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CHAPTER 1

England April, 1155:

Lightning crackled across the midnight sky illuminating the battle that raged around Peter Lawston. He took in the scene in that split second of brightness. The screams of his warriors paled beneath the sounds of thunder and the raging wind. Rain ran in rivers from Peter's drenched hair, blurring his vision and flooding into his mouth as he barked out orders. Worry constricted his chest as his men struggled against the enemy.

Eolian's attack had been swift and brutal, but Peter's men had been ready. The army riding with Knight Eolian had been terrorizing the neighboring holds and lands for months, burning fields, raping women, and killing anyone who stood up to them.

Following the path of destruction left by Eolian had been simple and Peter had pushed his men hard to get ahead of them. He then set up camp in their path and waited.

He did not have long to wait.

That morning, with dawn still hours away, the cries of battle had broken the silence that blanketed the land. At first torches had sufficed to light the way, now only the biggest of bon fires survived the deluge that befell them. Everything was drenched and the battle sounds fell short in the walls of water that cascaded down.

A blur of movement beside him drew Peter's attention and he tightened his grip on his mace. He tensed in anticipation as a warrior raced toward him, a broadsword held high above his head.

There was no time for fear, just a steady rush of awareness and energy. His body tingled with power. Mud flew from beneath the warrior's pounding feet and caked the fur of his leggings. Peter raised his mace and braced himself. He swung. Blood flew and the man fell.

The sodden ground sucked at Peter's feet as another man came at him. He waited and then swung his mace hard. There was the crunching of bone and the man fell. Man after man pierced the darkness, charging forward. When no one came to Peter he went to them.

The exhilaration of battle was short lived. Peter's adrenaline was quickly wearing off, leaving him feeling drained and empty as he fought his way through the muck. His mind was becoming just as weary of this life as his body was. He was too old for this.

He stopped in the ankle deep mud, trying to ignore the cold that crept through his muscles and invaded his bones. The battered and broken bodies of his enemy lay glistening with sweat and rain as the tenacious flames covered them with flickering light. Peter shook his head. Pity tightened his chest. These men would no longer feel the warmth of the glowing fire. Its welcoming heat caressed them, but was wasted.

Not long ago, Peter had enjoyed his role as leader of the army, but now what he thought of was the families of these men. No matter what these men had done, they had wives and children who would never see them again. Where once Peter had felt elation at victory, there was now only a painful sadness for the ones who were lost and the families who were left behind. At nine and twenty it was time to think of his own life and future, or more importantly the future of Castle Grayweist.

Rain hissed into the fire and steam swirled around him. In the mist that caressed his face he saw his father before him. Peter was once again standing at the crackling fireplace in the library, trying to convince his father that everything would be all right...



His father's face wrinkled in worry as he paced in front of the large oak desk. "What am I going to do if you do not return? If you die my name will end. You are all I have to show that I was ever here." Gesturing to the shelves of books and the expensive furniture that adorned the large room, he shook his head in frustration. "All I have built, all of this, will mean nothing without you. You are my future." His face relaxed as he stopped before Peter. Gripping his hand, he smiled softly. "Please come home safe."

A deep breath did little to calm Peter's emotions. "Father, everything will work out and I will be coming home." He could hear the strain within his own voice. Heat from the crackling fireplace behind him made him think of the cold and wet nights that were in store for him. He rolled his shoulders and closed his eyes. "I will be fine, I always am."

"Make this your last battle." His father's voice cracked with emotion. "I want to see you settled down with a wife and children who you love and cherish. I want to see my name go on but more, I want you to have a good life and to be loved and happy."



Lost in thoughts that had no business on the battle ground, Peter was drawn abruptly back into the Hell that surrounded him as pain exploded through his shoulder. The warm comfort of the library vanished as the long blade of a dagger cut violently into the small area that his chest plate failed to cover. Peter lost his footing as the man, wide as the boulders that surrounded them, first twisted and then ripped the dagger from his mangled shoulder.

Peter's mace slipped from his fingers and was lost in the sludge. The mud splashed around him as he fell. His helm slipped from his head. He threw his arms up to defend himself against the beast of a man who leaned in for the fatal blow. He wondered irrationally why this man was fighting with just a dagger as he reached for his own.

Peter's dagger never cleared its sheath as the man's leg of a foot came down, crushing his wrist. This man was going to kill him. His father had been right to worry. He would not be going home.

That thought had just begun to form when a shadowy figure parted from the darkness and lunged at the man. The giant was knocked off balance as the man collided with him, forcing him off of Peter's arm. The crushing pain disappeared as he was freed. He slid closer to the bonfire. Heat penetrated through his armor and a warm trickle of blood ran down his arm and side.

Rain and fire fought their own battle behind him, hissing and crackling, creating a mist that enveloped everything around them. Peter could hear nothing but the sounds of the fire and the booming thunder. He never took his eyes off the two figures in the mist before him. The man that had saved him circled the enemy with not so much as a dagger in his hand.

His rescuer was tall and wide through the shoulders, but the massive man was a head taller and had at least a hundred pounds on the smaller man. Peter tried to identify him, but only caught a glimpse of shimmering chain mail and armor before he disappeared behind the larger man.

As the two circled, his rescuer came back into sight and his hairless face came into view. Lit by the fire it was obvious that he could be no more than fifteen. Shock rippled through Peter as he realized he wasn't a man. He was just a boy.

Peter struggled to get to his feet, knowing this boy didn't stand a chance against the larger, more experienced warrior. The pain and loss of blood made him weak. He managed to get one knee under him before his vision blurred and the world spun around him. The slick mud gave way and he fell back.

The boy grinned as he continued to circle through the swirling fog like a vulture who knows that death is imminent. The boy's grin only widened as the large man began to yell at him, getting angry enough that his voice was audible over the winds and the fire. He told him that his mother was a whore and that he was a bastard. He told him he was in the land of men now and he would die without ever seeing a woman naked.

The boy just laughed, yelling loudly, "I had seen more of a naked woman's body by the time I was ten than you have yet to see. One has been filling my bedding every night for many years now." Amazingly, no fear was shown, no hesitation evident.

A tight band of worry wrapped itself around Peter's chest and refused to let go. He knew it was going to end badly and he didn't want to see this boy die for him. He cupped his hand around his mouth and shouted for help, but he knew it was useless.

Reason stood that if he couldn't hear them over the blaring sounds of war and nature they would not be able to hear him either. Still, this kid had no business on the battleground. Peter could not just lay here with the cold seeping into his bones and do nothing. Struggling to his knees, he fought a surge of nausea as the world wavered around him.

The huge man lunged at the boy. The young kid waited until the big man was off balance and then he jerked to the left, not to avoid the man, but to ram a wide shoulder into his side. The man growled as he teetered to the opposite side. As his arms pin-wheeled for balance, he lashed out with the dagger.

The boy jerked back as the blade sliced across his bared cheek, laying him open from his ear to the corner of his mouth. Blood welled, and then flowed freely covering the front of his armor before the rain washed it away.

As the big man tried to catch his balance, the boy slipped in behind him. He gave his wide backside a kick, sending the outraged man face first into the mud with a great splash. The man was surprisingly agile for his girth and took no time getting to his feet and charging the boy. The boy laughed.

Laughed! Peter could not believe the gall of the kid. Once again the kid waited until the last moment. Peter's breath caught in his throat as the enemy got within grasping distance. The giant made a final lunge at the motionless kid. Relief washed over Peter as the boy dove out of the way. Hidden behind the kid was one of Peter's men.

Richard Devenroe instantly brought his sword up. The big beast had no chance of stopping and ran full force into the long blade.

The whole act became clear even to his pain-clouded mind, and it had been an act. Dangerous, but all to a purpose. It had been devised to distract the man. To anger him to a boiling rage, one that would cloud his thoughts and make him careless. It had worked flawlessly, minus the heavy gash in the cheek.

The boy shrugged off Richard, who was trying to check his rapidly bleeding cheek, and rushed to Peter's side. Richard followed behind, a look of irritation on his face that made Peter want to laugh, if only he had the strength. Right on Richard's heels were several of Peter's men. Their concerned faces faded and disappeared as Peter's vision spun. He shut his eyes tightly.

Pain washed over him as he was dragged roughly to his feet. An arm slipped around his shoulder, supporting him. Opening his eyes, he saw the kid. The boy urged him forward, but his feet dragged through the mud, his legs not wanting to cooperate. The world around him swayed and he was forced to allow the boy to take his full weight.

A blurry lean-to appeared before him. Its opening faced the fire allowing in light and needed warmth. He bit his lip, staying a moan of pain as they placed him into the small shelter. He closed his eyes to keep the world from spinning. It didn't work.

Listening to the noises around him, Peter could feel the comforting warmth of the fire seeping through him. He growled deeply, opening his eyes as he was moved around. The boy shifted him slightly to remove his armor. Pain rushed through

his shoulder, but the heavy weight of the metal seemed not to be of any bother to the young man. Peter ground his teeth together as he was moved again from side to side. Finally he was bared to his dingy white tunic.

Taking a deep breath, he prepared himself for the boy to remove it as well. Instead the boy used a dagger to start a cut in the material. Then grasping the jagged edges of the shirt in blood-stained, dirt-encrusted hands, he jerked the tattered remains away from the mangled shoulder. Peter closed his eyes against another onslaught of pain.

He sucked in a breath and jerked his eyes open as pressure was put onto the wound. The boy looked over his shoulder at Richard. "Go get the doctor. If he does not want to come, and come now, you have my permission to get him here at your enjoyment." The voice came out in a growl, an order too full of self-assurance to come from a mere page. No, he was a squire, no doubt. The kid had battle under his belt. Instinct and experience told Peter that the trick with the monster of a warrior who had almost killed him was just the beginning of his cunning.

Peter closed his eyes and his breathing became shallow. Numbness was beginning to overtake his mind. His thoughts were getting slower. He could feel it. He tried to concentrate on the boy's voice above him, but his mind felt heavy and sluggish.

The voice that had been gravelly and deep at first had changed—softened, like a gentle breeze across his heart. He was confused at his thoughts. His mind was hazy. Delirium was obviously setting in. A groan slipped from beneath his numb lips.

The sweet, concerned voice caressed him, washing over him like a warm caress. "Are you with me? Can you focus on my face? Come on, talk to me. Open your eyes. I need to know you are going to be all right." The gentle voice was like a melody to his war-ravaged ears, a loving voice that brought forth images of that life his father had spoken of. Of children to hold and to love, not just some faceless heir to be his future, but a child to be his life.

He opened his eyes to the young boy's blurry face. The light from the fire pierced into him, cutting through him like a dagger. He shut his eyes again with a moan.

"Come on, focus. You are going to be all right." There was fear in that soft voice that told him he was cared for. That he was needed. "Look me in the eye." The worry that he heard enveloped him in warmth in a way no fire ever could. He could almost picture the mother of those children who would hold him at night when he was cold, as he was now. She would be beautiful, dark, and exotic.

When he opened his eyes once again the boy was gone and in his place was the beautiful, yet blurry, face of a girl. "Are you all right?" she asked sweetly as she leaned close to him.

"I am here with you." Concern filled him as he spotted the large gash on her cheek, oddly in the same spot as the lad's injury. He shook his head to clear it. Confusion swirled through his weary mind. Peter lifted his hand and ran his fingers along the uninjured cheekbone as blood dripped onto his injured shoulder. "Your face. You are hurt. You must have it looked at."

The face swirled in and out of focus and the boy was there once again. Peter closed his eyes tightly and shook his head. "I will. You first, I can wait," the soft voice told him.

When Peter opened his eyes once again, she was smiling down at him. Her face was still blurred, but he knew it was her from her melodious voice.

"You have such dark eyes, almost black. One could get lost in them." Peter continued to stroke the smooth cheek above him, sliding trembling fingers down the warm and inviting skin gently cupping the soft and shapely chin before starting again. He squinted in an effort to keep the world focused as he looked deeply into those black eyes and thought of his future. "You are so beautiful."

Full lips parted in a sweet tinkling laugh, like water rippling over stones. "I will forgive you that since you have lost so much blood. Your thoughts must be scrambled and your vision faulty." A wide, beautiful smile took the sting from the words.

A deep trembling breath caused the world to shimmer and the image of the boy was once again before him.

Peter pulled his hand away in confusion. "Quite. I have lost a great amount." His arm dropped as darkness swallowed him.

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CHAPTER 2

S*ounds of anger invaded the peaceful cocoon of darkness that shrouded Peter. He blinked several times to adjust to the brilliant sunlight that poured through the flaps of the tent. The irate voice that had penetrated his sleep was coming from the boy. He stood stiffly, with his back to Peter.*

The rough growl was back in his voice, if it had ever been gone. "Aye, that is right, I am still here and I will be the next time you come."

The boy stood at least six foot tall, hands on narrow hips, covered by a large wrinkled tunic that fell past the tops of his thigh high black leather boots. The armor and mail were gone from Peter's young rescuer and were now stacked in the corner of the tent. Peter glanced back at the bright sunlit opening and concern filled his chest as he considered how long he had slept. It was dangerous for his army to remain in one place for long.

"I am not leaving his side 'til he wakens," The boy growled. Peter shifted his head to see who the boy was challenging. Pain shot through his shoulder so he contented himself with glancing around the crowded tent.

Three men stood with the boy between Peter and whoever the kid was arguing with: Telfer Constaire, his brown hair standing on end and in disarray; Grant Hestlay, Peter's right hand man, his lanky frame stiff and unmoving; and Richard Devenroe, one of his higher ranked knights, as well as his good friend.

Richard stood motionless, his arms folded before him, his short sword still in the scabbard at his thick waist. Peter looked from Richard's stern profile to the side of the boy's face. Now stitched, it still looked brutal, damaged more than necessary by waiting to have it looked at.

As his gaze roamed across the jagged line of stitching a quick memory of the woman he had spoken with that night flashed across his vision.

God, had he really stroked the boy's cheek? Had he really said those things? He prayed it had all been a dream.

"You will move aside." The familiar voice of the doctor came from beyond Richard and the boy. Peter tilted his head until he could see the massive man. He was red faced in anger. His dark brown hair brushed the top of the tent. Dr. Jonas Cobb towered over everyone Peter knew, which was one of the reasons he had never seen anyone stand up to him before now.

"He will die if you do not let me help him," Cobb growled. "He will not awaken until I have bled him. You will be responsible." The doctor raised one thick fist in the air. The boy didn't move, but Richard edged a little closer to him.

Peter smiled at his friend's protective nature.

"Nay, you are wrong. I allowed you, without opposition, to help him. You stopped his bleeding." The boy gestured to Peter, but not one of the men looked at him. "You stitched him up and gave him medicine to help him heal. You now propose..." he shook his head in frustration and took a stiff step forward. "After all the good you have done, after all the blood he has already lost—" The boy's gruff voice trembled slightly, but whether it was anger or worry Peter could not tell. "Now you think to bleed him and you have the stupidity to call it helping him."

The boy tried to take another step forward, but Richard grasped one arm and Grant the other. They pulled him back, but his tirade never ceased. "Do you know how many men I have seen die because doctors bled them? I will not allow it to happen again, not with this man." His gravelly voice cracked in passionate anger.

Peter shared his anger. He had seen many men die from that same injustice and had stood toe to toe with surgeons himself to protect them.

"Are you accusing me of killing men?" The doctor lunged at him.

Peter was about to call out when the lad shoved hard against the doctor's barrel chest, retreating a step as the doctor stumbled back. By the time the massive man recovered his balance the tall squire had pulled the short sword from Richard's scabbard. A quick step forward found the doctor facing the steady blade.

Standing tall, legs spread wide for balance, the young man held the sword steadily in one hand. "I will stay by his side until he can speak for himself and if you want to change this then you can move me. But if you are thinking you will find help in this with any of the men, you are sorely wrong." To prove this point all three men with him took a step forward, situating themselves in between Peter and Jonas Cobb.

Peter didn't think he had ever felt so important and respected. His chest swelled with pride to see them beside the arrogant squire, all four heads held high.

The doctor's face was almost purple with anger as he shifted from foot to foot. "The king will have your head for this. Do you not know who this man is that you are jeopardizing?"

"Nay. As a matter of course, I did not stop to inquire his identity when I decided he was in danger. So nay, I knew not who he was. At the moment it was not all that important."

Peter leaned to the side to get a better view, but it was useless.

"As to my head—" The boy tapped himself on the top of the head for emphasis. "Well, I gave my loyalty to the king, and if he wants my head he can have it. I have risked my neck for this man once already and once more should not be too much to ask." The sword never faltered, never trembled, just pointed accusingly at the doctor's wide chest. "I did not risk my life and that of my good friend to have you bleed him to death."

Jonas stopped shifting and stood straight and tall, looking down at the arrogant boy. Peter watched his face tightened in resolve. "You cannot stop me. You will be responsible for his death, then I will see to it the king has your head for it." He leaned forward slightly, preparing to attack.

"We shall see." Every head turned at the sound of Peter's weak, trembling voice. Clearing his throat he attempted to sound more in charge and less like the invalid he felt like. "As I see it, he is responsible not for my death, but for my life." His throat was dry and raw and speaking was difficult. He coughed gently, but water would have to wait. "I will not be bled. Not now, not ever."

The sword arm dropped as the boy turned. He handed the weapon back to Richard without even a glance. His gaze remained locked on Peter's face.

The three men and the boy surrounded the mat where Peter lay. The fearless lad stood at Peter's feet, his face motionless. Peter shook his head in wonder. "Have you really been here with me all night? You have not left me?"

"I have been with you all night, all day, and the night again. It is now working on the mid meal of the day, my lord." The anger was gone from his voice, but the deep gravel was still present. "You must be famished." Without waiting for an answer the young man motioned to Telpher, who immediately rushed from the tent. To Peter's amazement, he did so without even looking to Peter for approval.

"You will stay for a while longer yet?" Peter asked the boy.

"If you wish it, my lord." There was a softness hidden beneath the boy's gruff mannerisms. A softness that brought fleeting images of the phantom woman from the night before.

Peter took a shaky breath and turned his attention to the doctor. Cobb stood stiffly, still red faced in anger, but no longer looking like he was ready to pounce. "I feel weak, due to loss of blood and hunger," Peter said. He swallowed what felt like sawdust for air and continued. "I feel a terrible thirst, but other than that I feel...alive. My shoulder hurts like the Devil. If you need to examine me, you may."

Cobb raised his dark brows and pursed his lips, making him look somewhat like a fish. He grunted and folded his arms across his chest but made no attempt to approach. "I need not see you now that you are awake. I will send something for the pain." With a small jerky bow, he stomped loudly out of the tent.

Peter looked at the ring of worried faces that gazed down upon him. A feeling of contentment flowed through his heart. He took a deep breath and flinched at the pain that splintered through his wound and down his side. He laid his head back and closed his eyes.

Opening them to see the billowing tent above him made it apparent that the rain had stopped. "I was moved?" The sun looked to have found its way out once again and he could feel the warmth radiating through the tent and lifting his spirits.

"Nay, the boy here refused to allow you to be moved, so the tent was built around you."

Peter turned to Hestlay. The tall red headed man, who had been by Peter's side for twelve years, spoke with respect.

"You looked surprised when Telpher took orders from the boy."

Peter nodded, looking toward the lad. The boy stood at attention but held a bemused grin on his face. He looked from Peter to Hestlay without saying a word.

Hestlay gave an amused snort, drawing Peter's attention back to him. "The upstart has been giving orders since you were hurt. Only one man argued, and he got a broken nose for it."

Peter turned to scowl at the lad. The grin only widened on the boy's face. He looked proud of what he had done. Peter took a deep breath and cocked his head, looking closely at the boy.

Was he familiar? Peter had to know him since he was a squire in his army, but he had seen so many young faces come and go over the years. He tried to spend time with each and every one of them, but they came and went so quickly that some of the faces blurred and faded. It saddened Peter, but there were too many young recruits and not enough time.

"You really don't know who I am? I could just be a lowly warrior?"

Indignation swam through the boy's dark eyes. He puffed out his chest and jerked his shoulders back. His spine was so stiff Peter thought he could hear it creaking. He clenched his fists. "I, sir, am a lowly warrior. All of the men I have fought beside for the last three years, and all the ones I have served under for the four years before that were the same." His voice, thick with anger, resounded throughout the tent. Peter watched his face and movements trying to remember where he had seen him before. "These were men that I greatly respected," the boy continued. "Men I would have risked all for, just as I did for you." He took a jerky step toward Peter.

Peter held up his good arm. "Easy. I meant no offense."

The boy had honor in his heart. Respect for this rash and arrogant boy nudged at him.

The young boy shifted on his feet, fists held tight at his sides, but he held his ground. Peter could sense the anger still alive within him. "Tell me this then, boy." Peter looked at the lad. Arrogance and pride dripped from him as he stood unafraid.

Overconfidence would get him, Peter knew. He had been the same way when he was fifteen. "You put yourself in danger. You risked your life and it didn't matter if I was king or foot soldier. Why would you do it? Do you not believe your life as important as theirs, or as mine?"

The boy's face relaxed into an easy grin. He shook his head and gave a short bark of laughter that sounded nothing like the soft, comforting laugh from the angel of Peter's pain induced delusion. Nonetheless he had to push away the insistent images that plagued him.

With a lop-sided, devil-may-care half-grin the boy said, "Nay, 'tis not like that. When I saw you, or see any situation where someone is in trouble, something I feel needs to be changed, I act. It is my body that takes action." The boy's dark eyes glimmered with amusement. "I don't think of myself, not until after I have acted. Until I have already done something stupid. Devenroe here—" The boy jerked his head toward Richard. His face wrinkled and he winced in apparent pain, opening his mouth slightly and working his jaw back and forth. Then with a grin, he opened his eyes and continued as if nothing had happened. "The fact that Devenroe will not allow me to forget that I did something stupid, for days afterwards does not help any either."

Peter looked to Richard. Devenroe stood by Peter's side, arms crossed and a grin on his face as he watched the boy speak. "My brain usually doesn't make an appearance until I have modified the problem," the boy continued. "I have always been mocked that I believe myself the master of every situation. I received several good beatings, while still a page, for giving orders to those above me."

Peter jerked his gaze back to the boy. Beatings? He remembered him now, and realized he did indeed know him. Peter had had several run-ins with him while the boy was still a page at his father's castle. As he remembered the boy was always arrogant.

Van? He thought the name was right. He had been Richard's squire for the last three years. Squires and pages were kept separate from the men, so it wasn't surprising that Peter hadn't seen him.

As to the boy's beatings, he himself had administered one of them. He had saved Van from some bullies, turned to leave and Van had attacked him. Peter had tried to just hold him off at first, but the boy would not stop. Van had taken the beating well and if Peter remembered correctly had been happier, almost satisfied, after it had happened. Peter could only assume it had been Van's wounded pride that had caused him to act. Perhaps it had been embarrassment that someone had stepped in to save him. He knew there was a lot of competition among the pages at the castle.

Van should know him. He may not have recognized him in the dark and the rain, but he should remember him now. Peter thought he was hiding that knowledge on purpose. To make a point and to show that it didn't matter what station or ranking you had, everyone was important. Peter fought a grin, knowing he would have done the same thing in Van's place.

Peter tried to pull himself up on the makeshift pallet, keeping his good arm under him and his injured one close to his side. Instantly Grant Hestlay and Van were assisting him. Once sitting he continued. "I think it is about time for introductions—"

A blare of a horn cut Peter off. The king glided through the flap of the tent. Peter struggled to rise as the others took their knee. "Nay, there will be none of that in here. Rise, except for you, Sir Lawston. You stay where you are. Rest, you will need your strength." The king looked down at Peter, causing him to shift uncomfortably under his gaze. Injured or not, Peter felt he should be on his feet.

"I do not want to interrupt. Did I hear something of introductions? Pray let us continue." The king gestured to the kneeling squire.

The boy rose shakily to his feet and the others followed suit. With a slight tremble in his voice he turned and gestured to Richard. "Your Majesty, it is my honor to present to you Sir Richard Devenroe, a great knight, a man of honor and duty." Peter heard the loyalty and respect in the boy's speech as he spoke of Richard.

King Henry smiled at Devenroe. "My pleasure." The king cocked his head slightly and raised his brow at the boy. "And you?"

He took several deep breaths that trembled through his frame. His hands were shaking slightly. "I am Van Burgess, your majesty."

"No great praise for yourself, yet you are the one who saved Lord Peter, my champion, the Dragon Knight, are you not?"

The king's voice held great esteem as he spoke of Peter. Pride swelled within Peter's heart and warmed his weary spirit.

Around the crowded tent the men stood at attention as the King spoke to the young man.

"Aye, but I did not act alone." The boy shifted, head bowed slightly. He seemed uncomfortable with the praise and attention. "I could not have accomplished it without Richard's help." He pointed to Richard and shifted once again.

"From the stories that I have heard you do not do yourself justice. I have also heard that you were unaware of who he was when you rescued him." Peter watched as the king's gaze slid over Van Burgess. Peter could almost feel the king sizing the nervous boy up. Henry's forehead wrinkled as he closely watched the lad's reaction.

"Not at the time, Your Majesty. I had seen one of our warriors fall to the enemy and I just reacted. I did not realize who it was until I had him in the tent and was putting pressure on his wound."

The king and lad both shifted their gazes to Peter. Peter then glanced beside him and caught the eye of Grant Hestlay. He decided that he didn't like being the center of attention any more than Van appeared to.

Van turned his gaze back to the King. "It was then I was close enough to see through the mud on his face, sire."

"So you knew who he was when you argued with the doctor?"

The boy nodded his head and said that he did.

Henry smiled at Peter before returning his attention to Van. "Even knowing who he was, you were willing to argue with the doctor as to his care? What if he would have died?"

Peter watched Van's face closely. This was the question he had been wondering about since the boy had first flown out of the shadows to save him.

"Most would not face adversity for someone else," the king continued.

"If he would have died, I would have willingly lost my head, knowing I had done the right thing. As to facing adversity..." He shrugged his shoulders. "He had done the same for me. I could do no less." With that he turned to Peter. "I cry your pardon if I have spoken out of place, my lord. I also want to thank you for allowing me to be a squire under your man. I am forever indebted to you, my lord, for all you have done for me."

Peter listened as Van spoke softly and respectfully, straining each word to accent it with quiet dignity. The part of the obedient and acquiescent subject was so out of place for the boy that Peter could not control the laugh that erupted.

He grabbed his bandaged shoulder as pain rippled through his freshly stitched-up wound. He swallowed hard, his raw throat screaming for water and relief. Getting quick control of the laughter, he took a deep breath to relax his muscles and to allow the cool air to sooth his angry throat.

Van Burgess, foregoing all his respectful talk, yelled for the young man who had just poked his head through the opening of the tent. "Did that doctor give you his potion?" At his nod Van impatiently waved him in. Telpher Constaire kept his head down as he entered with his tray of food and medicine. The king smiled and shook his head softly as he watched Van giving orders.

Van dropped to his knees, pushing away Peter's hand that still held the injured shoulder muscle, as he spoke over his shoulder to Telpher. "Go see to more food, His Majesty has traveled some distance. Hurry."

Telpher bowed to the king in mid-step as he rushed from the tent. King Henry's grin twitched slightly.

Peter just shook his head at the King as Van turned his attention back to the bandaged shoulder and began to scold him. "You have to be careful. I do not need to have that doctor back in here blaming me if you tear out your stitches. Now here." Van held the water bag up to Peter's lips and gave him no other choice but to drink. The cold water was like heaven on his tattered throat. Sweet relief swept through him and he almost forgot about the pain in his shoulder.

Van held the bag for him to drink, but only allowed him a few sips at a time. Even knowing this was the best course of action, Peter had to force himself not to grab the bag and drink his fill. He knew his dehydrated stomach would expel the water as soon as it went in if he did.

Peter looked into the boy's dark, black eyes to help control the urge to gulp the sweet, cold water. Van leaned in a little closer, too close for Peter's still weary mind to focus clearly. His vision dimmed and the concerned face above him blurred, bringing back the fantasy of the beautiful woman. He knew it wasn't real. He knew it was just the boy, but it took an effort not to touch that cheek to see if it was as smooth and as warm as he imagined.

Realizing what he was thinking, he jerked his head back, trying to focus on the boy, trying desperately to dispel the illusion of the fictitious woman. Peter closed his eyes against the ripping pain the sudden movement caused. He barely noticed the cold water that splashed across his bare chest. Van gasped and pulled the blanket up to dry him.

Opening his eyes, Peter saw the concern on the faces circling him. He just smiled and shook his head. After all, what was he supposed to say? He couldn't very well tell them he was losing his mind. He had never looked at another man the way he was looking at this boy, and the fact that it was the imaginary woman and her seductive voice that he wanted didn't make him feel any better.

Food was quickly brought and Telpher disappeared from the tent once again. Van laid the water bag beside Peter and rose, facing the King. "Your Majesty. Shall I take my leave now to allow you to speak with your champion?" With a slight bow Van made a step for the flap. He appeared anxious to be gone.

"Stay. You were the one who saved me, you deserve to be here," Peter said, his voice weak. He hated feeling weak and helpless.

King Henry reached out and touched Van's shoulder. "Everyone shall sit and eat. You will stay at my side."

Peter smiled when Van glanced nervously at him. Everyone situated themselves around Peter and the King.

King Henry shook his head and took a large chunk of bread. "It is a shame that Eolian has escaped once more."

Peter grunted and took a small bite of his own bread, but the crusty bread only enhanced his thirst so he dropped the remainder. "We will get him, Your Majesty." He took a small drink of the cool water and let his mind wander to Eolian and his army.

Eolian had trained Peter when Peter had joined the armies. Peter had never trusted him, believing him to be loyal to the former king, King Stephen. When King Henry had learned of a plot to overthrow the crown, Peter had shared his concerns with the king and had taken Eolian's place as the King's Champion.

King Henry had just begun a campaign to recover the lands bartered away by the former King Stephen. These battles played a major role in the hostilities that now plagued the kingdom. Advocates of Stephen, as well as those who had received those lands, had been causing trouble for the new crown. Having been king for less than six months, King Henry was relying heavily on those loyal to Empress Matilda.

The conflicts between Stephen and Matilda had been long and gruesome. Loyalties to both sides still rode deeply. This made Peter's job extremely dangerous, but he was confident that he would capture Eolian.

"I think that will take time. His army took a heavy blow in the attack and it will take time for him to begin a new campaign. I believe it will take us time to find him once again, but I am sure he will not just give up." The king shook his head. "But we can hold out hope that he will disappear for good."

After the small meal, King Henry turned his full attention to Van. He stared silently at him, then smiled in a determined way, and shook his head again. "Yes indeed." Peter waited for him to continue, but he only said, "Help Peter outside," as he rose and moved toward the front of the tent.

Peter looked at the king in confusion. He wondered what King Henry was planning. Why did he want him outside? Peter was confident the King knew what he was doing and he trusted him but still, he liked to know what was going on around him. He raised a questioning brow at the King. The King just smiled and walked out of the tent. He had obviously come to some conclusion, but he didn't seem to be interested in letting them in on it.

Peter looked at the others who just shrugged and shook their heads. Pain seized his shoulder as Richard Devenroe and Grant Hestlay helped him to his feet. Careful of his injury, they assisted him out of the tent. Peter could hear Van right behind him grumbling under his breath.

Peter took a deep breath, squinting against the bright sunlight that prodded at his tired eyes. He wanted to go back to sleep, for at least a month. He wanted all this to be done, and he wanted to be home in his nice soft bed.

Van ceased his grumblings and took a spot next to Richard. It was obvious to Peter that the boy didn't like him being moved. Nonetheless, he kept his tongue still, but it was clearly taking a physical effort to do so. Van trudged along with a scowl on his face. Peter noticed the expressions on the faces of the men supporting him. Both struggled to suppress grins as they watched the boy nearly shaking in his effort to control himself.

Peter looked back to Van who was now looking at him. Van opened his mouth just to snap it closed again. Then he took a deep breath, clenched his fists, and looked away, grumbling something too quiet for Peter to hear.

Devenroe leaned over to whisper quietly to him. "You know, my lord, I am amazed to see him contain himself so well, even in front of the King." Peter felt his lips twitch as he struggled not to grin. He knew the lad wanted him to take the medicine the doctor had provided, but it would put him to sleep, and that would not be good with King Henry there.

The beautiful meadow that they had first taken camp in was now a ransacked and demolished mess of torn up grass and flowers. Ruts and deep holes, from the warriors and their horses, made walking on trembling legs difficult for Peter.

Out in front of all the men, the King's man blew once again on the horn. All stopped to look at the men standing with the King. Peter allowed his two good friends to sit him on a low boulder, in the warm sun. When all of Peter's men, as well as the men the King had brought, were circled around them, the King motioned to Van.

The King's face held a serious expression as he addressed the brave boy. "Van Burgess, will you please stand before me."

Van approached the King on shaky legs, head bowed. He appeared nervous and that surprised Peter. Why was this arrogant and self-assured boy so nervous around the King? Why was he so reluctant to be questioned or to be the center of attention? It almost appeared to Peter that the boy was hiding something. Peter took a deep breath deciding that more than likely the boy was just unaccustomed to all the fuss.

Peter's head was beginning to ache and he knew it would soon be a blaring headache. He took deep breaths and, concentrating on the King and Van, tried to ignore the throb that was becoming insistent.

The King's loud voice boomed across the torn up field, but he never took his eyes from the boy. "All who have gathered here will be witness to great deeds today."

Henry's bellowing voice tore through Peter's head like a stampede of sheep—prodding and gouging as they ripped through the soft tissue of his mind. Henry paused, but his words still echoed dimly in Peter's mind. He clenched his teeth against the pain as the king's voice once again filled the air.

"Van Burgess, for your bravery on the field of battle; for your selfless act to save another, with no regards to your safety or to personal gain; for your personal stand to protect your beliefs in the face of opposition I am here to acknowledge you—kneel."

Van dropped to one knee and bowed his head. He was sitting so still that between the black clothes and the deep black hair, he looked like a small dark boulder. The King took the sword offered to him by the soldier beside him. The shiny metal of the newly made sword touched each of Van's shoulders as the King said the words that made him a knight.

Peter's pride swelled within him as he listened to the familiar words. Richard cleared his throat beside him. Peter caught sight of the pride and emotion in Richard's face. With a grin Peter watched the King speak the final words of the creed. "Now rise. Rise as Sir Burgess, the Dark Knight."

The boy swayed. Peter thought he would fall, but somehow he managed to keep his feet.

"I have need of you to the west of here, Dark Knight." The king spoke seriously as his men began to gather up their horses. "You will take half of the army I have brought with me. They were brought here for the man who saved the Dragon Knight. For the man of great bravery and unselfish courage."

Once again the boy swayed, but he managed to keep his feet and to accept the sword the King offered. Van gave a grateful smile to the king and dropped once again to his knee to show his loyalty. "Get ready, you leave now." King Henry turned to leave as Van rose to his feet.

Van turned to Peter with a wide smile. "Thank you for everything, my lord." He looked to Richard, nodding his head before walking away. Richard rose and followed him. Peter watched curiously as they stopped not far off and began to talk.

Turning to Grant, he smiled. "Go in my bag and get my dagger."

"Yes, my lord."

Grant walked away to do what was requested and Peter turned his attention back to Richard and the newly knighted Dark Knight. Peter shook his head. He was too young to be a knight. The king must have decided on this course of action before knowing how young the boy was.

The two men seemed to come to some sort of conclusion and Richard walked back toward Peter. The boy headed over to the men now under his command, men who were close to twice his age.

"The men may not take well to a boy so young being in charge of them," Peter said as Richard reached him.

"No, they may not." Peter heard him take a shaky breath and looked up into Richard's nervous face as he continued. "That is something I want to talk to you about."

His good friend of ten years took another deep breath and continued rapidly. "Van has asked me to accompany him. It will be a step up in rank and commission for me. And although I don't want to leave your army, or lose your friendship, I think it will be a good step forward for me and the boy needs someone he can trust to help look out for him."

Peter didn't want to see him go, but he knew it was best for both Richard and Van. He held his hand up to get Richard to stop talking, to at least take a breath. "It is fine. I agree with you. You will never lose my friendship and you will always have a place in my army. If ever you decide to return to me, your spot will always be here for you."

Peter looked over to the boy coming their way. "And you are right. He is going to need all the help you can give him. Protect him well."

Grant returned with the dagger, handing it to Peter. He slid it behind him right before the boy reached them. Van smiled nervously at Peter. "I just wanted to thank you again for all you have done for me, now and in the past. It has been an honor to serve under you." He glanced at Hestlay and grinned. "Keep that doctor from bleeding him and make sure he stays down to heal."

Returning the smile, Hestlay nodded.

Peter smiled sadly. He carefully watched Van's face and said, "Well, Hestlay we are losing Richard. He is accompanying The Dark Knight."

Van turned a grateful and relieved look to Richard Devenroe.

"Did you think I would say no?" Peter asked him.

"No, my lord." Van's relief said otherwise as he turned back to Peter. "Thank you once again, but we must take our leave now."

"Burgess, wait. I have something for you." Peter only had one thing that was personal to him, something that held meaning. He wanted to show his gratitude for the danger the lad had faced to save his life, not just with the warrior but with the doctor as well.

Struggling to his feet, Peter brushed off the hands that tried to help him. He handed the dagger, jewel encrusted hilt first, to the gaping boy. The emeralds and rubies inlaid in the handle sparkled in the afternoon sun. The weapon had been a birthday gift from a friend of his father's. He thought Lord Matthew Fordella would have approved.

"My Lord, I cannot..."

Peter knew he was thinking to turn down the gift. He could see in his eyes that he wanted it, but would still deny it. Everyone also knew that it was disrespectful to turn down a gift from another warrior.

Van struggled with himself before coming to a decision. "Thank you, my lord."

Peter was shaken by the gratitude in the boy's trembling voice, by the emotion he saw sparkling deep within his bottomless black eyes. Peter wanted to speak to the boy about the night he was injured. Wanted to apologize for his behavior, but instead he watched him walk away.

Peter sent up a silent prayer as Richard and Van walked away from him. He prayed for them to be safe, for Van to have the opportunity to grow into a good man. He prayed for a quick end to the wars and a safe trip home for all the warriors involved in it.



The dark, black eyes, filled with caring and concern, once more hovered over Peter. The blurry face of the woman swirled in and out of his vision and her sweet, hypnotizing voice sang to him. Enticing him as it had that night, singing her sweet siren song of home and family. He could feel the heat of her skin over and over as he ran his fingers along the smooth cheek. He could feel her blood dripping down into his shoulder, becoming one with his own.

Jerking his eyes open in the darkness, Peter took a ragged breath. He tried to pretend it was just a dream about a woman, but he could not.

His shoulder ached softly but not enough to convince him to roll over and take more of the bitter concoction the doctor had sent.

Closing his eyes, he lay in the quiet darkness and tried to dispel the lingering whispers of the phantom voice.

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CHAPTER 3

England June 1158:

D*aniel Farnsworth crouched deep within the bushes, trying to ignore the pricks and scratches as the jagged thorns dug into his weathered skin and pulled at what little gray hair he had left. He had watched the battle rage around him for most of the day. Fear raced through his heart as he huddled in his cold, damp hiding place. He was too old for this. If a sword did not kill him, his old heart might. His muscles were tight and pain settled deep in his bones.*

The reason he was here ran through his weary mind for the thousandth time since he had agreed to deliver the message. He had consented to this trip because he desperately needed the money this job would pay. His wife had worked at the dress shop for many years but was now sick and unable to work. Now his only concern was what would happen to his wife if he did not come home at all.

His beautiful wife of thirty two years had pleaded with him not to come here. He had explained to her that Van Burgess had spent his childhood in their village of Junket, that he knew him, and would not harm him. She had reminded him several times that Van had always been unstable of temper and had grown into a dangerous knight since he had left. She had told him the money was not worth it and had begged him to stay home. He had not listened, but she was right. Money was worth nothing to a dead man.

Daniel's body shook violently—not only from fear, but from an immense chill that seemed to radiate from his very soul to envelope him. He watched men fall atop one another onto the blood-soaked ground until his innards were in turmoil and his mind numb. The heavy swords clanged so loudly he could feel them vibrate through the ground itself.

Taking a slow breath, he watched the man his message was meant for. The Dark Knight wielded his sword with deadly accuracy. A victorious guttural cry burst forth from the dark figure as man upon man fell to his weapon.

The Dark Knight's reputation preceded him and Daniel knew he was not a man to be trifled with. It was well known that he murdered men, raped women, and found joy in all that he pillaged and plundered.

The battle cries rose into a booming thunder. Daniel flinched as more fear raced through him. The enemy retreated and The Dark Knight's army took chase.

Daniel did not know how long he had crouched there in his cold damp hole, but he could not bring himself to leave the safety of concealment. Through the dense branches of the red berried bush he could see the knight standing proud in the misty late afternoon air. The eerie silence that draped itself over the now calm meadow was worse on Daniel's frayed nerves than the sounds of battle had been.

He closed his eyes and thought of the stories he had heard of the Dark Knight. The Dark Knight's heroics and his mischief were widely told among the commoners. According to the tales, he had killed more men than one could count. His temper was short and he answered with his fists more often than not, but that did not come as a surprise to Daniel. Van Burgess had always been that way. He had always been proud and arrogant.

Daniel took a deep, shaky breath. The smells of decaying vegetation and moist dirt filled his lungs. He swallowed hard and forced down a cough that threatened to burst loose and give away his position. He opened his eyes and watched as the fierce knight's penetrating gaze scanned the countryside. He could clearly see Van's nostrils quiver and flare as he seemed to scent the air for danger.

He ran his trembling, dirt-encrusted finger along the slightly rough surface of the rolled parchment. He knew he had lost his mind to have come here to deliver this message. If it was bad news, he did not want to face the Dark Knight's anger.

The darkly-clad and menacing figure walked slowly toward his hiding place. Daniel crouched lower into the soft and spongy ground, holding his breath to keep as still as possible.

His gaze was drawn to the flickering motion of the Dark Knight's pennant. It hung proudly upon a staff that had been embedded into the earth behind the tethered war horses. It fluttered gently in the breeze, an emblem of a rearing stallion, appearing for only a moment before it disappeared again into the waving folds of black cloth.

A shadow fell upon him, drawing his gaze back to Van, who now blocked the sun from his view. The fearsome knight was clad all in black. The only color to break the monotony was the silver destrier on his helm, one that matched the emblem on his pennant.

Sweat ran down Daniel's face and stung his eyes as he watched the Dark Knight stop not more than ten feet away. He took a slow deep breath and could smell the blood on the knight's heavy metal chest plate.

He thought to run. Forget the money promised him with a return message. He could say he never found the man and give back the money already given. His life was worth more than a small sack of coin.

He had left the money with his wife, along with a promise that he would hurry home, and he had sealed that promise with a kiss. He could almost smell his wife's sweet-scented soap on her warm soft skin, taste her lips beneath his.

Rough hands grabbed him from behind, jerking him from his concealment and the fantasy of his wife. Daniel screamed as he was catapulted through the brush covering, the thorns tearing at his face and hands as he fought for purchase. He landed only a few steps from the dark figure's booted feet.

Dirt stinging his eyes and terror freezing his thoughts, he fought to regain his footing. The knight spun toward him, drawing his large, blood-stained sword as he did so. Daniel's heart skipped a beat as his blood chilled. He dropped back to his knees in terror. Knowing he was about to die, he began to yell as he waved the message before him. "I am a messenger, please. I am a messenger, please." Over and over he pleaded, his heart thudding in his heaving chest.

"Bloody hell, shut up!" The menacing growl of the figure before him quickly shut his lips. The Dark Knight stalked the short distance between them, his black eyes drilling into Daniel's very soul.

"Are you quite done?" Van growled in irritation.

Daniel's eyes clenched as tightly shut as his lips were. He did not open either as he dropped his head to his chest. He cowered in the mud, the stained parchment trembling in his outstretched hand.

Van noticed that blood trickled from several scratches across the face and hands of the familiar messenger. There was only one person from Junket that would send a missive and the only reason that Van's mother ever made contact was because she wanted something. It was more than likely either money or repairs, but worry and concern still slithered around, refusing to be ignored.

Heavy boots splashed through the mud and Van looked up dismissing the messenger and his missive for the time being. There was no time to deal with either. Not just yet anyway, not with Eolian and his men still somewhere nearby.

Van glanced at Richard in concern. Richard nodded that all was clear, but anxiety was etched on his face. Van quickly scanned the area for the remaining scouts as the other men-at-arms began to circle.

Nervous tension twisted Van's stomach as the scouts returned. Each came back to camp with a nod to show that all was clear. None returned with prisoners, which was not a good sign.

Eolian and his army had escaped, once again. Anger boiled inside Van, bubbling like a cauldron until its poisoned waves spilled over the top. In a fit of rage, Van cursed loudly, turned, and kicked the blood soaked body of an enemy.

Taking a slow, calming breath he dispatched the guards and gazed after the men as they took up their posts around the perimeter of the camp. With knowledge that all was secure, Van turned back to the kneeling man who had still not moved. "How long have you been watching?"

The messenger remained immobilized, his arm outstretched and the message extended.. "Messenger?" Still nothing. Van peered closely at the old man. "Farnsworth, how long have you been watching?"

"Several hours, sir." The raspy voice was a bare whisper.

Van watched as the parchment trembled and shook in the old man's withered hand and understood that his fear was not from the battle he had just witnessed nor was it just the fear of him. It was from the message that he held as far from his body as possible.

With an amused grin, Van pulled off the black helm and shivered as the soft cool breeze drew goose flesh to overheated skin. "Rise and look at me."

The messenger rose shakily to his feet, held the message out, and looked in wide-eyed shock at the figure before him.

Van knew what the messenger saw. He saw a tall boy who looked all of eighteen. Van's smooth and defined cheek only added to the illusion of youth. The only thing that marred the baby face was the long jagged scar that had been earned three years before. If not for the wicked scar and the dirt and encrusted blood, Van would look effeminate. Not that anyone would dare say that to his face.

Van felt the same nagging anger that always surfaced when coming face to face with that shocked look. The expression in those wrinkled eyes said clearly that Van's lie would soon fail to be credible.

Van, short for Vanessa, had lived the lie all her life.

Van's father, wanting a son, had been enraged when she was born a girl and had vowed to kill her. Her mother had spoken of it often, telling her that she must always pretend to be a male or else her father would find her and finish what he had vowed to do the day she was born.

She had kept the secret all her life and had never strayed from the lie, but it had gotten to the point where very soon she would no longer be able to pull it off.

Worry grew within her as she considered her options. She could not stay as a knight, this she knew. She would never grow a beard and she was lucky that her woman's cycle had not been noticed.

Pain gripped her heart as she realized that she really only had one choice. She had to leave before she was caught in her deceptions. She hated being put in this position. She was angry with her father for wanting to kill her and with her mother for forcing her into this life. Mostly she was angry because she loved her life as a knight and was loath to let it go.

Richard cleared his throat gently beside her. Van looked into the concerned eyes of her friend. She raised one black brow at him and grinned.

Richard shook his head and groaned. He knew that look. Van was angry and when he was angry that made Richard nervous. Van turned back to the elderly man and jerked the message from his hand.

Farnsworth, who looked about ready to fall from fatigue and fear, screamed as the parchment was ripped away from him. The Dark Knight said, in the most arrogant voice Richard had ever heard him use, "Relax, I receive messages all the time and I assure you, very seldom do I have to kill a messenger."

The man teetered and would have fallen if Richard had not grasped the bone thin arm. Richard laughed a deep resonant sound to comfort the old man. "He is kidding you, my dear man. Come, we shall get you some water and some—" Richard looked at Van's ghost white face behind the unrolled parchment and his laughter died in his throat.

"Sir?" Richard had never seen that look on his friend's face. It was a mix of anger and concern, almost fear. Worry wormed its way through him as he stepped closer to his friend.

Van's helm went back over jet black hair that was pulled into the thick braid and wrapped full length with a black leather strap as it always was. There was no answer as the wide shouldered figure stalked toward the still saddled horses.

"Sir." Richard caught him in several strides and grabbed a mail clad arm. "Van. Where are you going?"

"I need to go. Take care of the men." Van looked agitated and nervous as he looked from the parchment to the horses. Richard had never seen his lord in such state. Indeed Van had only two emotions. Anger and calm. Richard was unsure of how to deal with this new emotion, but he did know that he could not allow his liege to ride off alone.

"Nay." Richard refused to release Van's arm even as Van pulled against his hand.

"Nay!" Anger flashed in the dark ebony eyes and Van gripped the hilt of his sword. Richard knew he was not used to being questioned, especially by a friend. Van was still in the habit of fighting for respect, of fighting just to survive with the men.

Richard had known the wild knight long enough not to be led into an argument. It was best with the arrogant and unsteady boy to be calm. If one raised their voice to Van he jumped quickly into anger, but a calm argument would more than likely make him listen. "Nay. Look around you. You cannot go alone anywhere. Not with the night closing in. Not a lone rider."

The Dark Knight took in the surroundings and the men who lay dead. He shook his head with that same rushed look of anxiety in his eyes.

Richard could almost read his thoughts as Van surveyed the slaughter that had occurred. He could see when Van began to think of the consequences of leaving. Eolian's army had been few compared to the Dark Knight's men, but the enemy had hoped for the element of surprise. It had not happened. Van had a spy in the ranks of Eolian's army and he had brought him the message of the ambush the night before.

Most of Eolian's men had fallen in the battle, but some had escaped. Eolian Montgomery was among them. A lone rider would be easy pickings.

Van groaned gently, looking toward his horse once again. The men watched as Richard confronted him. Richard did not want to cause a scene in front of them, but he could not let his lord ride into the night alone.

Richard sighed in relief as Van relaxed. "Give him a fresh horse, I want to leave now." With that, the parchment was thrust into Richard's chest. Richard released his friend's arm and Van took a shuddering breath before walking away.

Richard watched him check the saddle on his mount. Concern ate at him as he gently opened the crumpled missive.

Dearest Van,

I need you to come to me. I will not live to see you if you do not hurry. I have waited too long. Doctor Burgess is with me. He is unsure of how much longer I can fight off the lung infection that has ravaged me. Please hurry to me. I love you. I must see you.

Love Patricia

Richard did not know what the relationship was between Patricia and Van, but he did know she was not one of the many mistresses that the young man kept. He had wondered many times if she was his mother. Never once had it been said, although there were lots of messages. All were responded to and most would take him away to see her.

"Men, mount up, we are moving." Richard's hearty bellow found all the men and sent them rushing to mount their steeds.

Richard came to a stop before his lord and placed a gloved hand on Van's long leg. The knight sat astride Damien, the big destrier the King had given him three years ago at his knighting ceremony. Richard looked up at the knight's blood-encrusted armor.

With Eolian escaping, another attack could come at any time. It would be an uncomfortable ride, but it was best they all rode in full gear. "The men are ready, my lord. The wounded are few and none that cannot wait for treatment. All are in condition for a hard ride."

Van grasped Richard's hand, desperately clinging to it. In all the battles that he had fought beside the young knight he had never seen him so badly shaken. Fear tingled at the back of Richard's mind. Van was clearly upset about Patricia, but there seemed to be something more. "I need to talk to you, my friend,"

"Of course, my liege." Richard could see the despair, the emptiness in those coal black eyes, things he had never seen before. The hair stood up on the back of his neck. He was scared for his young friend.

"If something were to happen," Van took a deep breath. "If I had to leave you—" His hand trembled slightly as he struggled with his words. "I need to know you understand how I feel about you. I love you like a father. Without you I would not be who I am today." Richard glanced around him at the men who appeared to be out of hearing range. "I want to thank you for all you have done." Van's voice trembled and his eyes shimmered with moisture. "Everything I have and everything I am is to your credit."

Richard was unsure of how to deal with the unexpected emotional outburst. He wanted to say something. He needed to say something. He tightened his grip on the clutching hand and smiled. "You have always been a son to me and you always will be."

Richard's stomach twisted in protest at the thought of losing the young boy he had taken under his wing eight years ago. Van was irrational and unpredictable, but Richard had been honest in his answer. He had always thought of him as the son he had never had. It was hard to see him as the ferocious knight with the unearthly appetites that the story tellers described him to be. No, Richard would always see the Dark Knight as the scared little boy who refused to admit that he was scared.



Van looked back to her men. They were weary and withered, but not one of them would complain. Her stomach lurched at the mere thought of leaving them. A deep breath did little to contain the overpowering emotions. Anger, fear, loneliness, and despair crushed at her like a boulder. A few deep stinging breaths and she was able to shove the feelings down to a place where they were at least manageable, even if not completely gone. She concentrated on the rough ride instead of her useless emotions. Fear and worry would do nothing to help. All it would do is make things worse.

The night's ride was rough on all the men and morning had led into afternoon before the small, yet tidy homes of Junket village came into view. Van knew the men were all about to drop from exhaustion.

The people fled before the thundering hooves of the army's horses. The fearful villagers gathered children to their bosoms as they ran from the deafening sounds of chain mail and weapons. Van scowled in irritation. Normally she felt great pleasure and pride at the way people trembled at the mere mention of The Dark Knight's name, but not here in this village. These were people Van knew and had grown up with, but all they knew of Van was that he was an overzealous boy with a quick and violent temper that had grown up to be dangerous.

Van took a shuddering breath that hurt deep inside. She threw up an arm signaling the men to stop. Then she rode the massive destrier back through the men to where Daniel was slouched in his saddle. His head bobbed to the rocking of his borrowed horse as the creature shifted nervously from leg to leg. Van pulled Damien to a stop in front of the messenger and touched the old man's shoulder. Daniel jerked his head up in surprise.

"Easy, old boy. Time to wake up." Van held a small bag of coins out to Daniel.

There was still fear in Daniel's eyes as he took the offered coin, but he smiled weakly and dismounted on wobbly legs. An older woman rushed, without hesitation, into the group of warriors. She threw her arms around Daniel, nearly knocking him off his feet.

Van reined Damien around and headed back to the front of the army. She snorted impatiently and looked back at the couple who kissed and hugged. Tears of joy flowed as they reunited with each other. That same swirling rush of emotions threatened to overcome Van once more and the torrent of feelings had to be shoved back down.

She smiled as Richard handed a small bag of coins to one of the men. Four of her warriors broke off from the group to retrieve supplies. Normally, the army would hunt and gather, but they were all in need of rest and recuperation. Van rode back to the front of the army and they passed quickly through the town.

Van led the army through the dense woods that lay to the east of Junket. She had spent almost every day in these woods, running and cavorting with the boys of the village. The tree line thinned suddenly, showing a small clearing before them. Her heart thudded heavily as a small cottage came into view.

She forced a calm façade as they approached the quiet house. While growing up here as a young boy Van had never felt welcome at the village or in this home. She shook the thin webs of memory from her mind before they could grow and consume her. There was no time for reminiscing.

A short, thin girl stopped in her tracks in the middle of the yard. She was frozen as she watched the army of men and horses descending upon her. She stepped back, one step then two. Suddenly she screamed and raced for the house, her long blonde hair streaming out behind her. Van was not concerned about the girl. She would tell Patricia about the knight and the army and Patricia would calm her.

She flung open the door and slammed it closed behind her. The sturdy door was well kept, but looking it over, Van took in the thatched roof that was once again in need of repairs and a missing shutter over the front window that had been boarded up. Van took a deep breath, signaling the men to stop.

Richard stopped his horse at her side. Van glanced at him and pointed off into the woods. "Take the horses through there..." Van's voice left her. She knew she could not face this death alone. "Bloody Hell." She took a deep breath and turned, reluctantly, to the men. "Devon. You are in charge."

“Sir?” the young man nearly squeaked in alarm.

“Take the men and the horses—”

“Sir?” Devon protested again.

Van understood the problem and kept the anger at being questioned contained. Devon was afraid he was taking Richard’s place. It was Richard’s place as first in command to take charge when The Dark Knight was gone. Devon was probably afraid Richard would kill him. Van did not have time for this, or the time or energy to get upset about it. Devon was young and he would learn.

“Take the horses through those trees. There is a small lake. Feed everyone and tend to the wounded.”

Devon looked terrified. Unsure of what to do, he looked from Richard to Van and did nothing. He froze.

“Move!” Van was tired of waiting and lashed out at the hesitant man-at-arms.

Devon moved, kicking his horse into action. The steed lurched forward, running headlong and encouraging the others to move along with him. Soon she and Richard were alone in the courtyard.

“He was afraid he was taking my place.” Richard smiled, but Van did not respond. They walked across the yard.

Van pushed against the door. Nothing. The girl apparently had not gone to Patricia. Nay, she had bolted the latch. Van pounded a gloved fist heavily on the door. “Open this door, you insolent little wench, or I will break it down.”

The door swung open. The small blue eyed girl stood holding a pitchfork out before her. Van raised one black brow, in a mix of annoyance and amusement, and took a quick step forward. The tines of the implement raked across her thick armored breast plate and she grimaced as the fork screeched along the heavy metal.

The girl winced as the impact shook her.

“I like my women with some spirit.” Van grasped the handle of the fork and ripped it from the girl’s dainty hands, pulling her into a tight one-armed bear hug.

She stared deeply into Van’s eyes before fainting. Van stood there, just holding her limp body.

“Is she all right, my lord?” Richard stepped to the side as Van tossed the pitchfork into the courtyard. He laughed when she snorted in disgust.

“Do you want me to take her?”

Van glanced at the short, fat balding man who stood off to the side of the doorway.

Paul Burgess shifted nervously as he quickly added, “I told her it was all right if you came in. She would not listen.”

She flung the girl over an armor-covered shoulder like a sack of grain. “Nay, I got her. Where is my mother?”

Paul led them through the house.

Van paused in the doorway to her mother’s room. Her breath caught in her throat to see how frail her mother had become. She had been so full of life just a few months ago.

"Van, what did you do to that poor girl? Lay her on her pallet." Her mother's quiet whisper resounded loudly in the silent room.

Van took a deep shaky breath and crossed the room. The girl's head fell to the side when Van dropped her roughly onto a pallet that was laid out in the corner of the small room. Her long blonde hair spilled over her face hiding her pretty features.

"Why did you not get in touch with me earlier?" Van asked gruffly and turned back to her mother. "I would have come sooner."

"Who is this?" Patricia completely ignored Van's question as she looked at Richard. "You have never brought one of your warriors here before."

"Richard Devenroe, my first in command. Richard, this is my mother, Patricia."

After the introduction Patricia added, "I should have liked you to come visit me while I was well. You have the look of a man who could give a woman great pleasure. It has been a long time. A good rutting could have done me some good." Her breathless words shocked Van.

"Mother!" Van's voice cracked in surprise.

Dr. Burgess looked up. "Forgive her. She has been prone to saying strange things of late. I believe the high fever is..." Paul drew a deep shaky breath. "Well, it is confusing her. I try to just ignore the odd things she says."

Van opened her mouth to respond but Patricia interrupted. "Oh, posh. I may not live through the night. If I cannot be impertinent now, there will never be a time I can." Her skin was sallow, thick black circles stood out under her eyes, and her limbs trembled with every breath.

She looked so frail and helpless. Van's heart felt like a great warrior had it in his fist and was trying to drag it forcibly out through her throat.

Much to her amazement and Patricia's apparent delight Richard walked across the small room to her side. Pulling off his glove, he grasped her hand, pressing it to his lips.

Dr. Burgess smiled weakly, but it faded quickly from his trembling lips. Van knew he loved her mother and that this must be very hard on him. Paul had been with Patricia since Van was born according to the stories they told. Her death would be devastating to the man. He not only loved her, he worshiped her.

Richard remained bent with her frail hand in his massive warrior's paw. "My dear, it would have been my great pleasure to rut with you. I still would not mind if I did not think it would push you over the edge."

With a racking cough that brought Van to her side, she laughed. "Oh, but what a way to go." She took in a deep gurgling breath and coughed again.

Van pulled Richard away from her side with a look of reprimand. "All right, mother. That is too much. I don't think I can handle any more of that. Nay, let us just talk."

Van's shaking hands stopped midway to taking off the black helm when Patricia blurted out. "Your father came to see me."

"What?" Van's eyes jerked to her mother. As a child Van had shuddered at the mere mention of her father. That fear had driven her to practice obsessively with a sword and dagger in order to protect herself and her mother. As her skills increased the fear slowly ebbed and, in its place, anger took seed.

"He wants to see you. I told him we would send him a message when you arrived. I agreed to send you to him." Patricia struggled with another deep gurgling breath.

Van blamed her father for putting her mother in this position. The hairs tingled on the back of her neck and her stomach twisted and cramped as the anger blossomed within her, sending its deadly shoots into her every nerve.

"He has arranged a marriage for you."

"Mother, please. You cannot be serious. You expect me to go back to my father? You expect me to be married?" Van's breath became shallow and nervous tension threatened to tear apart all her well-practiced control. Van's eyes darted nervously from Patricia to Dr. Paul. "Paul, tell me she is...confused now."

"No. I am afraid not."

Van felt out of control. The swirling emotions were getting harder to ignore. She concentrated on the anger because it was the easiest. It was not weak. Fear and pain were useless and weak. She refused to allow herself to feel those emotions.

Van looked down. She was still in full battle garb and the chain mail hauberk glinted in the sun coming through the window of the small room. Most of the blood had been washed away at the small stream where they had rested their mounts in the frantic rush to get to her mother's side, but it was still apparent. Van rubbed at the large blood stain and tried to regain her composure.

Patricia Fordella smiled and whispered so low that Van had to drop down beside her bed to hear her. "This is my last wish. I want you to marry. I want grandchildren." She coughed deeply, a thick wet sound as breath wheezed in and out of her lungs. "I may never get to see them, but I want them."

Van's mother slipped farther away with each labored breath. "Your father has changed. He now has two sons and he wants to make up for the past. Please, love. Let your mother die happy. Promise me." Her voice was a bare wisp. Her eyes closed.

"Yes, Mother," Van answered reluctantly through gritted teeth. Patricia's voice became nothing more than soft breath on Van's cheek. The words were more felt than heard as she leaned in close to her overly-warm face.

"Thank you. I love you..." Van strained to hear her fading words. Patricia sighed. "You will make a good wife, a good mother."

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