

PROLOGUE

RICHARD OF NORMANDY

THE HOLY LAND
SATURDAY, 8TH DAY OF JUNE 1191

THIS. THIS IS A man to wear the title of King.

Sludging through the mud nearby, Richard was only a stonethrow from the horse and the man and the crown. Of course he had seen this man before—the one the others called King—but at the right moment the spectacle was breathtaking. Atop a horse more muscle than beauty, dripping in armor, this man became an extension of the animal rather than merely its rider. The way some damned flower crawls through the cracks of a boulder. Beast and man moved as one amongst the soldiers, and the pale dawn sky cast a glow about his edges. Unstained plate, glistening mail, and at the top a beacon to everyone—across any stretch of battlefield, there would be no mistaking the spectacular warcrown that was perched at the top of *this*. This pillar.

This stupid arrogant pillar, begging to be murdered.

Only three soldiers or a desperate leap of fate away, Richard's eyes never fell entirely on the terrain. One eye on the King, even as he navigated around holes and puddles. Others, too, turned to watch as their leader passed, pausing to wonder at him. Some might want a glimpse of the power, others cursed their own inglorious births, and another might pursue that thought to its natural extension—*It could be mine, if not for luck.*

Up ahead, a wide stump and a flat rock beside it. Richard dropped his pack and rushed forward, one foot on the stump, the next on the rock, propelling him high enough to leap and plunge a knife just so, underneath the king's armor by the right breast. Up and deep, through the ribs. King and crown falls, and the war is over.

The stump and the rock and the opportunity passed by, never knowing what they could have been. A nosy soldier nearby was staring at him, so Richard looked down again and found reason to fall behind. One eye on the King.

It had only been a few maddening hours since they made shoreline, one hundred shipsworth of soldiers and steel, finally *here*. The *Holy Land*. But even that simple victory was bittered by months of delay. Each step forward now was just chasing the shadow of *what-should-have-been*. Every able-bodied man, knight, and nobleman at England's disposal had followed the king's great Crusade to the Mediterranean, only to be instantly diverted to the island country of Cyprus. A year of planning destroyed by a few shipwrecks—one of which carried the king's wife and mother. The Holy Crusade, repurposed as a domestic rescue mission. Because of propriety, because of sentiment.

But those empty distractions were thankfully over, and they had at last landed

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a day's march north of the foreign port-city called Acre. A month of sunsets from home, they were determined to take the city and Jerusalem beyond.

After all this work, it would be damned ironic to end with the king assassinated on the road so close to his goal.

In the narrowest part of the pass now, massive rock slabs rose three times the height of a man. Richard waited upon one as the Lionheart passed underneath, and loosed a single crossbow bolt. The shaft would catch the warcrown on its way out the other side of the king's head, arrow and crown, blood and brain, launched upward and outward to mix and mingle in the mud. Amongst the confusion, Richard could slide back into rank and file. He might even throw himself over the king's body and beat his chest in grief and sarcasm.

A pair of mounted men in bullied armor approached the king, who peeled his mount from the line to speak with them. Richard feigned disinterest, but watched. Perhaps it was nothing, any of a thousand nothings, or perhaps his game was up. A third rider called the king by name, and Richard flinched. That had been the hardest part, to forget his own name. *It's King Richard they want*, he reminded himself, *not I. I'm just a nobody*. After a short discussion, the visitors rode away, leaving their liege as unprotected as before.

If he had a horse, Richard could ride up unchallenged, throw a noose around the king's neck, and wrench him from his steed to be dragged and trampled, hooves crushing his throat and his chest and his legacy.

The same nosy soldier made a small half step over a rock, long enough to turn his head backward and glance at Richard again. Brief enough, but no accident. Their eyes met.

Richard surged forward, landed them both on the ground, and slit the man's throat as he got back to his feet. Perhaps there would be two or three seconds before the men behind noticed. Long enough for a sprint, a quick dodge around the sentinel's men. A slash to the horse's belly would bring the king down close enough for a blade at the base of his ear before Richard was dragged down himself.

Some weaker part of Richard wondered what would come of Berengaria if he died. Certainly he ought to think more achingly of never seeing his wife again. That's what other men would do, no doubt. They'd cling to the *idea* of her and remember the last time they had seen her, or carry a trinket or some petty useless remembrance as if that would help them come home alive. Whispering words into a lock of hair had, historically, never proven adequate armor against steel. He would be more than willing to accept such pedestrian superstition once he witnessed the hand of God reach down, catch an arrow, and hurl it instead at a different soldier who had never discovered true love.

No, love was no asset. Richard had watched a man grieve once over a lost lover. Really, truly grieve. Some nasty business in France where nothing had gone smoothly, the men had broken rank and rampaged through an unimportant fishing village. One of Richard's companions—whose name he couldn't place now—suddenly collapsed. The man was not injured but his eyes were wide, unmoving. They locked on a woman's body down the lane, a tangle of black hair

with one rigid arm clutching some amount of pretty fabric. Bone and dark crimson stretched wide toward them from her side, split open. This man, some man, his eyes nearly dried to bark so long did he not blink. He was oblivious Richard was even there staring at him—oblivious to what a Richard might be. All the man could see was the woman's body, a trick of the mind mistaking it for his lover's. Richard was awestruck. Impossible, that the body could be so entirely shut down by emotion—a tangible reaction to *nothing*. Richard was almost jealous. *He had never felt anything that powerful*. This otherwise healthy man *broke*, simply broke.

Some confused being broken with being weak, but anything can break, no matter how strong. *The one thing you can never judge in a man, he recited, is what makes him break. But you can learn from him, to avoid having that same flaw.*

The King, that other Richard, had waylaid his war for his weakness. History would remember that single pathetic act, and how it sealed his fate. It gave his enemy time to prepare a defense, to strategize, to lay traps. Enabling a single assassin, embedded in the English army . . .

"I didn't mean offense," a voice belched. The suspicious soldier was now next to him.

"Grumble," Richard responded. He tried to analyze what words he meant to say, and realized with disappointment that he actually said the word *grumble* instead of anything that could be considered language. The soldier didn't seem to notice, but incorrectly took it as an invitation to continue talking.

"It's just that you look familiar, is all. Have we met?"

They hadn't. Some of the companies had been reorganized upon landfall, which was why Richard thought he might go unquestioned so close to the king. This observant soldier had insulting eyebrows and a scar across his nose, which seemed more likely to have been received by slapping his helmet on too quickly than from an enemy hoping to cleave it off. "Are you with Lincolnshire?"

"I keep to myself, and don't intend that to change," Richard lied, readjusted his pack, and broke to his left. His jaw chomped on the ugly English language, and no doubt the stranger heard his accent beneath. But it wouldn't matter. That man would never speak to Richard again.

The path leaned straight here, hugging a gentle slope littered thick with curious trees, a rarity in this terrain. If Richard were an army, which he sadly noted he was not, he would hide in that hillside and noiselessly slide down into the line's flank, taking half the king's number before anyone had thought twice. Instead, he resigned himself to behaving quite unarmylike for a while longer, pushing on along the road, doing his best to be unnoticeable, one eye on the King.

By day's end, the army stopped well north of Acre to regroup and supply. A campsite for eight thousand men was a wild animal, constantly twitching and kicking. An endless rolling noise combined complaint with cheer, lament with laughter. Richard closed his eyes and breathed it in, the hammering and arguing and power, all intertwined into a single voice, the sound of *men*. This is what made him unable to ever miss a Berengaria. The breathing of an army was unlike the breathing of a woman. His hands could feel the softness of a woman, but

his heart could never be engrossed in it. A thousand men, out of their element, relying on nothing but that which they carried on their backs and the bond of the brother beside them, living for one more night of relative safety . . . this was something to be overwhelmed in. Richard wished he could get drunk on the sound and forget himself. There was simplicity here, a joyous numb stupidity that was shut off to him now, for whenever he opened his eyes he was closer to the king's tent and to his duty.

The husk of a wagon offered him its darkness, but the nearly full moon gave him a clear view as the king and his entourage approached. Each man ducked through the heavy flaps of the command tent. The king, escorted by his personal guardsman—handsome men both—and a handful of company leaders were there to talk strategy. But Richard didn't watch them enter. He had already sprinted around the back of the tent, flattened himself against the ground between two tent stakes and pulled the thick cloth over himself, rolling inside and quickly upright again. Furs hanging from ceiling to floor masked Richard's presence as the king's company rifled inside, cursing about this and that and tearing their armor off, believing themselves safe. Richard's blade, short enough to be tucked into his sleeve, was now in his palm. When the commotion was loudest he moved, two steps behind the king, his right arm reached around with the knife, his left hand grabbed the king's shoulder to push his neck through the waiting steel.

"Dead," he stated.

He said it in English, the one word he envied them, its French equivalent lacking the finality of its hard *d*. He touched the blade to the king's royal throat, and the king's royal lips smiled.

"Very good, Your Grace," answered Robin of Locksley, removing the crown from his head.

"Excepting you died first," came a second voice from behind. Richard felt a tap at his back, the edge of a sword. "We would have killed you outside, but figured you wouldn't want the commotion."

Richard laughed off the excuse, but still surrendered his knife to the man behind him. William de Wendenal took the weapon with a slight laugh, and emerged from the shadows with obvious satisfaction.

"Even so," Richard swung fully into the light, "you let me get too close."

"Well I forgot to mention that my throat is protected by God Himself," Robin said, "and He would never let you damage it." He stood to trade places on the throne with its rightful owner, which Richard accepted. The chair warmed to him, it preferred his touch over either of his two body doubles, it could recognize a true king's power over any impostor's. Richard flopped himself down, gave his crown a cursory inspection, and thanked his guardsmen for their work. There had thankfully been no surprises awaiting their arrival in this foreign land, but it was only the first day of many.

"Now then," he leveled his eyes on the others. A council of sycophant noblemen and misplaced egos, and their armies outside. The sum of Richard's plans

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and taxes had brought them here—not the best England could offer, but certainly the best it could afford. It would suffice, because it had to.

They awaited instruction, as every well-curbed dog does.

Richard gave it. “Let’s war.”

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PART I

A WOLF IN
LION'S CLOTHING

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ONE

MARION FITZWALTER

LOCKSLEY CASTLE, NOTTINGHAMSHIRE

MARION PLACED HER HAND on Walter's shoulder and gave a meaningful squeeze. Her fingers found more bone than muscle beneath his modest doublet, and she flinched, worrying she had hurt him. But Lord Walter of Locksley simply smiled, hermit lord no longer, and wiped an embarrassed tear from his eye.

"I can't remember the number of years it's been since I've seen the dining hall so lively," he said. "Sometimes I forget to just sit and take it in, you know? Even at my age, I have to remember to enjoy the little moments."

It would have been an understatement to say it warmed Marion's heart. To see Lord Walter thriving again, and his estate flourishing, was to see some great wrong lifted from the world. "You have plenty of years ahead of you," she said, straightening his collar. "This is just the beginning."

The dining hall was brightened only partially by chandeliers, and the rest by personalities. The room heaved and swelled like the ocean, mixing together sounds of laughter, dining, and *life*. It reminded Marion of her youth, when her family would visit Locksley often, when she and her sister would play with Lord Walter's sons.

It would certainly be good to have new, happier memories of the place.

Only a year earlier, she solicited Locksley's help for a man named Baynard—an aging local gentleman with an unfortunately common story. Ever since the war tithe was implemented, the *Saladin tax*, nobles were finding creative ways to minimize their assets—such as evicting their least valuable vassals. People without masters, like Baynard and his family, were still legally subject to pay *son vassalus* for themselves. This was a typically empty threat outside of a city, but had been increasingly enforced in the last year on account of the war's thirst for coin. And poor Baynard had been naïve enough to petition Nottingham for assistance, where he might have been thrown into a debtor's cell if Marion had not intervened.

She recalled her trepidation in approaching Lord Walter on the matter, given their history, but was now so glad she'd taken that chance. Relocating Baynard to Locksley Castle had been a gamble that now paid off a hundred-fold. Despite his reputation as a recluse, Lord Walter was a charitable man with wealth to spare, and his manor was in dire need of tending. Hoarding his coin for decades at the expense of his estate had earned him the nickname of "the hermit lord." He was thought to be quite peculiar by those too young to remember, but Marion knew better. It was not greed or eccentricity that had closed Locksley Castle's doors, but heartbreak.

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Fittingly, it was compassion that opened them again. Baynard's family was here now, amongst all the other souls Marion had sent in the last year. Here lived a community of refugees who found new purpose in each other. Locksley Castle had been resurrected, a dozen or more families had been rescued, and the rumors continued to spread across the county.

Lord Walter was the man to see when you couldn't pay your taxes.

"Thank you," he said, his voice tight with the sheer gravity of what it meant to say those words to her. "I don't know why you've done this for me . . ."

She hushed him. He didn't say her sister's name, but it was there on the tip of his tongue. *Vivian*. Instead, she squeezed him tighter. "Please don't."

She might have said more. She might have said *That was so long ago*, or *It wasn't your fault*, but there was no point. She had tried so many times over the years, but Lord Walter would carry what happened on his shoulders until the end of his days.

He turned his face away from the hall, his thin muscles tense with the momentary emotion he could never hide.

Vivian's death was the first to darken Locksley's door, but hardly Walter's only ghost. His wife Helen passed slowly from a wet cough a dozen years ago, which began his recession from a public life. His eldest son Edmond was lost to the world, and would hopefully never reemerge. Lastly there was Robin, gone from England to join the war. He was alive and sane, but still the sharpest of Walter's losses. Marion shared that pain—she would always have a tender spot in her heart for Robin, or rather for the eager young man he had been when they first met, before their two families had been entwined with tragedy. Lord Walter chose to bear the burden of the past with exactly the same enthusiasm that Robin used to avoid it.

"Shall we dine?" he recovered, returning to the mirth of the dining hall.

"Go on without me." Marion had far more important demands on her attention this night. Lord Walter gave a goodbye and stepped into the bustling rapture of Locksley's halls. It had become one of Marion's favorite places, which was one of the reasons she found herself visiting so often of late. It was subtle, but the mood within Locksley was unlike any other manor or castle in England. Part of it was that every single soul here knew how lucky she was to be alive, and to work for a living. The other part, Marion could not define.

"Oh my!" she blurted as she almost tripped over a young boy. She wrapped her arms around the child's shoulders, but he promptly wriggled free and ran away. *Oh my* seemed a terribly quaint thing to say, and she flushed to wonder when it had become an instinctive phrase. The boy barreled recklessly down the path between dining tables, his long golden-blond hair flowing behind him. Marion tried to recall his name but it slipped out of her mind, fluttered away, and probably had a very nice life without ever missing being a part of her vocabulary. All she could recall was the boy was an orphan, found alone by a river, and had been collectively adopted by four or five families since.

Children and families. It would be a lie to say this was the most able-bodied

group in the world. There were more women than not, children, and elderly. They were, at a cold-blooded assessment, the obvious choices to be exiled from their previous masters' vassalage. But a percentage of them were men, and a percentage of those men were physically and mentally fit. And a percentage of those capable men were willing to go beyond normal, lawful work to show their gratitude.

And those men were Marion's other reason for visiting.

IF MARION HAD TIME to waste she might spend it thinking backward, prodding at her own memories like a loose tooth, to recall the first point she strayed from a truly honest life. She had been raised with a fear of the law and the Lord in equal measure, and as a little girl had been exacting in her obedience to both. But as a lady at court, the granddaughter of the esteemed Earl of Essex, she quickly discovered both the law's limitations and its failures. Policies that genuinely helped the country often neglected the poorest of its citizens. And in a world of politics ruled by men, charity had somehow become a character flaw.

It may have started off as something as simple as a dilapidated footbridge, kept in neglect by the rivalry of the noblemen on either bank. No one but Marion would ever know who eventually tended to its repair. From there she might recall the next time some accidental political slight had gone unnoticed, and unpunished. The bread crumbs would lead to increasingly daring acts of willful disobedience. She would likely remember the fitful balance of risk and reward, and of maintaining deniability. She'd recall the people who received new seed after being robbed, the problematic raiders who mysteriously disappeared, or a missing delivery of wool blankets that its baron would never miss.

More than anything, she would relive the discovery of what it meant to be female. Despite her "damnably inferior brain," her kinship to King Richard opened the doors of England's court just enough for her to learn about the cases being ignored. To be a woman was to wear an invisible cloak, but that loathsome fact was absolutely advantageous in the world of misdeeds. She had learned how easy it was to fake apologies, feign ignorance, to smile wide and let men blame her gender and forget. If she had time to waste, she'd relish it all.

But Lady Marion Fitzwalter was ever a lady without time to waste.

"How did it go?" she asked John of Hathersage, lumbering beside her as they walked away from Locksley Castle. He did an admirable job of keeping up with her overland, despite his size. A decade ago his mass would have intimidated any man, but now the muscle had been reluctantly replaced with something decidedly spongier, and the thick beard of his neck showed more grey than not. Gratefully, neither age nor stuffing could slow down John Little.

"How did it go?" he repeated her question back at her, sing-song and out of breath. "Well it didn't go . . . why don't you tell me again how it was *supposed* to go?"

"That's reassuring," Marion said flatly. "It was supposed to go simply. You

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were to intercept the Lord Oughtibridge's convoy between Sheffield and Locksley, drive its grain wagon into the forest and eventually back here, with nobody injured or alarmed."

"Yes, that," John replied.

"Yes, *that*, what?"

"Yes, that." He laughed. "That's exactly how it didn't go."

Marion's love for the man could survive any mistake he made, but she cringed to think what could have gone wrong with this job. "Tell me."

"Best walk. Better to see it."

It had admittedly been bold in concept, but the beauty was that its consequences should have been nonexistent. Lord Geoffrey of Oughtibridge, a middling lord of well-more-than-middling weight, had spoken openly in Marion's company about his unsavory tactics in avoiding his taxes. When confronted with an impending assessment from the county's tax collectors, he opted to temporarily transport several wagons full of rarer foodstuffs to a friendly neighboring lord rather than let them be counted against him.

Since Lord Oughtibridge had no legal recourse to complain about lost goods he claimed never to own, there should have been no risk. Marion had been the one to inform him of the tax collector's upcoming visit, and she legitimately felt a twinge of guilt that this was an absolute lie. But she simply didn't have time to linger on such trifles. That time was better spent doing more worthwhile things, and moving food from noble hoarders to people in need was, inarguably, a thing worth doing.

Yet in light of John's impending bad news, her pace quickened and her breath shortened. She tried to assure herself that John was overreacting, but her stomach seemed to know something she didn't.

They continued in silence except for a few hurried greetings to the people they chanced upon. A wide-eyed girl named Malory and her friend Maegge, followed by a milk-sopped young man named Devon and his wife. While most families tended to stay close to the safety of Locksley's manor, farther from the castle were the more curious type. Lord Walter's generosity had also attracted people who sought haven from troubles more immediate than short taxes. There were men here with questionable histories, or outcasts from city gangs who claimed a new calling. As they passed a few millers on the path, hurrying along to the dining hall, Marion could feel the heat from their bodies. They gave wearied hellos that spoke to the difficulty of their day's labor. She was mortified to realize she did not know either of them by name, since they were honest workers. *Honest* and *useful* had become increasingly exclusive characteristics in her friends. If Marion had a few moments to throw away, she might have considered what that meant.

Soon enough they drew upon their destination, an uncomfortable departure from the path against a broken rockface. Their camp was below, hugging under the outcropping, safe from casual onlookers. A hundred thousand responsibilities ago, the young Robin of Locksley had shown her the way to this secluded

glen, and she had fancied that it might become a secret hideaway just for the two of them. She had fortunately matured significantly since then, as had her intentions for this place.

But any hope that John's bad news was exaggerated quickly vanished at the sight of the path down. Not only had they posted a guard, they'd used a man whose very existence screamed *go away*.

"It's that bad?" she asked, trying to hide her reaction.

"Ma'am," was all the sentry said.

The White Hand. Tall and gaunt, his skull pushed through his face, so sunken were his eyes and cheeks. He was always helpful when needed, but nobody seemed to know what the ghost-man did with the rest of his time. He kept himself stolen away under a dark hood, but there was no mistaking the bleached white glove on his right hand. Marion had no doubt that half the stories about it were utter rubbish, and that the remaining half only bore a shred of truth, but even that sliver was enough to give the man his leave.

But she knew his name. Gilbert with the White Hand was one of hers.

Down the steep path, far enough to pretend deniability, a leap away from the politesse and politicking of her public life, Marion came across their camp. John Little whistled sharply as they approached, rousing a dozen of them from their makeshift dinner around a modest campfire. Marion did not need John's warning to read their body language, each of them hesitant as a child who knew she was due a scolding.

"I'll be the first to say, I don't think this was entirely our fault." Will Scarlet, as defiant as he was immature, was likely to blame for whatever had gone wrong. Where many of this group were outcasts by force, Will and his lover Elena Gamwell were here by choice. They claimed to have once led a major gang in Nottingham, and were both abominably talented at sneak-thieving. The fact that Marion did not bother to chastise his flippant welcome spoke volumes.

"Just tell me . . ." she said, " . . . *Alan*."

She turned sharply to Alan-a-Dale, a scrawny olive-skinned farmhand who would sooner be caught dead than lying to her. "It started off well," Alan stammered, wiping a flop of dark hair from his eyes. "At least I thought it did. I'm probably not the best person to ask."

"You're probably not the best person for anything," Arthur cut in playfully. Arthur a Bland's spite for the world was mostly for show, an intentional disguise against a blindingly loyal heart. "It started off terribly, and it only went worse from there."

"You said there wouldn't be any guards," Elena threw in, cocking her head intently.

"There shouldn't have been any guards," Marion responded, mostly because there definitely should not have been any guards.

"Oh, there were guards," John Little grunted beside her, in a tone that defied contradiction. "What there wasn'ting, was food."

Marion stared at him.

“He means there wasn’t any food,” Alan translated.

“I know what he means, Alan.” Marion did not break away from John. He simply folded his wide face in half and looked importantly past the campfire, where Marion could see the faint glow of a large hulk beyond. It was no simple wagon, but a strong boxed carriage with sharp iron features and reinforced edges. It was not the sort of thing a middling lord like Oughtibridge would have access to, precisely because it was not his.

They had stolen from the wrong caravan.

“What’s in it?” she whispered, afraid it might awaken.

“Nothing we can eat,” John bellowed, inviting her to investigate. Its rear side boasted a thick hinged door that had been opened with what appeared to be a ludicrous amount of force. Inside lay a dark abyss of possibilities, though none of them seemed better than crawling away and pretending this wasn’t happening. A barrage of questions demanded to be answered about the number of guards, and whether anyone had been harmed, what colors they had worn, and how her crew had even been successful at all.

But those questions would all wait. First she needed to figure out exactly what brand of trouble they had bedded. She eased the carriage’s door open enough to let the firelight trickle therein. Whichever nightmares had been brewing in her head were not as terrible as reality.

“Oh my,” she said, whether she wanted to or not.

There were crates upon crates upon crates of swords. Packed in bundles, stuffed with hay, oil still glistening from the forge. The amber light wormed through their shadows just enough for Marion to recognize their purpose. An obvious flared Crusader’s cross was stamped into each hilt.

“This is not the wagon I told you to steal,” she said, focusing on what was immediate and true.

“*Wagon?*” asked Will Scarlet with caution. “Singular? This is only the first one.”

Marion’s stomach, against all sober advice, started dabbling in acrobatics.

“What do we do with them?” John Little asked.

“We bury them,” Marion answered instantly. “We bury them and pray.”

TWO

ROBIN OF LOCKSLEY

ENGLISH WAR CAMP, ACRE

THAT MEASLY TWINKLE WAS the city of Acre, transformed by the distance into a faint collection of fiery pinpricks, barely visible in the night. Robin raised his hand up until the entirety of the foreign city sat on the base of his thumb. Such a small thing from here, such a tiny little parcel of planet, but somehow the center of everything. In the last few months the city had withstood assaults from a dozen armies, each of which had failed and crawled home as wretched, unlovable failures. Sadly for them, only one country could be England. The French and Austrian armies still lingered, rightfully predicting that England's arrival would change the tide and bring Acre to its knees.

"But the poor city," Robin said gravely, "never expected an attack . . . *from above.*"

And his forefinger came down to meet his thumb, quietly snuffing the city out of existence.

"I don't think that worked," William chuckled beside him. "I can still see it."

"That's always been your problem." Robin kept one eye closed, rubbing his fingers together to grind the city's walls to rubble. "Perspective."

He smashed the city's gates, he scraped the towers to the ground with his fingernail, he flicked the arrogant soldiers from the walls into the clouds above. For over a week, King Richard's army had done nothing but stare at the city while its citizens mocked them for their inaction. Robin hated the insults almost as much as he hated that they were right. The delay had driven Richard to fits of rage, sudden and unpredictable mood swings that Robin found entirely justified.

"Just wait until the morning," Robin threatened the city with a wag of his finger. "And we will annoy the shit out of you. You might even lose a bit of sleep."

William laughed, and they both glanced over at the silhouettes of the siege machinery. Two lonely trebuchets were finally complete, while dozens of others were little more than empty framework. It would probably take most of tomorrow just to wheel them within striking distance, but clearly nobody was concerned with Robin's critique. The few trees that could be found in this land had proven too flexible to be of any use, and their first trebuchet's arm had shredded itself to sinew rather than hold any weight. Most of the new timber came by sacrificing the hulls of their ships. "You don't think those two will do it?" William asked whimsically.

"We'll take the city," Robin answered, in sincerity. "But not the way Richard wants us to. And not soon."

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“Which is probably good,” his companion kicked at an offensive stone, “given the other problem.”

Robin hated that, too. “Given the other problem. We ought to check on that next.”

William’s silence lingered into agreement.

“You’re in the crown tomorrow,” Robin added, thinking that might cheer William’s mood. “You’ll get to launch the first volley.”

William rolled his eyes as obviously as possible. “Our men could run the trebuchet wheels nonstop for a month and the city would laugh it off. No, I think wearing the crown promises no glory any time soon.”

They rotated that responsibility. Each day one of them donned the king’s mantle while the other lurked nearby. They normally chose at random, or by a throw of dice, or a drinking game when William wanted to win. Richard himself preferred to go “slumming with the soldiers,” or the packmen, or wherever he found curiosity each day. Some of the noblemen in his retinue thought the strategy reeked of cowardice, though they’d only admit it beneath a barrel of wine. But Robin saw it more about giving the king freedom than taking the target off his back. Richard preferred to observe, without worrying about how his every pause or hesitation might be interpreted by others. Robin and William’s main task was to exude confidence, protecting the king’s reputation as much as his body. It was how he came to be called Lionheart, because he never appeared to fear for himself. Though that title was ever a misnomer. Lions, so Robin was told, were solitary beasts with little cunning in their hunt. Richard and his two private guardsmen relied on mutual strength and deception. *A wolf in lion’s clothing.*

They were hardly identical, and anyone close to Richard clearly saw through the ploy, but none of the common soldiers could ever tell the difference. The war-crown surrounded one’s face with mail, and all three of them were of comparable height and hair. “*And handsome,*” as Richard always insisted. Robin had no doubt theirs was the finest position in the English army. While in the crown, Robin was effectively King of England, trusted to make decisions and commands. King Richard had his secret ways of directing them, or providing quick counsel, but for the most part he trusted in their competence on noncritical matters. If only Robin could write his father and describe his daily duties, then old Lord Walter of Locksley might die of fury. Robin had joined Richard’s retinue four years earlier, well before his coronation, and even then Lord Walter had been livid over the affiliation.

It was probably part of the reason Robin enjoyed it so.

“*I try desperately to be unlike my father as well,*” King Richard had once laughed when the subject was broached over a cask of ale. “*My father was King of England, and my father spoke English. Sharing one of those traits with that monster is quite enough.*”

“It’s pretty,” William said absently, and Robin didn’t recognize what he meant until he waved his hand at the foreign landscape. The ocean to their right ate up the bare moon, splitting light as wide as the horizon, black and sharp. The dis-

tant city would have seemed like a promise of comfort if this were England. But here, that prettiness came with consequences.

“Don’t fall in love with her now,” Robin chided. “She’ll look different in the morning.”

“Oh, absolutely,” William answered quickly. “She’ll have two tiny black marks high up on that wall. Unless we lose another arm, in which case she’ll only have one.”

Robin swallowed. “Maybe you’ll luck out and the treb’ll take your head off as it falls apart.”

William’s face contorted. “How is that lucking out?”

“Well you wouldn’t have to worry about any of this anymore.”

“If I die tomorrow,” William eased off back toward the main camp, “I am absolutely blaming you.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Robin followed. “But if you die tomorrow, *King William*, I’ll be so upset with you I very well might kill you.”

William laughed. “And I’ll keep *that* in mind, *King Robin*.”

ROBIN DEMANDED A REPORT as they approached, startling the group of worried noblemen into an impossibly more baffled state. Some of these barons had never been to war before, and were ill-suited for every bit of it. There were others, particularly those who had been part of the Kings’ War fourteen years ago, that were anything but keen on taking orders from Robin or William. While wearing the crown they held Richard’s authority, but it was delightfully ambiguous as to how much power they held in plainclothes. Both Robin and William had learned quickly that this ambiguity played far more often to their advantage than not.

“It’s not good, Robin,” answered an older man, the Earl of Derby, named William de Ferrers. His bald head and goblin-thin frame put him more at home in a cave than at a warfront, but his was a patient, gentle soul. He was one of the few commanders whose wisdom seemed sincere, and never treated Robin’s command with disdain. However, he stiffened when he realized Robin was not alone. “Wendenal,” the earl said respectfully.

William ignored the greeting. “How is it not good?”

Ferrers shifted back to Robin. “I would venture we have not even a single regiment that is fully outfitted. I’ve reallocated everything we have. Yes, we have complete battalions of swordarms, but at the expense of taking the shortarms from our archers and pikemen. Hazard, a thousand men have no weapons at all, and a thousand more have nothing for close quarters.”

“Thrilling,” Robin said. Two full ships of weaponry had sunk into the Mediterranean off the coast of Cyprus, during the storm that had capsized King Richard’s family. Ferrers and his companions had been tasked with moving their remaining weaponry around, but it seemed they were slightly more fucked than Robin had guessed. “What about legs, do we have enough legs?”

“Legs?”

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“Legs, two legs, like these ones.” Robin demonstrated what legs were.

The earl seemed uncertain how to respond. “Are you asking me if the men have legs?”

“I was going . . .” Robin laughed it off. “I was going to say that they may not have swords, but at least they can still run away.”

“I see.”

“It would have been funny.”

“As you say,” Ferrers responded, but a slight smirk kept it light. Their situation was less than perfect, but there was no reason to be so dour about it all. “Replacement weaponry is on its way from England, we’ll simply have to wait it out.”

Robin grimaced. It was only the sixteenth of June, barely six weeks had passed since those ships had met the bottom of the sea, not nearly enough time for replacements. The fastest messenger might have returned to England in three weeks, but a full cog would take longer than that to return. And that didn’t even include the time to collect new weapons, if they were even available.

“Hooray,” Robin said dryly. “I’m sure Richard will understand.” The King was furious about the missing supplies, but would not suffer the embarrassment of acknowledging reality. He had gone to extraordinary measures to fund his Crusade, admittedly leaving quite a bit of England to disrepair, foreign hands, or the hangman while raising the capital. Given the option, Richard probably would have sold London herself rather than let the war perish from lack of support. Instead of waiting even longer for the new shipment, he would likely try to fix his problem by throwing more bodies at it. Robin looked to William, who seemed equally frustrated. “We’ll have to convince him to wait.”

“He’s going to have us move forward with the trebuchets tomorrow,” William said seriously. “He wants to throw some stones. He’s waited too long for his toys, now he wants to play.”

Robin wouldn’t have compared the king to a child, but he had come to the same conclusion. “He’ll be starting something we’re not prepared to finish.”

“Hopefully you’re right,” William sent a meaningful scowl at the awaiting trebuchets, “and we barely scratch those walls.”

“But we’re building more,” Robin calculated. “We’ll break a little hole through Acre’s walls eventually, without having done much damage to the rest of the city. He’ll send the army in, and if we don’t have enough weapons by then . . .” The casualties would be devastating.

William’s face grew as grim as Robin’s assessment. With no hint of emotion, his eyes burned a hole in the earl’s scabbard. “*You* carry a weapon.”

Robin was surprised by the venom in his tone. Ferrers put a hand to its hilt, he recoiled only a hair. “Of course.”

“Why haven’t you *reallocated* that one? Or will you be on the front line when we break a hole?”

“I shall be with the King,” the earl said quickly, daring anyone to call that position coward. “This sword was my father’s. I’ve carried it into every battle. You would not have me give it up for a common soldier . . .”

William said nothing beyond a cold staredown with the earl, who opted to silence himself. Robin was left with very little idea of what to say, but William fortunately abated the tension by wandering a few steps away.

Ferrers turned swiftly back to Robin, his voice lowered. "Talk to Richard. Gives us more time for the swords to arrive. If we break that wall too early, it'll be the last thing we do."

If there was anything in the world that Robin hated most, it was being handed a bucket full of other people's mistakes.

"*ABSOLUMENT PAS*," RICHARD GRUMBLED in French, readjusting himself on the velvet-covered close stool. What was already a disgusting task was made all the worse by the stifling hot air that persisted even through the night. But Robin had hoped Richard might be more amenable to advice in private, and the only opportunity for privacy was while the king was shitting in a box. It was as appropriate a metaphor for their situation as Robin could imagine.

"There's no need to rush," Robin tried to explain. "Why not wait until more siege weapons are built, at least?"

"While they sit and laugh?" The king reached for a linen and Robin desperately found anything else to look at. "They already watched one trebuchet tear itself apart. They won't be afraid until we start to use them. I won't suffer to be their source of entertainment another day."

"Better they laugh for a week now, than for centuries," Robin said to the sky. "They don't know we're undersupplied. But if it comes to close combat too early, they'll quickly figure that out. If we simply wait for the weapons to arrive—"

"Then there will be some other problem!" Richard snapped. "There's never a perfect moment to attack, Robin. You never have all the weapons you want, or all the men you want, or all the time you want. You make do with what you have, and I am exceptionally good at doing that. If you think I am nothing without shiny new swords, then you have not been paying attention."

Robin took it with humility. "I don't think that. I just wanted to voice my concern. Part of my duty is to dissent."

"I know." Richard tidied himself. "But I am resolute. Tomorrow we start the trebuchets." He slammed the hinged lid of the close stool down, and Robin tried very hard to ignore the soft sloshing sounds of its contents. He followed Richard back into the command tent, and the commotion of its inhabitants made it clear that William had been equally unsuccessful in rallying reason into the king's council.

By night's end, the two of them stole away to the edges of the otherwise furious tent, exhausted. They traded a few derogatory comments at the expense of the more useless advisors in the room, hoping to forget about their predicament. "You were awfully prickly with the earl, Ferrers, earlier," Robin noted. "What was that about?"

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“The Earl of Derby is my father’s liege lord,” William explained quietly, “and there is some dark history between his house and mine.”

His tone spoke to the quality of that history. But Robin knew better than to probe farther. William did not keep much to himself, so his short answers meant he did not care to say more. “Ought to make you happy, then?” Robin asked lightly. “Giving Ferrers a hard time?”

“No,” William’s mouth twisted. “Ferrers has had a long and difficult life, full of wrong decisions and failures. We are all only a few desperate decisions away from ending up like him.”

Robin put his hand on William’s leg and shook it meaningfully. It was a rare thing to find a topic the two of them could not joke about. But it was war’s eve, and that always led some to grim thoughts and regrets. Robin let his friend to his contemplation, preferring a night of levity himself. About the command room, the lords of England’s favor sought to distinguish themselves in front of King Richard by inventing elaborate solutions to their unfixable problem, and Robin watched in bemusement. Many of the lords and earls who had followed their king to war were determined to be rewarded for their fealty, and thought Richard cared only about how quickly and deeply they bent their knee. The truth would have shocked them, that the man they called *the Lionheart* took their obedience with contempt. Not a single lord in the army understood that King Richard would never reward naked ambition with power.

Neither Robin nor William were interested in the glories of prestige, which was precisely why Richard trusted them. And tomorrow they would launch the first volleys of war together, incessantly throwing pebbles to bounce off the walls of Acre until the world was Holy again.

Robin laughed himself straight to sleep.