own adjuration that you reach a better understanding together."

The conditions had been lowered. I recognized that at once. To all intents and purposes, Leofric of Bourne had given in to his turbulent son. And the son knew it. Yet I saw no triumph in Hereward's eyes, only a swift confusion of regret and guilt and gratitude, and something else quickly veiled by the ridiculously long lashes. The rebellion was over, and reparation about to be made.

Hereward's fingers gripped his sword-hilt, began to draw the weapon loose; and I understood the gesture he was clearly about to make. To deliver up the sword to his father who no longer demanded it.

I swallowed a sudden lump in my throat. I felt curiously proud of him, for in this one act of generosity, he was doing all I had hoped of him, and more.

Later, I thought angrily that there was no excuse, that both Leofrics, who knew him so much better than I, should have known to leave it there. But they

had given in and had to justify it, with or without Hereward's humility.

As if he had not even seen the youth's move, the Earl, suddenly grim, said, "If you choose not to submit, you leave me no alternative but to send you away from my lands, to withdraw my protection from you, to make you an exile without a lord. Is it clear?"

I saw at once what they had done. Why didn't they? A gasp rippled around the hall, of approval in some quarters, and outrage in others. Hereward himself stood unmoving, his hand still on his sword hilt, his eyes still locked to his father's. Waiting, I realized. Waiting for him to argue, to show his denial of the Earl's ultimatum. But he couldn't deny it. They had cooked it up together, and if Leofric of Bourne regretted it, he hid the fact in the determination of his glare. Only his hand, convulsively gripping the skirt of his tunic, gave him away.

Slowly, Hereward's fingers slackened their hold on the sword, let it slip back with a tiny shriek into its scabbard.

He said, "You would do that?"

His voice sounded merely conversational, but there was a desperate struggle going on to keep the hurt out of his eyes as well. To Hereward, *this* was betrayal. Aching for him, I wondered how far he had thought his father would let him go. I wondered why they could not understand each other's own foolish pride.

Low-voiced, more so than he had meant, I think, Leofric of Bourne said, “What do you expect? I have forgiven you so often, Hereward, and each time you have reoffended, worse than before. I *will* have your obedience!”

“Will you?” said Hereward, deliberately. Beside him, Alfred was gazing open-mouthed from his brother to his father and back, as if he didn’t understand what was going on. I wondered who did.

Lucy. She was silently weeping on my hand.

Just for an instant, I thought that even Hereward was unsure what to do, what to say. Like a sail suddenly deprived of wind. His restless eyes fluttered over his anguished mother, silently suffering throughout; then they wrenched away, quickly, back to the Earl.

“I thought you had summoned me to serve in your army,” he said brittlely. A boy, just a boy thwarted in his quest for honour. No wonder they had been so sure he would come. Betrayed again. I wanted to cry, and it had been so long since I had cried for anyone.

The Earl said brutally, “What use to me is the sword of an unreliable man?”

It was harsh, unnecessarily harsh. They were trying to shake him up, bring him back to a sense – *their* sense – of right. But they had chosen the wrong way, and the wrong man.

Hereward laughed, and if there was a catch in it, very few could have heard. “Don’t ask me. I have no unreliable men. Mine all give – and receive –

complete loyalty. Well, my lords, if my sword is not required here, I shall take it elsewhere.”

“Where?” demanded his father, disgusted yet desperate. “Who would accept it?”

“Alba?” Hereward said, as though suggesting it to himself. “I believe there is a spot of trouble up there still . . . Oh, don’t worry, my lord,” he added to the Earl. “I mean to go to King Macbeth himself, not to the protégé of any enemy of yours.” Not to Malcolm, he meant, not to the foster-son of old Earl Siward of Northumbria, not to the friend of Tostig, Harold’s brother. “I told you, I take my loyalty seriously.”

He laughed again, bowing to the Earl with almost inhuman, unhurried grace, before he deliberately walked past his father. He didn’t even see me, for Aediva was catching at his sleeve, as if she could not help herself. But Hereward shook her off – not, I saw, to be cruel this time, but because he could not bear any more.

“Hereward!”

Alfred was running after him, but his father caught him fiercely, growling something under his breath that kept the boy anguishedly still. And the crowd parted to let the outlaw through. He swaggered past till I could not even see his unconcern belied, as I knew it was, in his pain-filled eyes. He was an oddly dignified figure, alone, defying rejection with calm unconcern, although his every loose-limbed movement, like some half-tamed young wolf, reminded me that the violence in him was barely controlled.

When the door banged shut behind him, we even heard him whistling before the noise broke out in the hall. Through it, I saw Gilbert, slipping among the eagerly arguing Englishmen to the door.

At least, I thought, angrily dashing my hand across my eyes, his godfather would bid him farewell. I was conscious of gratitude to Gilbert for that. For the rest, I was aware chiefly of fury, because they had sent away my friend before he had even had the chance to become so.

**That's the end of the sampler. We hope you enjoyed it.
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Mary Lancaster was born in Scotland and graduated with honours from the University of St. Andrews. Her degree is in history, a subject which provides the chief inspiration for her writing. She has worked or studied in Wales, Glasgow, London and Edinburgh, and eventually settled on the Fife coast, where she still lives with her husband and two young sons.

Despite having earned a living over the years as Editorial Assistant, Researcher and Librarian, Mary Lancaster has managed to retain her love of books, particularly old and dusty ones. Her interest has always extended to writing them - though, for many years, only for her own amusement.