

ANNA
BELFRAGE

THE
CASTILIAN
POMEGRANATE

Time *Light*
press

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Chapter 1

“We should have remained in France,” John the Gascon said, holding in his horse beside Robert’s large stallion. “I do not like this, Robert. Not at all.”

“No,” Robert FitzStephan agreed, studying their surroundings. Despite being late in the afternoon, the sun on this day, the first of September in the year of our Lord 1285, was warm, a golden light softening the contours of the hills, the recently harvested fields, the meadows. Grape vines grew on the south-facing slopes, still heavy with ripening clusters. To his left, Robert could make out a flock of shorn sheep and beyond them a collection of houses, overshadowed by the brooding walls of the castle above.

“Too silent,” John said. “There should be people harvesting the grapes, out among the animals.”

“Aye.” He too would have preferred remaining in France. Truth be told, he’d have preferred never to have left England, but instead here he was, destined first for Aragon, then Castile, and all because of a grief-struck queen and her threats. He glanced over to the rest of their group, halted some distance away. A stout litter, men like Tom and Harry—and John—that he’d ridden with for close to two decades, his young squire, Elias, and four more men-at-arms that Robert had hired in Bayonne. The litter swayed, the curtains parting as his wife alighted from the contraption. She saw him and raised her arm. He waved back before returning his attention to the churned ground to the side of the road.

“Many men,” John commented. “And mounted on war horses.”

Robert nodded. The imprints of horseshoes were easy to see. “So there is truth in what we’ve heard,” he said. “Philippe the Bold aims to conquer the crown of Aragon by force.” All along their long ride south from Bordeaux to Bayonne, from Bayonne to St Jean Pied-de-Port, they’d heard of the French king’s Aragonese Crusade.

What had started as a furious French reaction to Aragon’s annexation of Sicily had swelled into something more when the pope had firmly placed himself in the French camp. The French pilgrims they’d travelled with over the pass of Roncesvalles and down along the River Arga had brought news of the events at Roussillon, where, apparently, the French had burned a cathedral to the ground with the inhabitants inside—not the best start to a Crusade.

“Of course he does,” John said. “And let us not forget he has the pope’s blessing.”

“Even when they slaughter innocents?” Robert asked mildly. In the distance, something moved, and he stood in his stirrups and shaded his eyes. Nothing. A figment of his imagination, no more.

“When has a pope ever truly cared about the innocent?” John replied. “Not since St Peter himself, I’d wager.”

True enough: popes did best concentrating on spiritual matters, but of late the popes were meddling increasingly in the matters of the world—usually to the benefit of the French. It was the pope who had blessed Charles d’Anjou’s campaign to wrest Sicily from the Hohenstaufen family several decades ago—he’d even dubbed it a Crusade, although the whole world knew Manfred of Sicily was just as Christian as Charles. More so, apparently,

seeing how despicably Charles had treated Manfred's surviving little sons. Blinded and locked up forever behind walls—no good God-fearing man did such!

Robert smiled crookedly, recalling with some bitterness that he knew of at least one more man who dispatched innocent children to live out the remains of their lives as royal captives. As always when he thought of little Owain and his older brother, Llewellyn, Robert raised his eyes to the sky and sent off a prayer that their captivity at the hands of his lord and master, Edward I of England, not be too harsh. He counted back in his head: now in the Lord's year of 1285, Llewellyn ap Dafydd would be sixteen and likely a bitter young man, very different from the proud and brave lad he'd escorted two years ago to his permanent captivity in Bristol Castle. He shook himself free of these rambling thoughts and the accompanying guilt.

"A raiding party?" Robert asked, gesturing at the hoofprints. He looked back the way they'd come, yet again convinced he saw something move. Nothing—and even if it were, it was probably a sheep. They'd seen no one all day and had crossed the border between Navarra and Aragon some hours earlier after spending the night in a little inn in a hamlet called Uharte before setting off due south east.

In Navarra, they had now and then seen companies of mounted men, but there had been no indication of an assembled army to invade Aragon from the northwest. According to their voluble innkeeper, Pedro of Aragon had crushed two Navarra armies back in 1283 and had threatened to do worse should he have to. Still, according to that same innkeeper, the French host had already rolled into Aragon, invading this mountainous land foot by hard-fought foot.

"Probably. I reckon most of the Navarra men-at-arms are riding with their king," John said. "If so, they are likely with the French."

The king of Navarra was also a Philippe, son of Philippe of France, heir to the French throne and nephew to Pedro of Aragon. Not that Robert thought it likely there would be any tender family reunions between the House of Capet and their Aragonese relatives—there was too much blood between them, and ever since King Pedro of Aragon had taken it upon himself to wrest Sicily out of Charles d'Anjou's grasp, things has slowly been building towards a final confrontation. Pedro claimed Sicily by rights was his—well, his wife's, as Constanza was Manfred's daughter and only surviving unmaimed child.

The sound of a horse had Robert turning. Noor was astride her palfrey, riding the spirited little mare with ease. Beside her loped Mist, the huge wolfhound that was Noor's constant companion.

"Why have we halted?" she asked. Days on the road had left her with a lovely pink tinge to her olive skin, those dark eyes of hers fringed by the longest and darkest lashes he had ever seen. He smiled at her, and her generous mouth curved in response, the tip of her tongue visible for an instant. She looked lovely, the fabric of her kirtle clinging to her round breasts and making him think of beds and sheets that smelled of lavender and sun. Admittedly, he was somewhat besotted with his wife.

“We are but scouting the lay of the land.” Robert nodded at the roadside. “I do not like it, that mounted and likely armed men have ridden here recently.”

Noor gnawed her lip. “Should we turn back?”

“Or maybe ride due southwest instead,” John said. “After all, if that monk Guillaume is right, the Aragonese kingdom is no more, what with the French army having conquered Girona.” He tilted his head due south. “Do you think it is true? That Charles of Valois is already crowned king of Aragon?”

“Crowned and recognised is not the same thing,” Robert said. “Something tells me Pedro of Aragon will fight unto death to hold on to what is rightfully his.”

“Not according to the pope,” John said with a wink.

“But if Charles is crowned, is not everything lost?” Noor asked, struggling with her veil when a sudden gust of wind unfurled it from her head. A glimpse of dark hair, neatly braided and wound like a crown on top of her head. Hair that would spill well down to her buttocks when it was unbound. Hair so thick, so smooth, a man could lose himself in it, allowing it to shield him for a moment from the world. Hair that was only his to see, so Robert grabbed hold of a fluttering length of silk and held it until Noor had ordered her appearance.

“I think not,” Robert said once his wife was looking adequately modest again. “But John is right: we should probably detour this part of the world.”

“We cannot,” Noor told him. “We have missives to deliver—at our queen’s orders.”

“I will not risk our lives,” Robert said.

“I see no risk to them.” Noor set a hand on his arm. “The sooner we deliver her letters, the sooner we can return home.”

Except, of course, that was not true. He couldn’t help it: he looked at the litter and the sturdy little lad playing in the grass beside it. As long as Noor refused to give up Lionel, they could not go back—or so the queen had ordered.

Noor sighed inwardly when her husband’s gaze lingered on the dark-haired child, happily plopping pebbles into a small puddle. Every day, she spent hours in silent prayer, asking God for guidance in this convoluted matter. Every day, she waited in vain for a divine message, and so she was left to sort the matter on her own. One thing she knew for certain: she could not abandon a child—especially not a child who had no one else in the world but them.

In Lionel’s world, Robert was his father and she his mother—time enough later to clarify they were but his foster parents. Lionel’s real name was Gruffydd, and he had been entrusted into Noor’s care by none other than his real father, Dafydd ap Gruffydd, last Prince of Wales.

Not only was Gruffydd the son of King Edward’s most hated enemy, he was also true-born, a child birthed by a mother who was so exhausted by the time her ordeal was over she never noticed when the newborn lad was replaced by a maid babe. These days, that unfortunate little maid child lived out her days behind the walls of a convent in Lincolnshire while Prince Dafydd’s two older sons were kept under lock and key in Bristol Castle. And

should King Edward ever find out that Robert and Noor were knowingly harbouring Dafydd's last-born son . . . She swallowed. God help them!

He would likely hang Robert—if he was feeling merciful. If not, her husband would suffer the tortuous fate of not only being hanged but also drawn and quartered. Just the thought had Noor's guts cramping, and she threw a look at her husband, presently laughing at something John was saying. His head tilted back—it always did when he laughed—his long, dark hair sweeping his shoulders. He'd dispensed with a coif—as had all his companions, even if Harry insisted on wearing a large hat, complaining that this southern sun was too hot for his poor head.

Despite the heat, Robert was wearing the old leather surcoat his grandsire had given him more than a decade ago—a garment so patched and mended Noor teased her husband there was nothing left of the original. Unusually, Robert was sporting a beard—something he insisted would come off at the first decent bathhouse they passed. She agreed: it was a shame to hide his features under all that hair. Especially his mouth. At present, it tickled when he kissed her—which he did frequently.

Robert laughed again. For an instant, their gazes met, his light eyes crinkling at the corners as he blew her a kiss. Her man, so full of life, and just the thought of him being tortured to death . . . No one knew, she told herself shakily—she did that often. Except that Queen Eleanor had added two and two together and harboured strong suspicions as to Lionel's real identity, and then there was that Welshman Rhys, who had accompanied Dafydd to Orton Manor that day when he'd placed his son in Noor's care.

Only the fact that Queen Eleanor feared for her royal husband's immortal soul had stopped her from sharing her suspicions with him. Aghast at having lost yet another son, her beloved Prince Alphonso, convinced that this was divine retribution for what Edward had done to Dafydd's children, Eleanor had instead ordered Noor and Robert to leave England with the child, saying that as long as she was alive they were forbidden to return with the boy. "Get rid of him," she'd said. "Leave him behind at a monastery somewhere and you are welcome to return."

Without conscious thought, Noor had steered her mare back to the litter and dismounted to hug Lionel. "Never," she whispered into his hair. "I will never abandon you." So instead she prayed for divine guidance and—God forgive her—for Queen Eleanor's death. Far too often, she woke angry, silently cursing the woman who'd obliged her and her husband, their foster son and their little daughter, Isabel, to leave their home for a long and hazardous voyage.

The litter drapes were pulled back, and Amalia stuck out her head. "Are we to stay here all day?" she grumbled. "I long for Sevilla, for Castile, not for a field in the middle of nowhere." She smoothed her wimple into place, framing a very round face in which two dark eyes were the most distinctive feature. "And you," she said to Lionel, "come here, *mi tesoro*. You cannot go about like that!"

“Let me,” Noor said, reaching inside for Lionel’s coif. The child protested loudly, but when she promised he could ride with her once the coif was tied into place, he stood as still as was possible for a child born with quicksilver in his veins.

A couple of hours later, they were travelling down a rutted road. Still unnaturally silent, still uncomfortably hot despite the lateness of the day, and Noor was yet again astride her mare, looking longingly at the shade offered by the woods that bordered the road to the left.

Robert and John were riding some distance ahead, and she knew they were concerned—as was she, having caught the flash of sunlight reflected on metal in the distance. Even worse, there’d been smoke, dark tendrils snaking upwards to paint the azure sky, but after that there had been no more sightings of anything potentially threatening. And yet . . .

“Look!” Elias called, pointing at the sky. Two soaring eagles, circling lazily above them.

“Maybe they’re after one of the lambs,” Noor said.

Elias laughed. “They may be big, my lady, but unless the lamb is newborn, they could never carry it off.” He craned his head back. “I wonder what it is like to be able to fly, to see the world spread below you.”

“Well, it is not something you will ever find out, is it?” Noor said, smiling at him. She’d known Elias her entire life, him a month or so older than her and, just like her, raised at Orton Manor. But where she had grown up the daughter of the lord, Elias had spent his childhood in the stables and kennels, his father the head groom.

“No.” He grinned. “But at least I am well on my way to seeing the world.”

“Part of it, lad,” Robert said, having joined them. “Not a very big part of it either.”

Elias looked at him verily like an adoring hound stares at his master. It made Noor suppress a little smile. “Will you tell me again, my lord? Of your adventures with the king when you travelled all the way to the Holy Land?”

“Ask John,” Robert suggested. “He was there too.”

“So was I,” Harry said. “No one ever asks me to tell them about it.”

“Likely because your version would be very short,” Robert said, punching him lightly. “Along the lines of ‘*Aye, I got on a ship, we travelled for many weeks, we arrived in Acre, the king was almost murdered and then we went back home again*’.”

“Which is a correct depiction,” Harry said.

“But bone dry,” Noor said. “You’d never make a good minstrel.”

“I never wanted to be one,” Harry said with a shrug.

Something darted out of a nearby shrub. With a loud *woof*, Mist set off in pursuit and after him went the men, cheering each other on as they chased after the wildly leaping deer. Noor laughed but kept her mare under control. Instead of following the men, she rode her mare in among the trees before dismounting. She darted further into the woods before crouching to relieve her bladder.

A twig snapped. Noor rose out of her crouch, hastily smoothing her skirts into place. From behind came the sound of something rushing through shrubs, and she ran for the

horse. Why had she walked so far away from it? Her veil snagged and tore; a branch whipped her across the face. She could see the road now and the swishing tail of her mare. Heavy footsteps thundered towards her. She dared a quick look over her shoulder. A man. A mountain of a man. With a little yelp, she increased her speed.

A large meaty hand closed over her arm, bringing her to a brutal halt. Moments later, she was off her feet, and the ground came rushing towards her. Noor landed with a thump, all air knocked out of her. The man reached for her. She slapped his hand away. That made him laugh. Yet again that hand on her arm, hauling her to her feet, but this time she bit him, hard enough that his hold slackened. She tore free and ran.

“Help!” she shrieked. “Robert, help me!”

An arm round her waist, lifting her, and Noor screamed again, a wordless howl. The man cursed and slapped a hand over her mouth. She fought. She kicked and flailed, but it served for nothing. Her arm caught on something sharp. She tried to scream. He pinched her nose closed. No air. She sucked and sucked, but that hand the size of a trencher, those fingers, denied it to her. She could hear her blood rushing through her head, her vision became hazy, blackness leaking in round the edges. She could no longer lift her arms. Her legs . . . so heavy. A weak kick, another. She slumped.

Noor regained consciousness when she was dumped onto the ground. She scrambled away from her captor, clutching at her throbbing arm. She was bleeding from a deep gash, her fingers coming away stained a bright red.

Several men approached, men who looked at her with the intent look of cats staring at a mouse. Men-at-arms, she’d hazard, taking in their weaponry, their surcoats, all of them emblazoned with the same heraldic badge.

“Oh, for the love of everything, again Guillaume?” the youngest of them said in a peevish tone. He spoke French—oddly accented French, to be sure—but Noor heaved herself to her knees.

“Let me go!” she said, addressing the young man. “How dare you carry me off like this?”

“Let you go?” The man who had grabbed her chuckled. “Not bloody likely. Not when you’ve made me bleed, wench.” He slapped her—hard enough to send her off her knees and back on her rump.

“You attacked me!” she said. “What right do you have to do as you did?”

“The right of the strongest,” another man said with a laugh. “And besides, a woman on her own?” He tut-tutted.

“I am not on my own! Any moment, my husband will come to find me.” She shifted backwards, away from them. Her fingers closed on the handle of her eating knife.

“Really?” Guillaume drawled, following her. “I heard no sound of pursuit.” He snickered. “No, I think that husband of yours does not exist. But do not fear, pet, come morning you’ll have fifteen new ones.”

“How dare you!” Her back hit a tree. She cleared her throat. “I am Eleanor d’Outremer, wife to Robert FitzStephan, and woe to any of you if you do as much as tweak my hair.”

That huge oaf of a man laughed and tore off her veil. This close, he stank of garlic, sweat and rotting teeth, his every breath emitting a putrid stench. Thick, pudgy fingers sank into her hair, and she gasped. “Want me to show you just how hard I can tweak?” he said, and those fingers twisted and tugged until tears scalded her cheeks.

“Leave me be!” she said, hating how fearful she sounded. “Please,” she added, directing herself to the young man, who, to judge from his apparel, was the closest thing to a lord these ruffians had.

“Think Lord Fernand has any say in this?” one of the other men said. “Think again, wench.” He smirked when Guillaume twisted his hand deeper into her hair, causing her to yowl with pain. “Go on,” he said. “We all want our turn with her.”

In desperation, Noor stabbed at the man holding her. Futile, the short blade barely scoring the heavy leather of his gambeson.

“Like that, hey?” Guillaume wrenched the knife from her, slapped her in the face with such force her bottom lip burst and punched her twice in the belly. Air whooshed out. Noor tried to curl together, but that hold in her hair made it impossible. “Best do as I say,” he growled. “Best do it now.” And there was his hand, shoving her skirts out of the way while his companions cheered him on.

“What was that?” Robert drew Mars to a halt just as Mist turned on his hind legs and came rushing back towards them. “Noor!” he exclaimed when he heard his name. “That’s Noor!”

He followed the dog as it made for the distant litter. Halfway there, the dog came to an abrupt halt and leaped into the woods instead. Her mare was there, standing placidly under a tree, but of Noor there was no sight.

John almost fell off his horse, Harry dismounted somewhat more carefully and Tom and Elias leapt off.

“What?” John gasped.

“I don’t know!” Robert searched the ground. The dog whimpered and took further steps into the forest. The faint scent of urine under an oak and there was a patch of downtrodden ground, the branches of the nearby trees broken. The dog sniffed and took a hesitant step further into the dark.

“They went that way,” a dark voice said.

Robert closed his eyes. Not him. Not here. Suddenly, those sightings of a shadow in the distance made sense.

“What are you doing here?” he hissed.

“Later,” the Welshman said. “Now we best see to your wife before the ruffians who grabbed her do.” Rhys nodded at the horses. “I suggest you ride. Me and my companions will flit like shadows.”

“And then what?”

“You do what you do best; we do what we do best.” The Welshman was already holding his bow. He bowed slightly in the direction of Robert. “You are better with the sword than I am.”

“And the bow,” Robert replied.

Rhys merely smiled, as did his five companions.

The dog led the way. The six Welshmen melted into the shadows of the trees while Robert rode towards the distant sounds of men laughing. Someone screamed again. Noor. His belly tightened, and he pulled his sword. If they’d harmed her—

“They’ve had no time to tumble her,” John said softly from behind him.

“You think not?” As Robert recalled, bedding a reluctant woman took little time. Not that he’d ever done so himself, but men after a battle left to loot and despoil in lieu of wages were quick to throw a woman to the ground, shove her skirts to the side and thrust into her.

The woods gave way to a clearing. A fire was burning in its centre. Several horses stood neatly hobbled to the side, but it was the spectacle under the large oak that drew Robert’s gaze. His wife was fighting like a hellcat, a huge mountain of a man laughing at her futile efforts. Her skirts were bunched at her waist, the man had a massive thigh between hers, one hand tugging at his braies. Noor half sat up and clawed him across the face.

The man had hold of her wrists and pushed her flat to the ground.

“No!” she shrieked, and those massive bared buttocks tightened while the men standing in a loose circle cheered him on.

They leapt aside when Robert rode straight at them.

“Stop him!” he yelled.

“Too late for that,” one of the younger men said, a hand at his sword.

“I wasn’t talking to you,” Robert snarled.

An arrow hissed through the air and buried itself in the would-be-rapist’s throat. Blood, a gargled scream and he fell forward, atop a screaming, weeping Noor. A couple more arrows and there were ten men left standing.

“How dare you!” The youngster blustered. “These are my men!”

“Under your command, are they?” Robert asked.

The youth straightened up. “Yes.” He raised his chin, adopting an expression he likely thought was forbidding.

“Ah. So why did you not stop them from abusing a woman of gentle birth?”

The youth’s pale cheeks coloured. “How was I to know she wasn’t a whore?”

“A whore?” Robert rode Mars in a tight circle round the youth. “Are you saying my wife looks like a whore?” He had his eyes on the men, but all of him strained towards Noor. At least she was silent, and a quick look over his shoulder revealed John had freed her from the dead man-at-arms.

“Well, she is one now,” one of the bastards said.

With one strike, Robert lopped his head off. "Best hope she isn't," he told the remaining men, now held at bay by his companions and the Welshmen. "Because if she is, none of you will see the sun again."

"How dare you threaten me!" the impudent pup hissed. Robert's response was to knock him over the head with the flat of his sword.

"Robert?" Noor's voice shook. She had somehow regained her feet and was standing with her back against the tree. "Robert?" she repeated. "I—" She held up her arms to him, and there was blood on her hands, her forearms. He was off his horse. Two strides and she was in his arms, and he clutched her to his chest.

"Did he harm you?" he whispered, his hands conducting a quick inspection. "Because if he did, I'll cut the heart out of every man still alive." He touched her face, her arm, and she recoiled with a hiss. Her sleeve was drenched with blood, there was blood streaking her face, dripping from her lip. Hurt her? The bastard should have been flayed alive! He tightened his hold, and she made a protesting sound.

"Bruises, no more," she said, smiling up at him—a wobbly little thing that contrasted with the tears in her eyes. "I am sorry."

"Sorry?"

"I should not have left the road." She grimaced, tentatively touching her arm. She looked at him again. "You stopped him in time," she said, lifting a hand to his cheek. "I could feel him against my thigh, but—"

He covered her lips with a finger. He did not want to hear this. How unfortunate the bastard was dead as otherwise he'd have cut off his cock and fed it to him in slices. Instead, he folded her into his arms and told her just how much he loved his little hawk.

Behind him, there was a commotion. One of the prisoners attempted to run. A well-placed arrow had him tumbling to the ground instead. Robert set his jaw. He would deal with them later.

Chapter 2

It was dark by the time Noor was safely back in the litter. For a while, Robert sat with his wife, holding her hand as she slept. The sheer linen hangings billowed softly in the evening breeze, lifting sufficiently for him to see Amalia with the two children and Janet, the wet nurse, sitting some distance away. There was a faint smell of blood lingering in the litter, but Noor looked clean if bruised. Her lashes fluttered. She opened her eyes, gasped at the sight of him.

"It is only me, my hawk." He moved to lie beside her. She made room for him, and he stroked her bruised face, her bandaged arm. Gently, he traced her scabbed lip, and then he pressed a soft kiss to her forehead. "They will pay," he whispered. She gave him a wan smile. Her eyes closed, and he held her until he was certain she was fast asleep.

The remaining eight prisoners stood bound in a tight circle, eight pairs of eyes following Robert as he slowly walked around them with his sword drawn.

"I demand that you set us free," the young lordling said. "You have no notion who you are dealing with."

"Oh, I do. An incompetent lout who cannot keep his men in check."

"That is not true!" The youngster straightened up. Like a leek, he was, all tall and stringy and just as green.

"Ah, so it was your idea, then, to carry off my wife?"

The pup swallowed so hard Robert could see his Adam's apple bob up and down. One of his men snickered. That was the last thing he did, his body collapsing as his head flew through the air. His remaining companions staggered as the weight of the dead man almost brought them to the ground. Blood spattered their faces, their clothes.

"You cannot do this!" the youngster shrieked. "I am Fernand de Montferr, you hear?"

"I hear, but I neither know of you nor care," Robert said.

"English oaf!" Fernand said. "I am cousin by marriage to the king of Navarra, future king of France!"

"And my wife is the niece of the English queen," Robert snarled.

The lad's mouth hung open. "What?" he squeaked.

"You heard. So what will your dear royal cousin say when I tell him you took it upon yourself to abduct a married woman, a woman with blood ties to the English crown?"

"I . . . I . . ." Fernand said.

"How were we to know she wasn't a doxy?" one of the other men said. "There she was, all alone in the woods—"

"Had you but asked her, I am sure she would have informed you," Robert said icily, and from how some of the men looked away, she had told them.

"Besides, rarely do trollops stray all that far from the inns and towns where they earn their living," John put in. "It would be a strange whore indeed to be looking for eager customers in the woods."

In response, the man shrugged.

“Was it on your orders my wife was abducted?” Robert asked again, directing himself to Fernand.

“No,” the lad said stiffly.

“You admit it, then, that you have no control over your men.”

A large man with a grizzled beard just laughed. “We’re his nursemaids. His dear mamá would not have let him step outside the castle otherwise.”

“Hold your tongue!” Fernand hissed.

“So you took the decision,” Robert said, addressing the large man.

“No,” he said. “But once Guillaume brought her back, I wasn’t about to say no, was I?” He regarded Robert calmly, knowing full well what was about to happen. Moments later, his bound companions were struggling with the weight of two dead men.

An hour later, the surviving captives had been run off. All but Fernand, who was pulling at the ropes that secured him to his two dead companions and cursing Robert to hell and back as he watched his men flee in nothing but their shirts.

“Let me go or kill me!” he yelled. “Don’t just leave me like this!”

Robert stood before him and carefully wiped his sword clean. “I don’t kill pups. I teach them a lesson. Besides, you may be of value as a hostage.” And then he walked away.

“Untie me! For the love of God, do not leave me to sit here with the bodies!”

“Whoever unties him is a dead man,” Robert told his men. “He can spend the night with them, and tomorrow I’ll decide what to do next.”

Come dawn, Robert was in a foul mood. That damned elusive Welshman had disappeared as quickly as he had appeared, and it irked at Robert to have Rhys of Clun shadowing him, a silent reminder of who Lionel really was. Even worse, he was now forever in the Welshman’s debt, and that did not sit well with him. At some point, he feared he might be forced to dispatch the dark-haired Welshman to the afterlife, but how honourable was it to do thus to someone who had helped you save your wife?

Noor lay sunk in sleep in the litter, and she looked remarkably pale, dark, dark lashes resting on cheeks he had never seen so drained of colour—bar the ugly bruises. But Amalia assured him there was nothing seriously wrong with her, even if she recommended they remain where they were for a day or so to give Noor the time to recuperate without the swinging motion of the litter.

Once he had informed himself of his wife’s health, Robert reluctantly approached their prisoner. Now tied to a tree rather than his dead men, Fernand looked as if he’d passed his night in abject terror—as he should have, incompetent oaf that he was. The men had been buried, and Elias was presently assessing the horses—healthy, solid mounts that would bring in good money at the next sizeable town. One horse was a beautiful bay, dark mane falling heavily down the side of its neck, an equally dark tail near on sweeping the ground. Not a mark of white on him, and to judge from the elegance of the neck and head, it came from Moorish stock.

“That one we keep,” Robert said to Elias.

“That’s my horse,” Fernand protested.

“Not anymore. Now it is part of the compensation you are more than delighted to offer my wife,” Robert retorted.

“So what am I to ride?”

“Ride?” Robert shook his head. “You will walk.”

“Walk? I swear, FitzStephan, one day you will rue your treatment of me.”

Robert raised his brow. He had some spirit, this sprout of a lad.

He sat down some distance away from the lad. “So how goes the French king’s venture?”

“Well. He will soon throw the Aragonese into the sea.” But he would not look at Robert as he said this, tongue slipping out to wet his lips.

“Ah. If so, then I may just as well leave you staked along the road here, and you can just wait until a band of victorious French come riding by.”

“What?” Fernand’s eyes widened. He was a comely young lad—his features a tad too delicate, his wrists a tad too thin. Translucent skin dotted with freckles, large blue eyes fringed by lashes so fair they almost looked white—Fernand de Montferr could easily have passed for a female should he have wanted to. Fair hair fell in unkempt curls to his shoulders, his coif somewhat askew, which just served to underline how young he was. How on earth could anyone have thought him fit for command, Robert thought, taking in long, spindly legs, narrow if straight shoulders and a pointed chin that showed not so much as a hint of a bristle.

“Mmm,” Robert said, biting into a round of bread. “It would take them at most a day or two, would it not?”

Fernand’s lower lip quivered, his gaze never leaving the bread. “No,” he said at long last. “It would not.” He sat back against the tree. “Pedro of Aragon has not given up. Aye, my liege controls Girona, but not much else—for now,” he added, flashing Robert an angry look. “With God on our side, we will emerge victorious, and when we do, I will have you flogged, dog that you are.”

“It is unwise to threaten those who hold your life in their hands,” Robert said calmly, and Fernand’s shoulders slumped.

“Aim you to kill me?” He lifted his chin. “If so, do it now!”

“As I said yesterday, I do not kill pups. Tell me more about this ongoing war.”

Fernand scowled. “I do not know much. I know King Philippe is bringing in reinforcements by the sea. Many, many men, close to a hundred ships, or so I have heard.”

“Ah.”

“They will swell the French host further, and Pedro of Aragon will be crushed.”

“Assuming those ships make it.” Robert stood up. “As I hear it, Aragon has controlled the seas along its coasts for decades.”

Fernand didn’t reply. But from the way he bowed his head, Robert would wager his horse the lad knew the French king might have overreached—badly. He studied the mountains that rose to his left, sharp crags and cliffs softening into hills and dales. Not the

easiest of terrain to ride a conquering army through—and all those mountain passes, all those roads narrowing to bridges that spanned churning little rivers, were ideal for ambushes. A few good bowmen in strategic positions and the French would find it difficult to do much foraging unless they rode out in force.

“Have you ever been to Girona?” Robert asked. Fernand gave him a surly nod.

“Not much to see,” he muttered.

“Is it far?” Robert detested having so little knowledge of his surroundings. His intended route was to make for Zaragoza and, if necessary, continue on from there to Barcelona, hoping to find the Aragon court in residence at either of those cities. Now, though . . .

“Aye. North of Barcelona.”

“Ah.” Robert chuckled. “The vast French host has not made much of an inroad, then.”

“The French are everywhere! My king and his lord father will tame the perfidious Pedro, just you see!”

Robert made a point of standing and scanning the surrounding landscape. “Not a French pennant in sight,” he informed Fernand, laughing silently when the pup snarled in response, baring even white teeth.

He hauled the lad up. “Can you guide us to Zaragoza while avoiding the larger roads?”

“I could. But I will not.”

“No? Well then, I have no use for you. Best leave you tied and tethered here with a large sign round your neck telling whoever finds you you’ve been raiding this fair land.”

Fernand’s mouth fell open. “But . . .” He swallowed. “They would kill me.”

Robert nodded. “Aye, I hold that very likely. Or throw you in a hole somewhere until your mother ransoms you.”

The lad licked his lips and swallowed. “I will guide you.”

“Good.” In times such as these, a wise man avoided the major thoroughfares, scouting the landscape carefully before advancing. Alternatively, a wise man returned home, but that was not an option for him. Bitter rage flooded his mouth; curse Queen Eleanor for effectively exiling them!

He surveyed their surroundings. The road they were on meandered off in a rough southerly direction, likely leading directly to Zaragoza. But roads such as these attracted companies of soldiers, men riding armed to the teeth. Such men were best avoided, which was why he intended to use the backroads to make for Zaragoza, hoping to find the court of Aragon there. Unless, of course, the king of Aragon was truly defeated, in which case his little hostage could prove of some value. He glanced at Fernand before shifting his gaze to the litter. He did not like travelling through these turbulent parts with his wife. On the other hand, leaving her behind was not an option.

No, what he needed was to get hold of that accursed Rhys and strike a deal with him. At present, Robert needed every man he could find, and six expert bowmen would be a welcome addition to his little group.

In the event, he did not need to look for Rhys. Apparently, the fact that they remained where they were, the litter moved to stand in the shade of some trees, was a sufficient reason for him to come riding out of the forests, shadowed by two of his men.

"Is she ailing?" Rhys dismounted, landing on both feet just in front of Robert. Of a height with Robert, the Welshman was at least a decade older, his hair streaked with grey, deep grooves bracketing his mouth.

"Aye." Robert had his arms full of his sleeping daughter, a picture of pink skin and dark hair, her little mouth slightly open. He shifted his hold sufficiently to awkwardly extend a hand to Rhys. "I did not thank you for yesterday. Without you—"

Rhys waved him quiet. "You killed all of them?" he asked instead, smiling down at the sleeping child.

"No. I let some of them go, but I kept the fine youngster leading them."

"Good." Rhys tilted his head to the side and studied Fernand. "What sort of fool would think him capable of leading a group of men-at-arms?"

"His doting mother, apparently," Robert said drily, rocking little Issy. He corrected himself: she was Isabel, not Issy, but of late Lionel's name for their babe was catching on.

"Not much of a doting mother if she sends out one so inept into the maws of war."

"It was a raiding party," Robert said. "They did some burning and looting further up the mountains and were on their way home when they were distracted." He clenched his jaw.

"Not the first time a woman has been grabbed by roving men-at-arms," Rhys said. "Happens all the time in Wales," he added bitterly.

Robert sighed. The Welshman was right, and while Robert had never allowed the men under his command to rape and pillage, other captains would look the other way. "Not anymore," he said. "The king does not hold with rape, and now it is his writ that runs through all of Wales."

"He doesn't hold with it?" Rhys spat to the side. "And yet what has he done to my homeland but ravish it?" His gaze strayed to the litter and the lad playing outside. A smile softened his face.

"No," Robert said. "It will not happen. Ever."

"Hmm?"

Robert freed one hand and pointed at Lionel. "Gruffyd ap Dafydd no longer exists. That child is my foster son, and he will never be burdened with a legacy that will only lead to blood and death. *His* death."

"That is not your choice to make," Rhys said with a shrug.

"It is when it puts me and mine at risk."

Rhys rolled his eyes. "For now, the laddie cannot as much as lift a sword. We will have plenty of time for this discussion later."

He was right. Not that Robert would ever back down: Lionel would remain Lionel throughout his life—a long and happy life, Robert hoped, unburdened by impossible and dangerous dreams. Robert looked away, frowning as he saw a small cloud of dust in the distance.

“More soldiers?” Rhys asked.

“Likely. The French are making a bid for this fair land.”

“I heard.” Rhys studied Robert’s few men and the litter. “Need me to stay close?”

“No more than you’ve been since we started up the mountain pass. Took you some time to find us.”

Rhys snorted. “Not as such. Finding a berth on a ship to Bayonne was what took time.” He nodded at Robert’s surly captive. “And him?”

“Him? Well, according to his bleatings, he is a man of wealth and importance here.” Robert shared a smile with Rhys. *Man* was not the word that sprang to mind when looking at Fernand. “If that is true—well, the wealth and importance part, at least—he may be of some value as a hostage.”

Isabel started to grizzle, and Robert handed her over to Janet before accompanying Rhys across the little clearing to where Rhys’ horse was standing. Not Rhys’ horse, if one were to be correct. The magnificent light roan stallion belonged to Noor, and she had only lent him to Prince Dafydd back in 1283. But to reclaim Cid came with risks Robert was reluctant to take—far too many had seen the flamboyant horse being ridden by the Welsh rebel leaders, first Dafydd, then Rhys.

“How many men do you have?” Robert asked as casually as he could, shielding his eyes from the sun as he squinted up at Rhys, now astride.

The Welshman grinned down at him. “Need my protection, do you?”

“Aye,” Robert said simply, clearly surprising Rhys. “If we run into a troop of men the size of young Fernand’s, but capably captained, we are too few to defend ourselves should they mean us harm.”

“We’ll be there,” Rhys said. “Somewhere in the shadows, we’ll be holding your backs. All six of us.”

“Thank you. Again.” It irked him to owe the Welshman not only for yesterday but also for this additional protection.

Rhys gave him a curt nod, set heels to his horse and disappeared into the surrounding woods.

Chapter 3

“Stop fussing!” Noor scowled at Amalia. “How many times must I tell you I am fully recovered?”

“Recovered?” Amalia snorted. “Clearly not enough to keep your wits about you.” She held out the hat she was holding. “Put it on before the sun fries your brain.”

“Hmph!” Noor snatched the large straw hat from Amalia and clapped it atop her veiled head. It was hot—surprisingly so—and this far down in the valley the heat had the air shimmering. No refreshing breeze, and despite the shade offered by the trees lining the narrow path they were presently on, sweat dampened her back and the undersides of her breasts. Noor had no notion where they were, nor did she have any intention of asking the only one who might know. She avoided Fernand as if he had the plague, due to an uncomfortable combination of pity for his present circumstances and anger for what his men had done to her.

“Ensure it shades your entire face,” Amalia said, recalling Noor to their discussion about the infernal hat. “You do not want your skin to darken further, or you will look like a full-blooded Saracen. That, Leonorcita, will not endear you to your Castilian kin.”

“Surely, I am not the only one with Saracen blood?”

“No. But you are a living reminder of their king’s indiscretions with a Muslim woman.”

“Ah.” Noor tugged the hat down. “Was my mother darker of skin than me?”

Amalia peered at her. “Somewhat.” She smiled. “She was the colour of dark honey all over.”

“Sounds lovely—and sweet.”

Amalia laughed. “Sancha was lovely, but you know as well as I do that the fairer the skin, the nobler the woman.”

Noor shrugged. She did not aspire to nobility. She wished for a calm and contented life with her husband and their children, safe within the walls of Orton Manor. She kissed little Isabel until the child gurgled with laughter before handing the babe over to Janet to be washed and went in search of her husband.

Robert was standing in a patch of shade, studying their surroundings. “There,” he said to her when she joined him, pointing due south. “We will set up camp on that hillock.” He looked down at her. “I’d have preferred if we’d slept behind walls tonight, but we travel too slow to reach that town yonder before nightfall.” He gestured south, and through the heat haze she could make out walls and tiled roofs.

“Would they have welcomed us inside?”

Robert shrugged. “We are mere travellers, nothing more.”

Noor had to grin. Her man might be many things, but a mere traveller did not quite describe the powerful man standing beside her. In his ancient leather surcoat with his hand resting casually on the pommel of his sword, he looked every inch the fighting man—as did their companions. They bristled with blades, Robert had a quiver of arrows hanging from his

saddle and had been riding with his bow at the ready since the unfortunate incident with Fernand and his men.

He smiled down at her. "Mere travellers carrying missives from one queen to the other."

Resentment flooded her. "She could have used someone else for that."

"Aye." He draped an arm over her shoulders and drew her close. "But here we are, my little hawk, and there is nothing we can do about it." He set a finger to her chin and tilted her face up. "We may be somewhere we would rather not be because of Queen Eleanor. But we are together, Noor. It could have been much, much worse."

It could. She stood on her toes and pressed her lips to his. His hold on her tightened, and his beard tickled her skin when he deepened the kiss. Not that she truly cared, not when her husband made love to her mouth with his tongue, causing heat to rush through her veins and pool in her womb.

"God's blood but I miss a bed," he groaned when he released her lips.

"There's nothing wrong with a tryst on a mattress of sun-warmed grasses," she replied, pressing so close to him she could feel the buckle of his sword belt through her garments. She gripped his hair and kissed him as thoroughly as he'd kissed her, and he groaned, holding her so that she could feel his arousal. With regret, she released his mouth and gasped down much needed air. Someone coughed in the background. Robert chuckled.

"Later," he promised, deft fingers smoothing her veil into place.

By dusk, there was a large fire burning in the centre of their little camp. Food was brought out, fat crackling in the flames from the small pig John had found rooting about in the woods. It had squealed something awful when John slit its throat, and Lionel had since not stopped attempting to recreate the sound, staring with avid interest as the animal was gutted prior to being spitted.

"Piggie!" he said, pointing at the roasting animal. "Look, Issy, it's a piggie. A piggie, piggie!" He skipped around the fire, bare legs under the flapping fabric of his shirt. "Piggie!" he told Fernand, who scowled at the lad. "He's dead," he added, nodding a couple of times before going back to skipping while squealing loudly.

"Enough," Amalia said, scooping Lionel up into her arms. "You will sit still and quiet beside me or you will be put to bed."

Lionel pouted but obeyed.

Noor chuckled. "I recall my own childhood," she confided to Robert. "Amalia was all smiles and cuddles, but disobey her and there were consequences. Right uncomfortable ones, at times."

"Oh?" Robert swooped up Isabel before she tottered closer to the fire and settled her on his lap. "Were you a disobedient little maid?"

From Amalia came a loud snort. "A right little hellion, at times. Stubborn like a mule and determined to do everything her brother did."

Noor merely shrugged, overcome with a surprising sense of loss. Her brother was dead since three years back, dead at the hand of the man presently rocking her daughter to sleep. "And you?" she asked Robert.

"Me?" He laughed. "There were days my grandfather threatened to use a switch on me until I couldn't stand. He never did, though. Instead, he'd just look at me, disappointment shining in his eyes."

"You were fortunate," John put in. "My father had a hard hand and a hot temper."

"Most fathers do," Tom muttered.

"Not mine," Noor said.

Amalia rolled her eyes. "Your father chose to leave the punishing to me, Leonorcita." She snorted. "That man was too soft-hearted when it came to you. Especially after your mother passed." She crossed herself; Noor followed suit.

Lionel fell asleep halfway through chewing on his second helping of the 'piggie'. By then, Isabel had long since sunk into dreams, a boneless heap held safely in her father's arms. Ever since their daughter learned to crawl, it had been Robert she'd gravitated towards, and now that she was walking, she'd become quite the little shadow, a determined glint in her light eyes whenever she caught sight of her father. Now, though, she was still and flushed, wisps of dark hair having escaped her coil to frame her little heart-shaped face. Noor saw little of herself in her daughter, nor was there much of Robert, which was somewhat fortunate as that large nose of his would have looked most out of place in the soft features of a child.

"Mayhap she resembles my mother," Robert said, stroking Isabel's soft cheek. He gave Noor a rueful smile. "Not that I would know: I have few recollections of her beyond the sound of her laughter."

Noor helped settled the children in the litter. Amalia announced that she too would be retiring, shaking her head when Noor refused to follow suit. "It's too hot," Noor said. Too cramped as well, with Amalia and Janet vying for space with their two charges. Amalia grinned and winked. "You prefer other company, *mi niña*. Admit it."

"*Quizás*," Noor replied with a shrug, her gaze drifting over to where her husband still sat by the fire. Amalia chortled and brushed a kiss over Noor's cheek. "Bed down some distance from our hostage," she said. "He is too young to be corrupted by the sounds of passion."

"Hmph!"

Noor took Amalia's advice, and soon enough Robert was lying beside her on a bed of grasses and their combined cloaks. The night was balmy, from the fire came the sounds of their men and to their far right were their horses. Mist was sleeping a stone throw away, but here, in this makeshift bed, it was only him and her.

He undressed her down to her shift. She returned the favour, making him hiss with pleasure when her hands roved up his thighs to undo his braies before cupping his balls. She stroked him and he hardened, pushing into her hold. One instant, she was lying beside him,

the next she was beneath him, his knees gently widening her thighs. She loved the strength in him. She loved the heat of his exhalations against her skin, the soft kisses he pressed to her eyes, her nose, her mouth. She loved how his hands slid beneath her to cup her buttocks and lift her closer to him as he entered her—far too slowly. His mouth swallowing down the sounds she made, his hands holding her still as he increased his pace, and all she could think was *mine, mine, mine*.

He must have heard her thoughts. “Mine,” he said, biting down gently on the point where her neck met her shoulders. “Only mine.”

“Yours,” she whispered back, and now all she could think was *yours, yours, yours* as the fire he so expertly ignited grew from a flicker to a roaring bonfire, consuming her from within.

Afterwards, it did not matter that the ground was hard and unyielding. All that mattered was that she was lying safe within his arms while above them flared the faint light of the summer stars.

“You make me soar, my hawk,” he murmured, kissing the top of her head.

In response, she kissed him over his heart.

Dawn came with the sound of approaching horses.

“Robert!” Harry yelled, and Robert was on his feet in an instant, hauling Noor upright with him before rushing them towards their camp. All he had time to grab was his sword before a dozen men came charging through the shrubbery.

He shoved Noor behind him. John and Tom were already exchanging blows with heavily armed men, and to his right Harry kept screaming invectives as he fought off their attackers with a long stave.

“Yield!” one of the men said. “Yield before we slaughter you like pigs.” A snap of his fingers and more men appeared, bringing the total up to a score of men or so. All of them well-armed, none of them wearing any distinctive badges. A raiding party of sorts, he concluded, registering the loaded packhorses.

“Who are you?” Robert growled. “And under what pretences do you attack peaceful travellers?”

The man held up his hand, and his men halted their aggression. In return, Robert did the same. A heavy silence fell. The leader pulled off his helmet, and from Fernand came a squeak.

“My liege!” he gasped. “My most beloved liege!” He tugged at his bonds.

The comely young man astride the light roan frowned, inspecting Fernand. “Do I know you?”

“It is me, Fernand de Montferr!”

“Quite some distance from home,” one of the other men drawled.

“I was abducted!” Fernand screamed.

“Not entirely correct,” Robert replied, directing himself to the man he suspected was Philippe of Navarra, future king of France. “Had Fernand’s men not abducted my wife and subjected her to vile and violent treatment, then he’d not be here.”

“Ah.” For an instant, the young man’s gaze landed on Noor, presently busy with adjusting the kirtle Amalia had tugged over her head. “She does not seem harmed.”

Robert gritted his teeth. “No thanks to him.” He gestured at Fernand. “A wellborn lady carried off by his men and he did nothing to protect her.”

“Hmm.” The young man dismounted. “I am Philippe, king of Navarra.”

Robert bowed slightly.

“And you are?”

“Me?” Robert straightened up. “I am Robert FitzStephan, loyal servant to Edward of England. I am here with my wife, niece of Queen Eleanor, to deliver missives to her Castilian and Aragonese kin.”

“Her niece?” Philippe gazed at Noor, now adequately dressed and veiled.

“I am.” She lifted her chin. Philippe offered her a courtly bow before turning to Robert.

“And along the way you abducted one of my nobles.” Philippe snapped his fingers again, and one of his men hurried over to cut Fernand free.

“No nobleman would act the way he did,” Noor put in. “But then, we must not expect too much of a lad nowhere close to being a man.”

Fernand went bright red. Philippe laughed. A very handsome young man, Robert reflected, with eyes as light as his own, adorning a face of pleasing proportions. A long, straight nose, a generous mouth and a strong chin gilded with fair stubble.

“Unfortunately,” Philippe continued some moments later, “Fernand here is my vassal. I can therefore not allow your high-handedness to escape without punishment.”

“Punishment?” Noor’s cheeks went a vivid red. “And him? How will you punish him?”

Philippe shrugged. “Women are often carried off by eager men. Your misfortune is due to your husband’s lack of care rather than Fernand’s wrongdoing.”

Fernand grinned. “Kill him,” he suggested. “And her, I can—”

Philippe slapped him. “Hush, pup. Didn’t you hear him? His wife is of royal blood. And I said punish, not kill. After all, he was but doing what any good husband would do, and had you not been a vassal of mine . . .” He shrugged. “Nothing personal,” he added, directing himself to Robert.

“Personal?” Robert tightened his hold on his sword. “Beg your pardon, my lord, but I find no comfort in that.”

Philippe took his time. Surrounded by his men, Robert and his companions could do nothing but wait as the prince undid his coif, shook out his long fair hair before replacing his head garment and then busied himself adjusting his gauntlets and the fall of his robes. For the son of a king, he wore surprisingly drab clothes, albeit the heavy grey cloth shimmered in the light.

“Come here,” he finally said.

Robert shook his head. Damned if he was going allow this princeling to punish him before his men.

Philippe sighed. "Either you submit to my justice or I'll have all of you killed."

From Noor came a gasp. Philippe bowed. "Not you, my lady. I would never harm you."

"No? And yet killing him would be akin to killing me," she snarled. Philippe blinked, studied her for some moments and shook himself before reverting to look at Robert.

"So what will it be? A symbolic—"

"Symbolic?" Fernand interrupted but fell silent when Philippe glared at him.

"As I said, a symbolic punishment and we part ways or a bloodbath?"

Robert had no choice, and the smirking man before him knew that. Severely outnumbered, Robert and his men faced certain death. He glanced at the surrounding trees, wondering where Rhys might be. A curse on unreliable Welshmen, he thought darkly before stiffening his spine.

"How symbolic?" Noor asked.

"Oh, he'll bleed a bit," Philippe said. He looked at Robert's old leather surcoat. "From the look of things, he'd been in enough battles to have bled before."

Robert handed Noor his sword. "It will be all right," he told her softly, although he wasn't entirely sure he believed himself. He didn't like the avid look in Philippe's face, nor the way Fernand grinned after Philippe said something to him in an undertone.

He was shoved to his knees before Philippe.

"Fernand here tells me you're quite the archer," Philippe said.

"What of it?" Robert scowled at Fernand.

"As I said, a symbolic punishment." Philippe nodded at the men holding Robert. One arm was twisted up behind his back, the other was pulled out in front of him, his right hand slammed down atop a relatively flat rock.

Fernand tittered.

"Go on," Philippe said, and one of his men set a knife blade just above the second knuckle of Robert's middle finger.

He did not scream. He just hissed. Blood spilled everywhere, and from behind him came Noor's voice, screaming his name.

"One more," Fernand said.

Pain numbed his vocal chords, and all he could do was stare at the blood pumping from his maimed finger—fingers, because the knife had sliced off the upper tip of his forefinger as well, the severed nail clinging to the scrap of flesh.

"No! Papa, my papa!" Something small and sturdy came flying towards him, and there was Lionel, sinking his teeth into the leg of the man wielding the knife. The bastard cursed, made as if to heave Lionel off him. There was a soft thud, a gargle, and the man fell to the ground, an arrow through his neck.

Robert's vision blurred. Lionel crawled into his lap, crying, and somehow he managed to embrace his foster son with one arm while using his whole hand to clamp down on his bleeding digit.

“Anyone as much as touches the lad or FitzStephan again and I will ensure the king of Navarra dies with a coronet of arrows adorning his head!” someone called out. Rhys. Thank Christ and all his saints for the Welsh archers!

One of Philippe’s men roared and ran towards his king. Seconds later, he lay writhing on the ground, an arrow protruding from his eye.

Robert strangled a whimper when Lionel squeaked and hid his face against his chest, thereby jostling Robert’s injured hand. He bit his lip, wrapped his fingers in his shirt and pressed down hard, willing himself to take deep breaths.

“Stay!” Philippe yelled at his men. “Who dares interfere with my justice?”

“Your justice? In Aragon? Your writ does not run here,” Rhys replied. “And I am sure Alfonso of Aragon will be more than happy to bring that message home.”

Alfonso? Was the prince nearby? Robert tried to shake his head free of the dizziness and pain.

A man on a horse came charging into the clearing. “My liege! Soldiers, many soldiers, and the pennant of the king of Aragon flies above them!”

“Damnation!” Philippe took a step back, yelped when an arrow whizzed by his head.

“I have not given you permission to move, have I?” Rhys said. “There is the small matter of restitution for maiming FitzStephan to handle first.”

“Restitution?”

“Oh yes.” Noor fell to her knees beside Robert, covering his hand with her own. “Your symbolic punishment requires a symbolic restitution, would you not agree?”

“My liege!” the scout screamed. “We must ride, and ride fast!”

With a curse, Philippe hauled out a heavy purse and threw it on the ground.

“Good enough,” Rhys said, and Philippe and his men scrambled for their horses. Moments later, they were gone, and Robert collapsed against his wife.

“It is not too bad,” Amalia said.

“Too bad? He’s been maimed!” Noor carefully finished bandaging Robert’s cleaned and cauterised fingers. He’d fainted when they’d set the red-hot blade to the bleeding stumps, and she’d almost retched at the resulting stench.

“Just one knuckle and a fingertip,” Amalia said. “It could have been worse.”

Worse? Half his middle finger was gone as well as a piece of his forefinger. She stroked Robert’s pale cheek. Her man lived by his prowess in battle, and while she supposed the maimed fingers would not affect how he handled a sword, she suspected it could very well impact his skill with bow and arrow—at least to judge from the look on Rhys’ face.

She scowled at Fernand, back to being tethered to a tree. He’d run after the Frenchmen, begging them to take him along, but with Alfonso of Aragon on their tail, not one of Philippe’s men were eager to add to their mount’s burden, and so Fernand had been brutally tackled to the ground by Harry and dragged back by his hair, screaming like a pig when he was dragged over the rough ground. Served him right.

“May God strike him,” she muttered.

“Who? Fernand?” Amalia spat in the direction of their bruised and bleeding prisoner.

“No. Philippe of Navarra. The face of an angel but the heart of a devil.”

“He was doing what kings do,” Amalia said.

“Do? He is not Robert’s king! He isn’t even king of this land! And to maim a man on the say-so of a worthless, spineless heap of cow dung!” Her voice rose, and Fernand flinched. “I am right tempted to sell him to the Moors,” she added, and Fernand pressed himself closer to his tree.

“That would be an unchristian thing to do,” Amalia said in a low voice.

“Aye. Which is why I will not do it. But no need to tell him that.”

Robert came to just as another large group of armed men rode into their camp.

“Not again,” Noor said, getting to her feet. Out of nowhere, Rhys appeared, coming to stand beside her with his bow at the ready. Robert rose, lurched and joined them, silencing her with a glare when she opened her mouth to tell him he should rest.

The young man now approaching them was as ostentatious as a peacock. In red and gold, his helmet hanging off his pommel and a large cape lined with scarlet silk fluttering on the breeze, he brought his black stallion to a halt before them. A beautiful horse, long mane and tail lifting in the wind.

He spoke, first in an unfamiliar language that sounded somewhat akin to French mixed with Castilian. When it was evident they did not understand, he sighed. “Who are you, and what is your business here in the realm of Aragon?” he demanded in French, leaning forward to look at them. Of an age with that accursed Philippe, Noor guessed, his skin smooth and unlined. Chestnut curls danced round his uncovered head. Light green eyes fringed with pale lashes, eyebrows almost as light and a smattering of red-brown freckles over his elegant nose gave him an almost effeminate look—had it not been for the forceful shape of his jaw.

Robert bowed. “I am Robert FitzStephan, and this is my wife, Eleanor d’Outremer. We are here at the behest of the queen of England, bringing with us her personal messages to the kings of Aragon and Castile.”

The young man grinned. “A missive from my future mother-in-law?” he asked. “How exciting.” He bowed. “I am Alfonso of Aragon. Old enough to wed, as is my intended bride.” He combed his fingers through his hair. “She is what? Sixteen?”

“Thereabouts,” Noor said.

Alfonso cocked his head to the side. “Here with a missive or to appraise their daughter’s future husband?” he asked lightly. “Do they not think me good enough?”

“I think it is rather the strained relationship with the Holy See that concerns our king and queen,” Robert said. He stood straight, but it cost him, as evidenced by his pale face and the sweat that beaded his brow. Noor moved closer.

“That sad excuse for a pope should mind his own business!” Alfonso said, spitting to the side. “Mark my words: a pope who meddles too much in matters temporal is a dangerous, unfettered creature, claiming that he only answers to God. Our present pope

has his nose so high up the French arse he likely has to scrape it clean of all that—” He broke off, a fiery blush rushing up his face. “My apologies,” he said, bowing to Noor. “I forgot myself, my lady.”

He looked at Robert’s bandaged hand, at the fettered Fernand. “It would seem you’ve had your share of adventures on your way here.”

“Aye,” was all Robert said.

“Well, it can keep. Best we return to Zaragoza first.” Prince Alfonso smiled down at Noor. “A bath and a night in a real bed. Does that not sound tempting, my lady?”