

Chapter 1

Adam de Guirande was in the bailey when his brother, William, was sighted at the top of the lane. It was three days before Twelfth Night in the year of our Lord 1327, and Adam should have already been on his way to Westminster, but he had delayed on purpose, not wanting to leave until his priest brother returned from his recent excursion to Tewkesbury Abbey.

It was wet rather than cold, and dark clouds to the east promised more rain. Adam sighed: it would be a long ride to Westminster, but he was not in a position to refuse. He had been summoned back to court, by both Prince Edward, his present young master, and Lord Roger Mortimer, his former master. From the terse wordings in the two separate messages, delivered by two different and exhausted messengers, Adam gathered his two lords were not seeing eye to eye on things. They rarely did lately. Ever since Mortimer—or rather Queen Isabella—had led the invasion that had deprived King Edward of his throne, the prince's relationship with his lady mother's champion and lover had cooled. Now King Edward was held prisoner at Kenilworth—an honourable and comfortable captivity, to be sure—and this had further distanced the prince from his mother.

Adam strode over to the gate to welcome William, stopping for a moment to take in his manor with proprietary pride. Tresaints was not a large place: it consisted of the manor house, several buildings that housed barn and stables, kitchens and storage sheds, and, to the left of the house, a chapel, built some centuries earlier by a returning crusader ancestor of Kit's. The thought of his wife made him smile, and he glanced at the solar window, the opaque horn panes lit from within by candles and fire. His Kit, surely sitting up in bed with their newborn son at her breast. A son, a little bundle he had already taken to his heart, holding him for hours as he slept.

William held in his horse and gave Adam a weary nod. He was covered in mud and drenched to the skin, shivering violently as he dismounted. Gavin, Adam's squire, was there to take the reins and lead the tired horse off towards the stables.

"Accursed wind," William said. "It drives the rain like nails through your skin."

"We'll have you in a bath soon enough." Adam studied the donkey that William had been leading. "Is that..." His mouth dried up.

"It is." William scrubbed at his face, the normally well-shaved cheeks bristling with fair stubble. "I would not recommend that you look inside."

Adam walked over to the donkey. A newborn son indoors, and here, in the darkening dusk, stood a donkey loaded with a wooden box that contained the remains of his eldest son.

"No coffin?"

"He was buried in haste. There were too many to bury to coffin them all, and what with the pestilence..." William left the rest unsaid, but Adam nodded. An unknown illness claiming several lives—the monks would be in a hurry to inter them.

"How do we know it is him?" he asked instead, caressing the rough grain of the wood.

"He was buried under his own name." William closed his eyes. "And I looked."

"You looked?" Adam studied the box. What was there left of a four-year-old lad after more than six months in the ground?

"The hair," William said curtly, and Adam didn't want to hear more. He lifted the box off the donkey, and something rattled inside. It made his stomach heave. So light, nowhere close to the solid little body that had been Thomas de Guirande, all blue eyes and fair hair and a disarming smile.

He had not wanted to do this, but Kit had begged and pleaded, saying it was only right that their son be brought back to rest at Tresaints. Adam cradled the little box. He'd had no desire to exhume his son's body, disrupt his peace, but when William had sided with Kit, he had given in with ill grace,

fearing that this would only open wounds that were half-healed. And he'd been right. To stand in his bailey clutching the nondescript box that contained his son's—he swallowed—bones, it was near on unbearable.

"I'll take it." William held out his hands. Adam shook his head. No, this he would do himself.

"I'll put him in the chapel."

William frowned. "By the door, Brother. There's enough left to smell." Adam threw him an angry look. His brother just looked back, his face grey with exhaustion and grief.

Once Adam had deposited his burden in the chapel, they made for the hall, entering together. Adam sent one of the maids off to arrange for a bath. William made straight for the large fire in the central hearth, pulled up a stool, and sat down, extending his sodden boots towards the heat.

"Were they helpful, the monks?" Adam asked, serving his brother wine.

"Not particularly." William's mouth twisted into a little smile. "The monks of Tewkesbury owe a lot to the late Despenser and his lady wife."

Adam flexed the toes of his damaged right foot, a constant reminder of Despenser, now safely dead—if unburied still, various rotting parts of the man decorating different locations. Even now, close to five years since Despenser had his men drive a red-hot stake through Adam's foot, he could recall the pain, and even more, the stench. He cleared his throat.

"A child is not to blame for Despenser's fate."

"No, but you are—or so they see it. They'd all heard that Adam de Guirande was one of the men who captured Despenser and led him off to meet his unsavoury death."

"I did as I was told to do." Adam drank deeply. The execution of Hugh Despenser still caused him nightmares, in particular the disturbing image of Mortimer and the queen dining as they watched the man die, piece by piece.

"It doesn't matter anymore." William held out his goblet for a refill. "England is now ruled by the victorious queen."

"Aye." And the equally victorious Mortimer, but Adam chose not to say that.

“So,” William said, smiling at him. “Has the babe arrived?”

“He has—four days hence.” Adam smiled back. “A healthy lad, with hair as red as his mother’s.”

“Ah.” William chuckled softly. “A temperamental son, then.”

“For now, all he does is eat, shit, and sleep, so I can’t tell.”

“And Kit?” William asked.

“Recovering, but still abed.”

“No, I’m not.” Kit’s voice startled Adam, who rose to his feet, as did William. She was not dressed for visitors, her dark red hair hanging in a thick braid down her back. Her kirtle was loosely laced, and she grimaced as she sat down, brushing at her swollen breasts. A right picture, his wife, her milky skin tingeing with pink under his appreciative eyes.

“A son, I hear.” William smiled fondly at Kit. At times, it irked Adam that his wife and brother had such a close relationship, and he didn’t like that there were things she’d talk to William about but not to him. “I can’t very well talk to you about you, can I?” she’d said when he aired this with her, and that comment had not made things any better, rather the reverse.

“A son? More like a starving wolf,” Kit said. “He eats all the time.”

They said nothing for a while. Finally, Kit turned to William. “Did you find him?”

“I did.”

Kit closed her eyes, but not before Adam saw the spark of hope extinguished. He sat down beside her and took her hands.

“He’s home, sweeting. As soon as we can fashion him a coffin, we will bury him here, where he belongs.” More or less the same words she’d said some weeks ago, but from under her eyelashes a tear or two seeped. He disengaged one hand and captured one of them with his thumb. “You knew he was dead.”

She opened her eyes, brilliant pools of blue that glittered with unshed tears. “But I hoped.” Kit leaned her head against his chest. “I hoped, Adam.” He stroked her head, fingering her heavy braid.

“So did I.” He drew her even closer. “God help me, so did I.”

Kit insisted they go to the chapel, overriding Adams protests that it was too cold, too dark, and that there was nothing to see—not really.

“I can’t leave him alone in the dark,” she replied, so, with a sigh, Adam got to his feet, found a cloak for his wife, and led her over the muddy yard with William trailing them.

As always, entering the little chapel imbued him with a sensation of peace. Kit greeted each of the three saints that guarded the entrance and then they were standing on the tiled floor, facing the altar. One single candle illuminated the entire room, casting most of it in shadow. In the gathering dusk, the stained-glass window on the eastern wall was mostly a collection of dark blues and black, and the flickering flame of the candle reflected on the polished floor.

Kit crossed herself and lit four more candles—one for every year of their son’s life. Hesitantly, she approached the little box.

“I want to...”

“No.” Adam was not about to open this makeshift coffin.

“But...” She stooped, placing a hand on the lid.

“No.”

Kit rocked back on her heels, a crease between her brows as she studied him.

“No, sweeting,” he said, hearing how his voice shook. He sank down to his knees. “Leave him be. You—we—should remember him as he was.”

Very slowly, Kit sank down to her knees. “He really is dead, isn’t he? And I’ll never see him again.”

“Sweeting, hush.” He cleared his throat. “Our son is safe now, free of the pains and rigours of this world.” A scant comfort: his son should have been learning to ride, collecting bruises and scrapes as he played. By now, he’d have had his first wooden sword, and Adam would have taught him how to use it. Not to be.

“Sometimes, God is very unfair,” Kit whispered to Adam. “Why did he have to take our son? Why not one of Despensers’ children?”

“God’s ways are unfathomable,” William put in, sounding more like the priest than the brother. He knelt down beside them, shivering in his damp clothes.

Kit didn’t reply. Tears streamed down her face as she commended her son’s soul to God.

Once indoors, Kit gestured them up the stairs to the solar. A tub had been placed before the fire, the steaming water sprinkled with rosemary and lavender. Kit dismissed the maid, gently disengaged little Ned from Meg’s arms, and handed their son to Adam.

“Time for bed, child,” she said to Meg, brushing a wisp of dark hair off their daughter’s forehead. Not quite two, Meg was as temperamental as Adam’s trusted old stallion, Goliath. At her mother’s words, Meg’s lower lip jutted out, her finely shaped brows—so like her mother’s—pulled down in a frown. She opened her mouth to protest.

“No.” Kit sounded firm. “You heard me. Now go with Mabel, and if you’re biddable, I am sure she’ll tell you a bedtime story.” She ushered the child towards the door and the waiting Mabel.

Adam nodded approvingly. For the first few weeks after being reunited with their daughter, Kit had hovered round the child as an apologetic shadow, but a recent confrontation involving Meg, Kit’s favourite veil and some shears had re-established the natural orders of things, Kit a firm and loving mother, Meg a wilful handful of a child.

Kit turned to William. “Why aren’t you in the water yet?” she scolded, helping William with his thick robe before turning her attention to his boots and hose. “And the shirt.”

William shook his head. “I’ll keep it on.”

Adam raised a brow. “Why?” He’d seen his brother naked often enough, as had Kit.

“Because I want to,” William snapped before getting into the tub. He hissed at the heat, sitting down very carefully while his shirt billowed like a sail around him.

“I can’t wash you with that on,” Kit said.

“I’ll wash myself.” William snatched the soap pot out of her hand, grunting as he did so.

“William?” Adam placed Ned on the bed. “What ails you?”

“Nothing!” But the way he washed himself, hands skating carefully over his arms and shoulders, told another story.

“Your shirt, Brother.” Adam crossed his arms and stared down at William. With a muttered expletive, William drew the shirt over his head, displaying a series of welts and bruises, the skin broken in several places.

“What happened to you?” Kit’s hands hovered over him without touching.

“As I said; not everyone welcomes a de Guirande with open arms.” William gave Adam a mulish look. “I gave as good as I got.”

“I’m sure you did,” Adam said. “But I’m assuming this wasn’t the monks.”

“No.” William looked away. “This was a band of ruffians.” He grimaced when Kit washed a long, seeping gash. “Despenser men. Peace is as yet a fragile thing, and I heard much muttering along the way. As long as the king remains at Kenilworth, he remains a rallying point for the discontent.”

“So what would you propose be done with the king?” Adam sat down on a stool, rested his shoulders against the wall, and extended his long legs before him, crossed at the ankles.

“I don’t know.” William gave him a tired look. “But while he remains alive—”

“Shh!” Kit scowled. “What are you saying? That the king be killed?”

Adam shared a look with his brother. Much better for the realm at large if King Edward were to die—but impossible to contemplate. The prince may have acquiesced to being his mother’s puppet—for now—but he would never countenance killing his father.

“Lord Roger will restore the peace.” Adam smiled crookedly at the irritated expression on his wife’s face.

“May God help him,” William said.

Some while later, the manor was sunk in sleep. William had been given a bed in the hall, and in their solar Kit was lying in Adam’s arms, her head on his chest. The babe snuffled in the cradle, one

of Adam's hounds sighed as it stretched out by the hearth, the glowing embers the single source of light in the shadowy room.

Adam toyed with her braid, wrapping and unwrapping it around his hand. She yawned and moved closer, her heavy, warm breasts pressing into his side. Tomorrow, he would be gone from her, and God alone knew when next he'd share a bed with her. He smiled ruefully; he had never expected to develop such a dependency on his lady wife, and he had no intention of ever admitting to it, but this was how he slept the best, with her at his side. He tightened his hold on her hair.

"Once Ned is old enough to travel, I can come and join you." She raised her head to look at him. "Do you think that would be all right?" And he could hear it in her voice that she detested being separated from him.

"I don't see why not." He brushed a finger down her nose. "Our prince has already decided he expects you to be on hand to welcome his bride." He chuckled. "Little Philippa is inordinately fond of you, isn't she?" Their future queen was all of twelve, and at present remained with her parents in Valenciennes, waiting for the papal dispensation required for the marriage to happen.

"She's a sweet child. She will make him a good wife—a gentle and sweet wife, very different from his lady mother."

"Mmm." Adam smiled at the ludicrous thought of Queen Isabella as a demure wife.

"Will the queen be at court when you return?"

Adam laughed out loud. "Queen Isabella *is* the court." He tugged at her braid. "For now. Her son will not always allow her to eclipse him."

"And rightly so."

"You don't like her much, do you?" Adam lowered his voice despite knowing they were alone.

Kit shrugged. "She is like a flame, and those who fly too close may end up singed and burned." She frowned. "And I like Lord Mortimer much more than I like her."

"So do I." Adam sighed. Truth be told, he loved Lord Roger.

The next morning, Adam set off for Westminster. He didn't want to leave, all of him screeched in protest at riding away from his wife and their home. And as to Kit, she clung to him, and he kissed her repeatedly, promising he would be back as soon as he could.

When he swung astride Raven, his coal-black stallion, she stood beside him, gripping his stirrup.

"Ride safely," she said. "And beware of the wolves."

"The wolves are all dead, sweeting," he said with a smile.

"The wolves never die, Adam. When one is killed, a new one takes its place." She patted his leg. "God's speed—and hurry home to me."

"I will return as soon as I can." Which, he admitted ruefully, was utterly imprecise.

Chapter 2

Prince Edward had grown—or so it seemed to Adam, who was taken aback at the sight of his young lord. It was not much more than six weeks since he'd seen him last, but in the intervening time Edward had filled out, and in a dark blue tunic of finest wool that hung to well below his knees, in boots of red leather and a heavy golden necklace set with gems that sparkled in the candlelight, he looked more royal than ever before.

But the smile that lit up his face at the sight of Adam was still that of a young lad, as was his hasty, undignified approach.

“You're back! At last,” the prince said, enfolding Adam in an embrace.

“My lord, this is not seemly.” Over Prince Edward's head, Adam caught more than one displeased look: the future king embracing a minor knight!

“I don't care.”

“But I do, my lord. I don't want to wake up with a dagger at my throat.”

“They wouldn't dare. And Lady Kit? Is she well?”

“She is.” Adam grinned. “And very proud of herself, on account of presenting me with a son. As you suggested, we've called him Edward.”

“My first godson.” The prince clapped his hands. “My congratulations, Adam. And maybe this little one will make the grief over Tom more bearable.”

“I hope so.”

“It was God's will,” Prince Edward said.

“Aye.” Adam studied his feet. “But that doesn't help much, my lord.”

“No, I suppose it doesn't.” With this statement, the prince clearly thought the matter closed and went on to discuss other matters as they walked towards the dais, on which sat the queen, deep in conversation with Lord Roger.

“They mean to make me king,” the prince said in a hushed voice. Of course they did. Thereby they eliminated any risk posed by the captive king, and as the prince was only fourteen, the reins of government would remain in his mother’s capable hands. Adam bowed from some distance away; the queen inclined her head, eyes as green as emeralds studying him. “But I won’t let them,” the prince added. “How can I, when my father still lives?”

“My lord, your lord father will never rule again,” Adam said, as gently as he could. Keeping the king alive was a risk, but to have two crowned kings in England was the equivalent of opening a Pandora’s box of strife and bloodshed. So if they planned to crown the lad, what would happen to the king?

“I know.” Prince Edward’s shoulders slumped. “I want to see him, but Maman says he doesn’t want to see me.” Thick eyelashes shielded his eyes. “Do you think that’s true?”

“I don’t know, my lord.” Adam cursed the queen to hell and back for her insensitive comment, true or not. “Could you not write him and ask?”

Prince Edward gave him a bleak look. “Do you truly think he’d be allowed to read it?”

It was a lively court Adam returned to. Over the coming days, he met most of the prince’s new companions, a colourful collection of lads and young men who were all somehow related to the important families of the realm. Some were of an age with Edward; quite a few were closer to Adam in years, as was the case with Roger Mortimer’s eldest son, Edmund. Not that Edmund aspired to a place among the prince’s companions—rather, he maintained a careful distance. But upon seeing Adam, he shone up.

“A son, I hear.”

“Aye, a healthy, squalling lad.” Adam scanned the room. “Your lord father?” He had not seen much of Mortimer these last few days.

“Not here. He and the who...— the queen—are busy elsewhere.” It came out very bitter.

“Beware, Edmund,” Adam said in a low voice. “The queen—or her son—will not have her spoken of like that.”

“But that’s what she is,” Edmund hissed, his fine features contorting. Adam sighed. Edmund and his mother were close, and Lord Roger’s open love affair with the queen was tearing Lady Joan asunder. Edmund leaned closer. “Four years locked away from the sun and the wind, all because of him and his ambitions. Or should I say his and her ambitions?” He broke off, cursing softly. “And after all those years, he returns—to England, to his lands, but not to his wife. How can he? It was us, not him, who paid the price. It was us—me, my mother, my brothers and sisters—who were locked away. But now he no longer cares for us, not now that he has that Babylon whore in his arms.”

“Shush! Besides, that’s not true.” Adam placed a hand on Edmund’s arm, causing him to flinch. “Your father loves his children—and Lady Joan. But this thing with the queen...” Adam cast about for words. “It’s like a poison, a fire burning through his veins. I don’t think he can help himself—and God have mercy on him for it.”

Edmund didn’t reply. His fingers picked at the embroidered edges of his sleeves, dark eyes flitting constantly around the room. The fine velvet tunic hung off his frame, and Adam could only imagine what several years as the king’s prisoner had done to him.

“Will you be staying at court?”

Edmund shook his head. “Thank the Lord, no. I am off to Wigmore within the week.” His face shone up. “Spring at home, eh? And even more importantly, spring as a free man.” He studied his hands. “It is difficult getting used to.”

After some further conversation, Edmund excused himself and left the hall, trailed by a young man Adam belatedly recognised as yet another Mortimer son, this one being John, at most sixteen or so.

“Consorting with erstwhile traitors?” someone said from behind him.

Adam turned, scowling. “Traitors? Edmund—”

“It was a jest,” the man standing in front of him said.

“In bad taste,” Adam snapped. “Especially to a man who has paid the price of so-called treachery.”

“Ah yes. But it was treachery at the time, was it not?”

“The king broke his vows,” Adam replied curtly. “What can men do but rebel against such a king?”

“So a king must live up to a higher ideal than the rest of us?”

“Yes.” Adam looked him up and down, trying to place the dark hair, the long face and dark eyes. “Don’t you agree?”

The man pursed his lips. “I do. A king is set to rule and must do so by example.” He laughed. “That would, however, disqualify many a king from being king, don’t you think?”

“Probably. Montagu, is it not?” Adam asked. The man bowed.

“William Montagu, at your service.”

“And I at yours, my lord,” Adam replied, bowing somewhat lower.

Not all of the prince’s friends were as polite as Montagu. Many of them made it clear they considered Adam nothing more than an upstart man-at-arms, and more than once he was aware of eyes digging into his back, now and then accompanied by a whispered comment about him being Mortimer’s spy. Adam chose to ignore it all, focussing instead on his young lord, who was more than delighted to have Adam back.

“Look,” Prince Edward said, holding up a squirming pup. “A gift from Lord Mortimer. Its dam is half wolf.” He stroked the pup over its brindled back. “I aim to call him Lancelot.”

“Lancelot?” Sir Henry Beaumont, the prince’s tutor and guardian, rolled his eyes and muttered that he doubted such a renowned knight would be pleased at having a dog as his namesake.

“He’s dead. If he existed at all, that is.” Edward gave his tutor a challenging look.

Sir Henry stroked his beard. “Well, let us explore other heroes today.” He gestured towards the solar. “Virgil awaits you.”

Edward groaned but followed obediently, the pup cradled in his arms.

“And what will it help him to read Virgil?” Montagu slid down to sit beside Adam in the window seat. “How will the story of Aeneas make him a better king?” He produced a couple of figs and offered one to Adam who shook his head.

Adam lifted his shoulders. He had little Latin and had never heard of Aeneas, but he had no intention of sharing this with Montagu.

“He loves you,” Montagu said.

“My lord?”

“The prince. In his eyes, you stand first among men.”

“And does that trouble you?”

Montagu bit into the fig and chewed. “Not as such. I find it surprising, no more.”

“It will pass. He will grow out of his former protectors.”

“Of course he will.” Montagu gave Adam a cool look. “At some point, he will rid himself of all reminders of Mortimer.”

Adam’s gut clenched. What exactly did that mean? “Like his mother?” he enquired mildly and was quite pleased by how stricken Montagu looked.

“The prince should be accompanied by his peers,” Montagu muttered.

“Men like you.” Adam nodded. “Like Ralph Stafford and the de Bohun brothers. But not men like me, a mere knight, no more.”

William Montagu flushed. “I don’t mean to disparage you.”

“But you did.” Adam rose. “I shall ask the prince’s guidance on this matter.”

“What?” Montagu leapt to his feet. “No, no, I didn’t mean to imply—”

“Of course you did,” Adam cut him off. “I am the prince’s man. Until he releases me or casts me out, I stay.” To his surprise, Montagu threw back his head and laughed.

“I stand chastened, de Guirande.” He extended his hand. “Start again?”

Reluctantly, Adam took his hand. He needed a friend—or at least a neutral acquaintance—among the men closest to his lord.

One such ally he already had, Adam reflected some hours later, bowing in greeting as Thomas, Earl of Norfolk and uncle to the prince, came towards him. Adam owed the earl his life, and for all that Thomas of Brotherton had problems keeping his eyes to himself whenever Kit was close, Adam liked the man—a lot. In difference to his incarcerated royal brother, Earl Thomas was level-headed and an intelligent man who thought before he acted. He was also a skilled fighter and a good drinking companion, more than capable of holding his wine.

“You’re back!” Thomas slapped Adam on the back—hard. He always did. As always, Adam pretended not to have felt anything, and the earl’s mouth twitched into a little smile. “One day, I’ll clout you so hard you fall on your face.”

“You can try, my lord,” Adam replied.

“A challenge, de Guirande?” Thomas chuckled. “You know me, I can’t resist a challenge.” He sobered. “How are things with your fair wife?”

“Kit is doing well, as is our son.”

“Ah.” Thomas bowed slightly. “A son; I am glad for you.” He guided Adam to the side, keeping a cautious eye on the various groups of courtiers. “I hear you’re to accompany Mortimer tomorrow.”

“I am?” Adam studied Lord Roger, at present standing beside the seated queen. The fairest amongst women, Adam thought, watching Queen Isabella tilt her head back to look at Lord Roger. A long, beautiful neck, visible through the folds of her sheer veil, an elegant figure highlighted by the tight fit of her newfangled cotehardie, for the day in deep red; her face, her mouth—her catlike eyes, gleaming green in the light of the candles—no wonder she held a man like Lord Roger enthralled.

“You ride for Kenilworth.” Thomas sounded curt. “You and half the parliament, to hear it.” He tossed Adam a walnut. “Ned insisted you accompany the party.”

“What for?” Adam asked.

“To inform the king that the barons have renounced their loyalty to him and force him to abdicate in favour of his son.”

“And then what?”

Thomas grimaced. "I don't know, but God help and sustain my brother in these, his darkest days." He nodded in the direction of the queen. "She will not allow any harm to come to her husband."

"No, she wreaks her vengeance on the Despensers instead." Adam was sickened by the story Sir Henry had told him earlier, describing in hissed detail how three of the Despenser daughters had been forcibly dragged from their mother not yet a fortnight since.

"Children!" Henry Beaumont had exclaimed. "The eldest no more than ten, the youngest four, and now they've been veiled, locked away to live out their lives as nuns."

"Together?" Adam had asked, hoping that the three girls had at least been afforded that source of comfort. Henry had merely looked at him, slowly shaking his head.

"What about Lady Eleanor?" Adam asked Thomas.

"What about her? My dearest niece remains in the Tower, at the queen's pleasure. I dare say they won't let her out until they've found her a suitable husband. Eleanor de Clare is much too precious a marital price to be allowed any say in her future."

Adam shrugged. That was the way things were ordained. Wealthy women were wed as it suited their family best, and a woman as comely as Lady Eleanor would attract a number of suitors. Politically, the queen would be foolish to allow Lady Eleanor to choose for herself.

On the dais, the queen laughed. She lifted her goblet to her mouth, drinking deeply.

"More spoils of war," Thomas murmured. "Our fair queen has appropriated dear, dead Hugh's collection of golden goblets. I think she finds it most satisfying to drink from them."

Adam studied the tableau on the dais. To one side, the queen and Mortimer, Lord Roger smiling down at his lady love as if oblivious of their audience. He wasn't, of course. Lord Roger rarely did anything in public without a purpose. On the other side of the dais, the prince was lounging in his chair, listening intently to whatever the tallest of his companions was saying. But now and then he glanced at his mother and Lord

Roger, and Adam felt an icy finger travel up his spine at the look in the prince's narrowed eyes.

"Dearest God, it isn't over," he muttered.

"Over?" Thomas lowered his voice. "Of course it isn't over. The play for power has just begun." He nodded at his nephew. "He hasn't found his claws yet. God help them when he does."

"She's his mother!"

"Aye. And the man you're riding to strip of his crown is his father."

Chapter 3

“He won’t accept it, he says.” Mortimer spat to the side and handed the pitcher of wine to Adam. “Silly brat! Parliament offers him the crown, and he says he will not touch it unless his father abdicates.” He shook his head. “He has balls, our young king.” His face clouded. “Too big, perhaps.”

“It is difficult for him, my lord.” Adam glanced at his young master, at present laughing with his friends and his younger brother. It was getting late, the fire in the large hearth had dwindled to glowing embers, no more, and other than Edward and his companions, the large chamber was empty, wise men seeking their beds rather than more wine. Adam would have preferred his bed, but Lord Roger had asked him to stay, and so here he was, sitting on the shadowy dais with his former lord while his present lord made sport with the jester and his dog.

“Does him credit,” Mortimer muttered. “Had the whelp leapt at the crown, I’d have been in two minds about him.” He emptied his goblet. “And so I am yet again burdened with the task of being the bad wolf. Me, not Isabella, not young Edward. Oh no, it is me that must ride to confront our former liege, put the fear of God in him should he choose not to cooperate.” He scowled. “Knowing him, he’ll not make it easy. He may have made an utter mess of things, but he has quite the stubborn streak in him—and is foolish enough to hope that he will be granted an opportunity to yet again turn the tables on me. Us,” he corrected himself, smiling down at the ring the queen had recently given him, thick gold adorned with a red jewel.

“It could still happen.” Adam crossed himself. Dear Lord, not that: not a kingdom torn asunder between father and son.

“No.” Lord Roger’s voice was flat. “Edward, second of that name, will never rule again. Never.”

Adam’s brows rose. “My lord?” No man knew what the future might hold.

“You heard. Never—not as long as I live and breathe.” Lord Roger grinned. “Besides, parliament has already decided to depose him. Edward may still make things difficult, but he can’t stop them—not now.”

“And the Despensers?” The daughters had been cloistered, but there were sons as well. Sons who would have every reason to avenge their father. The Despenser lands had been divided up, and it stuck in Adam’s craw to admit Mortimer had proved as rapacious as Despenser when it came to land, demanding the lion’s share of Despenser’s Marcher lands.

“Finished,” Lord Roger said. “You were there, remember?” As always, when he recalled Hugh Despenser’s death, something thick and furry clogged Adam’s throat.

“What will you do about his sons?”

“Despenser died attainted, and the sons are imprisoned,” Lord Roger replied. “Well, bar the fool still holding out at Caerphilly, but it is but a matter of time before he submits. And that’s what they’ll all do—submit or remain behind walls for the rest of their lives. And even if they don’t, what threat can they pose to me?” His eyes crinkled into a smile. “I have the lady of the realm by my side.”

The ride to Kenilworth was cold. Too cold, January winds laced with icy rain penetrating cloaks and woollen tunics. By the time the distinctive red keep rose before them, several days after setting out, Adam’s hands had frozen in place round the reins, and Raven’s thick black mane was dotted with ice crystals, glittering under a pale winter sun. Even his legs felt sheathed in ice despite both hose and leather breeches.

Once through the main gatehouse, they walked their horses over the causeway, ice making the ground treacherous. To their left, the great mere was silent and frozen, tufts of reeds rattling their frost-encrusted heads in the relentless wind. They slowed at the inner gatehouse, were inspected one by one by men in Lancaster tabards, and were then allowed to enter the lower bailey. They dismounted. The bailey rang with noise; shod hooves clattered over cobbles, men laughed and talked, and here and there a dog barked, a sword clattered. Mortimer

led the way towards the inner bailey, guarded by yet another gatehouse. Henry Lancaster came out to meet them, standing at the top of the stairs that led to the massive keep.

By the time Adam made it up the outer stairs, Mortimer was already deep in conversation with Lancaster, throwing but a cursory glance at Adam before continuing with what he was saying.

“I’ll see him first,” Lord Roger said. “See if I can knock some sense into him.”

Adam raised a brow but said nothing, noting several displeased looks. Lord Roger best beware—in the eyes of the men assembled, Mortimer was an unknown and dangerous quantity, and comments such as this would not endear him to those who feared the power of Queen Isabella’s lover.

“I’ll go with you, my lord.” Adam was here not only for Lord Roger, but first and foremost for his lord and master, Prince Edward. The prince would not like it if Mortimer entered his father’s rooms unaccompanied.

“As you will.” Lord Roger sounded amused. He leaned closer. “And no, I wasn’t planning on murdering him,” he added in an undertone.

“I know.” Adam gestured discreetly at their travelling companions. “They don’t.” Mortimer’s expression hardened.

King Edward was standing by the window when Mortimer and Adam entered the room. It was freezing, the fire in the hearth a pitiful source of heat in a room where the shutters stood wide open, the northerly wind gusting snowflakes onto the floor near the window.

Henry of Lancaster had provided a sizeable chamber for his royal captive, but had not gone out of his way to furnish it beyond necessities. A large bed, covered by an assortment of blankets and pelts, one armchair facing the hearth, a table, a stool—on the table a goblet, a pitcher, a plate with a half-eaten roll of bread. The room reeked of loneliness, of hours spent in solitude.

“Mortimer.” King Edward did not turn fully to face them.

“My lord.” Mortimer bowed, and Adam followed suit before hastening over to fasten the shutters.

“What do you want?” The king sounded tired. “Come to complain about the she-wolf?”

Mortimer bristled, dark eyes narrowing. “Your son refuses to accept the crown unless you willingly abdicate.”

“Good lad.” Edward ambled over to the hearth, found a poker, and dug into the embers. “So now what? Aim you to put a leash on me?”

“No.” Lord Roger kept a cautious look on the poker, as did Adam. “You abdicate, of course.”

“I do?” The king brought the poker down, hard. It made Adam jump, but Lord Roger didn’t so much as flinch. “Why should I?”

“Why?” In a swift move, Lord Roger grabbed the poker and threw it into the corner. “Because otherwise I will set myself up as king.”

“You wouldn’t dare! No one would accept it.” Edward of Caernarvon drew himself up to his considerable height—he overtopped all but Adam—and glared.

“No? Do you wish to put it to the test? Of course, first I must rid myself of the other contestants, so both your sons must die, and your daughters I will force to take the veil.” Mortimer grinned, and in the flickering light he looked akin to the devil. Adam wiped his hand on his tunic: Was Lord Roger serious?

“You wouldn’t!” Their former liege shook his head, fingers fussing at the fine fabric of his robe. For all his bare surroundings, Lancaster was ensuring his prisoner was adequately dressed, his surcoat trimmed with fur, the robe beneath in velvet. Somewhat sombre, the black material caused the king to look wan and ailing.

“You think me less ambitious than your precious Dispenser?” Lord Roger advanced on the king, who shuffled backwards. “What would he have done, do you think?”

“He would never have threatened my children! Never!”

“No, he threatened other men’s children instead,” Lord Roger replied, and the king deflated, sitting down on the chest at the foot of the bed.

“I loved him. Loved him so much, and now he is dead, and I will never...” He bit off the rest of the sentence, raising

a shaking hand to his hair—far more grey now than fair, but vigorous and curly.

“You loved him too much—more than you loved your children or your kingdom, and much more than you loved your honour. A king cannot allow himself such passion.”

“Honour? Passion?” Edward’s face hardened into a mask of royal displeasure. “And tell me, is it honour or passion that has you bedding my wife every night? What does Lady Joan think of your honour? What, pray, does my son think of it? And what does he think of his whore of a mother, that French—”

The slap resounded through the room. Adam moved forwards, hand on his sword, not sure if his intention was to defend the king or save Lord Roger from himself. To judge from Mortimer’s compressed mouth and the way his nostrils dilated, Adam feared the man was about to fly into one of his memorable—though uncharacteristic—rages. With a curse, Mortimer turned his back on them. Adam counted to six, and then Lord Roger turned to face them, his features fixed in a bland expression.

“So,” he said. “Will you do it?”

“Do what?” Edward gave him a puzzled look, a hand to his flaming cheek.

“Safeguard the crown for your son by abdicating.” Lord Roger sounded bored.

“Do I have a choice?”

“There’s always a choice, but one must abide by the consequences.” Lord Roger stretched his lips into a wolfish grin. Silence stretched between them. The king and his baron glowered at each other. Finally, Lord Roger shrugged and made for the door. “Parliament has already made its decision.” He threw it open and stood back, indicating Edward should precede him.

“Where are you taking me?” Edward retreated, the folds of his black robe merging with the shadows.

“To the hall—there is an entire delegation waiting for you there.” Mortimer regarded his former king. “Sire,” he added mockingly.

“No.” Edward planted his feet wide and lowered his head.

“No?” Mortimer fingered the hilt of his sword. “And what makes you think you have a choice? Either you walk on your own or I’ll have you dragged there.” Mortimer leaned his shoulders against the wall and waited. Edward looked from him to Adam before he succumbed.

“Very well. Lead the way.”

“Oh no. After you.” Mortimer made a little bow.

The walk from the keep to the hall was short, Adam and Lord Roger flanking the king. They stepped inside, and Edward came to an abrupt stop.

“What is this?” he demanded. “Why is my peace so disrupted?” His gaze flew from his steward, Thomas le Blount, to his chief justice, Geoffrey le Scrope, his tongue darting out to wet his lips. His eyes narrowed when they found William Trussell, the man who’d presided over Despenser’s mock trial, and Trussell paled and clasped his hands before him.

Adam studied the various knights and barons, then shared a nod with Orleton. He liked the Bishop of Hereford and was glad to see him here, confident that he would ensure matters were handled in an orderly fashion—well, as orderly as it was possible to handle the removal of an anointed king from his throne. Adam swallowed. A momentous occasion, to be sure. None of the men now present had any reason to love their former liege, but quite a few shifted on their feet, coughed and cleared their throats, faces averted as they attempted to avoid looking straight at the man they aimed to depose.

“Edward of Caernarvon, we are here to seek your voluntary abdication from the throne.” William Trussell raised his voice but was so overcome by what he was saying that all of him shook. He had not volunteered to be the spokesman—it had been an honour thrust upon him by Mortimer. An unnecessary turning of the knife, in Adam’s opinion, and he didn’t know quite where to fix his gaze as Trussell continued. “This realm no longer recognises you as our king. You have failed your subjects, you have repeatedly broken your vows, you have sinned, and...” His voice tailed off, but other men took over, some loud and vociferous, such as the Earl of Surrey, others

speaking in more measured tones. The message, however, was the same: Edward of Caernarvon would rule no more.

Utter silence settled on the company when Edward knelt. When he abjectly begged them for forgiveness, more than one man looked away. A king, to kneel before them—no, it wasn't right. Adam shuffled where he stood, hoping his young lord would never ask him to describe this scene or the ravaged man before them.

Edward remained on his knees as Orleton read out the formal proclamation, and then Thomas le Blount took a step forward, looked his former master in the eye, and broke the staff of office. And just like that, the man before them was no longer king; he was but a knight—and a landless one at that. Adam pursed his lips. A conundrum: How to handle a deposed king?

Matters concluded, the man who was once their king was escorted back to his chamber by Mortimer and Adam. With a shaking hand, Edward poured himself wine—heavily sweetened, to judge from the scent—and drained the goblet before throwing it at the opposing wall.

“Curse you,” he said thickly. “Curse that treacherous wife of mine. You have stolen my crown!”

“No, Edward. You lost it.” Mortimer shrugged. “You were born to it, but it never fit, did it?”

Edward studied his rings. “I am what I am,” he said after some moments of silence. “I could do no other than I did.”

Lord Roger's mouth thinned, but he said nothing. Instead, he nodded in farewell and made for the door.

“Wait!” Edward called out. “What about me?” There was a forlorn tone to his voice, more akin to that of a child than a grown man. “What will happen to me?”

“I don't know.” Lord Roger pulled on his gloves. “It is not up to me.”

“Will I...” Edward swallowed audibly. “Will...” His hands rose to his neck.

“Of course not!” Lord Roger scowled. “What do you take us for? I give you my word of honour that you will not be harmed.”

“Ah yes, the famous Mortimer honour,” Edward said with a sneer. “God knows you set a high store on it.”

“At least I have honour—you don’t,” Lord Roger snapped.

“For now.”

Lord Roger bristled, and Adam took a careful step closer.

“My lords,” he said, and both turned to look at him. Lord Roger scrubbed a hand over his face while Edward’s shoulders slumped.

“My son, may I see him?”

“Not yet.” Mortimer knocked on the door for the guards to let him out. “Once he is crowned, perhaps.”

There was a glimmer in Edward’s eyes as he turned away. Clearly, he did not believe Lord Roger. Neither did Adam.

“Did you mean it, what you said in there?” Adam asked once they were back on their horses, Kenilworth’s keep already far behind them. “Would you have tried to take the crown for yourself?”

Lord Roger’s mouth fell open. He blinked a couple of times, and Adam was reassured by his apparent surprise. He loosened his hold on the pommel of his sword, realising with a start that he’d been gripping it ever since Lord Roger’s threat of usurpation.

“God’s truth!” Lord Roger glared at him. “And do you think that woman of mine would have stood to the side while I disinherited her precious whelp?” He snorted. “Never come between a lioness and her cub, Adam. It will cost you your life. Besides, I have no right to the throne—but neither does the man we just left. He forfeited it long ago.”

Amen to that, Adam thought.