

THE WAGER

by

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Chapters

Synopsis	3
1. Wessex (c.1140)	5
2. Present Day: The Exhibition	19
3. 1140: A few days later.....	29
4. Present Day: The Inn.....	36
5. The Gateway	52
6. The 20 th	69
7. A Village on Lord Trellian's Estate	82
8. Escape (Day 1)	88
9. The River (Day 2).....	101
10. The Forest (Day 3)	111
11. Lord Montgomery's Castle (Day 4)	125
12. Lord Trellian's Estate	144
13. The Abbey of Montraie (Day 5)	150
14. The First Village.....	175
15. Lord Montgomery's Dining Hall.....	182
16. The Second Village	186
17. Sanctuary	196
18. Geoffrey de Champs.....	205
19. Abduction.....	222
20. Reunion and Challenge.....	232
21. The Riddle and the Veil.....	251
22. Lord Trellian's Estate	265
23. Wedding	273
24. Old Sarum	287

Synopsis

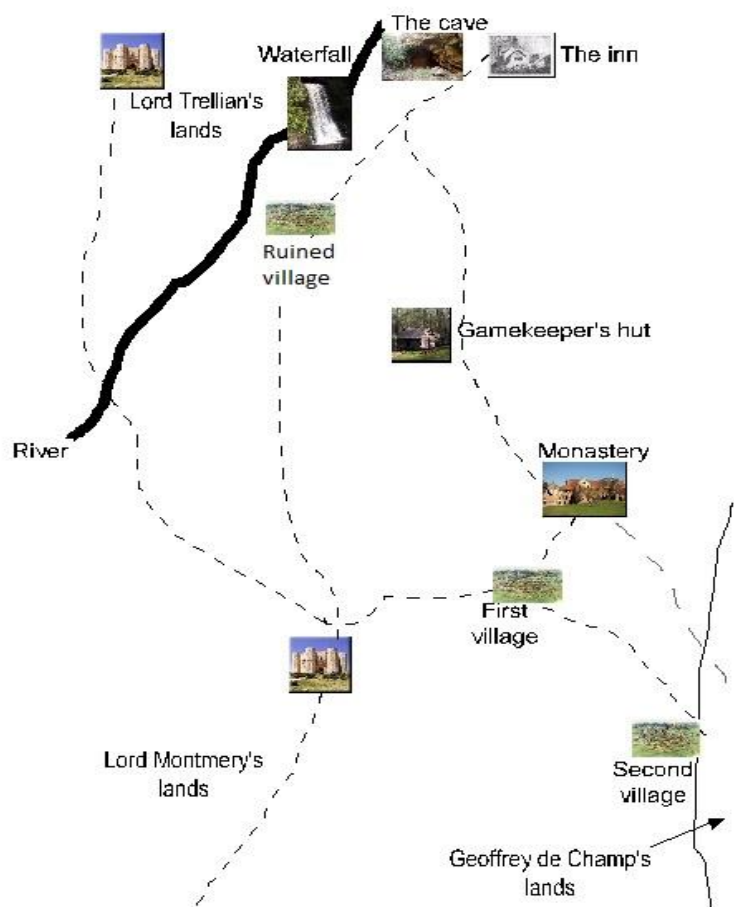
The Wager is a medieval tale of chivalry and romance set in the latter part of King Stephen's reign.

Lord John Trellian (a Saxon lord) and Lord Stephen Montgomery (a Norman lord) are neighbours holding lands in Wessex. Lord Trellian is a lover of tournaments (some might say a compulsive gambler resulting from his wife's death) and has unfortunately incurred a sizeable debt in favour of his neighbour Lord Montgomery, who has decided to call in the debt but agrees to one last competition to clear it. Surprisingly he proposes an archery contest that Lord Trellian knows he can win, having the best archer in the land in his pay. However, due to trickery and deceit Lord Montgomery wins and demands land, including villages, as payment.

Anna, Lord Trellian's beautiful, kind and strong willed daughter, whom Lord Montgomery desires, agrees to marry Lord Montgomery as payment to save her father's villeins from Lord Montgomery's harsh rule. Initially opposed to the exchange, her father reluctantly accepts the terms but is fearful of her fate.

A monk, Brother Hubert, believes there is a solution and contacts Father Bernard for help. This comes from an unexpected quarter – a man, Henry Longford, from the 21st century who is transported back in time, following an experimental virtual reality system, with the aid of a strange crystal discovered in both time eras.

Henry Longford rescues (abducts) Anna and there follows a series of adventures where the fugitives are chased by Lord Montgomery and his men, including the vicious Guy of Kent. Unfortunately, Henry's relationship with Anna has an impact on his decision when and if to return to his own era and presents the last challenge to him.



Lord Trellian's, Lord Montgomery's and Lord de Champ's Estates

1. Wessex (c.1140)

Lord Montmery strode over to where Lord Trellian was standing with his entourage, his yellow tunic emblazoned with a black eagle standing with wings spread, beak slightly open and piercing eyes seemingly ready to swoop down on its prey. It was partially covered with the black cloak he was wearing which was fastened with a gold clasp just below his right shoulder. Stephen Montmery was a well-built man of about six foot with short dark hair and a short, well-trimmed beard.

“Looks like you are not doing so well lately, John.” There seemed a trace of mockery in his voice.

“This is a contest which I wager you will not win, Stephen” John Trellian replied. He was standing very upright with his chest thrust out slightly. A little shorter than his counterpart, he was slimmer with longer, lighter hair and sported a full beard. The sun glinted off a trio of golden lions embroidered on his red tunic. The cloak he was wearing was also red and fastened around the neck in a manner similar to Lord Montmery’s.

To his left a few paces away his beautiful daughter Anna stood with a concerned expression on her face. She whispered to her lady-in-waiting standing next to her.

“I do wish my father would cease these contests with Lord Montmery, Isabelle. I fear that one day he may lose more than he means to.”

The woman nodded in agreement. “Yes my Lady.”

Anna had lost her mother several years prior, which affected her father badly. He had turned to tournaments and competitions (one might say gambling) as a way of trying to forget his sorrow. Most of the administration of his lands was left to his very able chancellor Arnold Barlow. Anna was dressed in a form fitting purple gown with a low neckline and long open sleeves that were edged with gold braiding. Her long blonde hair flowed over her shoulders moving gently in the light breeze. It hugged her slim face accentuating her smooth and soft features. Her father had suggested a more fitting formal style but she had a strong will and enjoyed feeling the wind blowing through her hair. She couldn’t help but notice how Stephen Montmery leered at her, undressing her in his mind no doubt. She couldn’t deny that he wasn’t a bad looking man but unfortunately he had a perfidious nature with a selfish determination and ruthlessness in always getting what he desired. He was also reputed to be quite a skilled fighter but was certainly not merciful when his antagonist was down. It was known that he had increased his land holdings with a certain amount of guile and deceit but any wrongdoing had never been proved. He was too devious a character to risk any suspicion regarding his actions.

Slightly back on Lord Trellian's right stood a young man in his twenties of solid build with short cropped dark hair. He was wearing a simple leather jacket and grey hose. He held a bow in his left hand and had a quiver of arrows over his right shoulder. Lord Montgomery spoke again.

"Who is your champion for the archery contest, John?"

Lord Trellian turned to his right and indicated the archer standing just behind him.

"This is Harold, the best archer in England."

"Really?" Mocked Lord Montgomery. "In that case we should increase the wager."

Lord Trellian did not initially rise to the bait but thought to himself: *'Is this man a fool or does he really believe he can better Harold? Still, if he wishes to lose this contest who am I to question it.'*

"Well John?" Bellowed Stephen Montgomery. "Do you agree?"

John Trellian knew Harold was the best. In all the time he had known him, the man had never lost a contest. "Agreed" he responded.

Anna gasped. She was very suspicious of Lord Montgomery's eagerness for the contest and suspected the likelihood of foul play. Her father was being lured into a trap and Stephen Montgomery was not to be trusted. "Father?" She said quietly.

John Trellian waved her to be silent. "What will be the wager Stephen? Name your price."

Lord Montgomery's mind was working in its usual devious way. "A sixth of our estates" he said quickly.

Lord Trellian was taken aback. *'A sixth? This man must be mad.'*

"Father. No."

"Silent Anna. I know what I am doing." He turned to Harold. "How confident are you Harold?" He asked quietly.

"I have never met another man in these lands who could better me my Lord. That is not to say that there is no one, I hasten to add, but if there is then he will have come from other lands."

"A wise response Harold. I think I will accept."

"But my Lord, what if ..."

"I will not hold it against you Harold. You have my word."

"Then we shall surely win."

"Agreed," shouted Lord Trellian.

Anna lowered her head, fearful now with a foreboding of catastrophe. A thin smile spread across Lord Montgomery's face. He stared once more at Anna lasciviously. *'By God she is so beautiful, and I will have her.'* He then turned around and strode back to his pavilion.

Soon the participants were gathered for the contest in an open area on John Trellian's estate set aside for tournaments. Anna thought back, wondering how things had managed to have got so out of hand. Everyone, even neighbouring lords, knew that Lord Montgomery was obsessed with tournaments and contests, constantly gambling with

stakes being raised ever higher. With his successes and ill-gotten gains he was able, with his ever increasing wealth, to employ some of the most skillful contestants in the realm. He had already increased the extent of his own estates quite substantially, consequently collecting ever more taxes from his serfs to fund his extravagant lifestyle and increase his power. Anna's father claimed to be more astute and often stated that he would never be drawn into a contest where he risked losing much. However, he obviously enjoyed the challenges of the tournaments but unfortunately Stephen Montgomery had been stealthily clocking up wins against him and the tally was now very much in his favour. He had habitually projected a very charming image to Anna's father and his court, but she always felt that there was an underlying reason and that one day he would either humiliate or destroy her father. In spite of her pleas her father firmly reassured her that he knew what he was doing and that he was the best judge of the situation.

Unfortunately the day came when Lord Montgomery presented Lord Trellian with the tally.

"John, I have been pretty easy going over the past few years but have noticed that what you owe me has now reached a point where I must call in your debt. I really regret taking this move" he continued, "but I have incurred other financial liabilities that I need to settle."

John Trellian didn't actually believe this of course but did not have much choice, so had agreed to a final contest to clear the whole debt. The stakes were high but it had to be done and he was confident of a successful outcome. He was actually surprised that Lord Montgomery had suggested an archery contest, particularly as his champion, Harold, was reputed to be the best archer in the land. Hence he had gladly accepted.

Lord Montgomery now strode up to Lord Trellian. "Are we ready John?"

"Of course."

He turned to the small entourage gathered behind him.

"I present my champion, Will, the best archer in these lands."

A huge fellow brushed his way through the group. He must have been a good six foot 5 inches with a black bushy beard and long black unkempt hair that fell over his shoulders. He was wearing a light brown tunic with breeches just short of his calves and tied below the knee. He carried what seemed an enormous bow with a quiver of arrows over his shoulder. Even the ground seemed to shake as he strode over to stand beside his Lord.

"We shall see" replied Lord Trellian, turning to his own group. "This is my champion, Harold."

Harold stepped forward from Lord Trellian's group. Although he didn't have the build and weight of his counterpart he projected the impression of being more nimble in his actions. Will stared at Harold with a sly grin spread across his broad face.

"Where are you from Harold?" He asked in a deep, gruff voice. "You don't look like an archer."

“Wales” replied Harold.

“Maybe you should return to Wales now before I humiliate you ... Harold.”

Harold did not respond to the provocation.

‘Harold certainly radiates an air of calmness.’ Anna thought. *‘Maybe I am worrying unnecessarily.’*

The target, being a design of concentric circles of red, white, black and white about a yellow centre, had been set up in the tournament field in front of a large oak tree. Referees from each side had been positioned a safe distance either side of the target to monitor the scores. Fortunately it was a fine day with just a gentle breeze blowing across the field.

“The best of five?” called Lord Montgomery.

“As agreed” replied Lord Trellian.

Anna couldn’t help notice the quick exchange of grinning glances between Lord Montgomery and Will. *‘Something is definitely wrong.’* She told herself, sensing treachery. She was about to caution her father again but thought better of it. What was the point. It would only make him angry and even more determined. *‘Harold is the best, so why am I worrying’* she had to admit to herself, having seen him not only in practice but also on many hunts and in many tournaments. Everyone admired his skill and incredible accuracy.

“Your man can lead, John” bellowed Stephen Montgomery.

“The honour can be Will’s” replied Harold.

Lord Montgomery glared at Harold for contradicting him but Lord Trellian quickly interjected. “But of course, then Harold can split his arrow.”

“Will” summoned Lord Montgomery, as he moved back.

Will took his position and pulled an arrow from his quiver. He fixed it to the bow string and slowly eased it back, pausing for several seconds before releasing the missile. With a whine it sped towards the target and embedded itself just inside the central yellow zone. A murmur of satisfaction arose from Lord Montgomery’s group.

Will stepped to the side, his place being taken by Harold, who repeated the procedure with greater speed and less hesitation before releasing his arrow. Gasps of joy arose from Lord Trellian’s group as his arrow hit the dead centre of the target. Both Anna and her father visibly relaxed whilst Harold maintained his serious expression as he stepped aside for Will’s second shot. It struck the target about the same distance from the centre opposite the first and the other side of Harold’s. Harold now moved to position pulling the second arrow from his quiver. Then he paused. This one felt different. He couldn’t quite put his finger on it but there was something wrong with it. It looked the same as the others, in fact identical; but it didn’t feel right, and he was always very particular about his arrows.

All Harold’s bows and arrows were all made by Llewellyn, a highly skilled well-respected craftsman, also Welsh, who was not only a very close companion but also

happened to be Harold's brother-in-law. Harold had married Llewellyn's sister several years prior and Llewellyn had made all of his bows ranging from yew, ash and elm with arrows made from cedar, birch and cypress. Each set of arrows were crafted to fit a particular bow and he had made light-weight sets for competitions and heavier sets for hunting and battles. The nocks of the arrow were cut to fit the relevant bow string and the fletchings were generally made from feathers taken from birds of prey. Again, the size of the fletchings and pile were carefully measured to produce the correct positioning of the centre of mass and centre of drag, depending on the purpose for which the arrow was to be used. Llewellyn was reputed to be the best fletcher and bowyer known and who was very proud and confident of his skills. He was also an excellent archer himself, although he was the first to admit that Harold excelled all.

Harold's pause was sensed by Lord Trellian and Anna.

"What's wrong Harold?" Mocked Lord Montgomery. "Lost your nerve? Launch the damned thing or concede."

Apprehensively, Harold proceeded to fit the arrow to his bow, but somewhat slower than previously. As soon as he released it he knew it would miss the target. It embedded itself in the red section of the target. Gasps of disappointment emanated from his friends whilst cheers of joy arose from Lord Montgomery's group.

"You'll have to do better than that boy." Lord Montgomery was savoring Harold's incomprehension at what had happened.

Will's third arrow found its mark close to his first shot, and slightly closer to the centre. Harold hesitantly pulled out his third arrow. This one felt normal and his confidence returned. *'Maybe the other one had got damp or maybe the wood was bad.'* He was looking for excuses not really believing that a poor quality arrow could have been made by Llewellyn. The repeat of his first performance found his third arrow dead centre again splitting the first arrow in two. Confidence rose once again amongst his colleagues.

"We are still ahead," Lord Trellian muttered over his shoulder to Anna, who had moved up beside him. She began to feel a little better but still had that nagging thought. *'Still two more arrows to go.'*

Will's fourth was better than the other three and even closer to Harold's two. Anna was curious that Lord Montgomery did not seem overly concerned over Harold's success; in fact he seemed too calm.

Harold's returned confidence took another knock as he pulled out his fourth arrow. Again, it didn't feel right and the sighs of disappointment were repeated when the arrow missed the target completely. Now even he was getting suspicious. Two bad arrows out of four; it was impossible. "I wish to request a new arrow" he called out.

"Huh! What's wrong with the one you've got?" Mocked Lord Montgomery again. "You've shot four already and are now blaming your arrows for two bad shots. Five we said. You chose five and that's that."

Harold turned to Lord Trellian. "My Lord?"

Lord Trellian hesitated an instant. "Do your best Harold. You can do it."

Will had already taken his place and was just about to release his last arrow. "Now we will see who is the best, Welshman." His last arrow again was off centre again but the overall grouping was very good.

Harold had already taken his last arrow with an overwhelming sense of unease. He was now convinced that someone had replaced Llewellyn's arrows with carefully crafted look-alikes; but how someone had managed to do this without his knowledge he just couldn't understand. His last arrow was on target but again hit the outer ring, too far from the centre to influence the obvious outcome.

The two referees stepped forward and checked the target. "Will wins by fifteen points" one called out.

The cheers from Lord Montgomery's group was matched by the deep depression felt amongst Lord Trellian's. Harold walked slowly over to Lord Trellian and knelt before him, his head bowed. "My Lord. I have failed you. I will ..."

"Speak no more of this Harold. This is wholly my fault; a result of my arrogance. I still believe you to be the best archer in England and ..."

"Well John," interrupted Lord Montgomery striding over. "Looks like your young Harold is in need of some training. I could of course offer Will but then ..."

It was with great restraint that Lord Trellian suppressed the temptation to pull out his sword to challenge the pompous man standing before him; he even felt Anna's restraining hand on his sword arm as she stood beside him. Harold stood up and exchanged glances with Anna. They could read in one another's eyes that treachery had played a part in this contest and they knew they must work together to uncover whatever deed had taken place.

"Time to collect" said Lord Montgomery. "I will ask Richard, my chancellor, to draw up the relevant documents redrawing the boundaries and we will meet tomorrow to finalize the agreement. On the agreed date my men will visit and notify the villages concerned regarding the transfer of allegiance. Until tomorrow John." He strode off back to his group who were starting to load up their carts with the tents and gear to take back to his castle.

"Oh father" Anna said sorrowfully. "We can't let Lord Montgomery take possession of any village. You know his reputation. He will tax the people into poverty and they will be powerless to resist. He will control their destinies; in fact their whole lives."

"Enough Anna. I know I have been a fool and have done wrong but what is done is done."

They began to walk slowly back to their own horses whilst the rest of the group were busy packing up. Harold was looking across towards the target with a questionable look on his face.

"Father?" Anna said.

"Yes?"

"You know that Harold and I suspect perfidy."

“What? Look Anna, just because ...”

“No, listen to me father. You saw the look on Harold’s face when he selected the arrows that missed the target. I believe he was thinking the same as me.”

“Which is?”

“That some of his arrows were exchanged.”

“But they were all the same. You saw that; and how could someone exchange his arrows without his knowledge?”

“I realize they all looked the same, father, but Harold knows otherwise.” She suddenly stopped to look for Harold and noticed him staring across at the target area. “Look” she continued, “if we retrieve the arrows that he used we can at least prove that they are not really alike and had not even been made by Llewellyn.”

Lord Trellian thought for a moment. “If there is indeed evidence of treachery then we must do our utmost to uncover it. Should you be right, and it is a long shot, it would seem that I really have been a fool. Stephen Montgomery had been building up to this moment and will, no doubt, do his best to carve out the best of my estate as his tally. This might explain why he displayed so much confidence.”

Anna’s concentration had now switched over to try and ascertain what was bothering Harold, who was now running towards one of Lord Montgomery’s young helpers who was on his way to join his lordship’s group with all the arrows in his hands. Anna noticed too and started to run after Harold. “Father. Harold’s arrows: they’ve been taken by that young lad.”

The field was clear and it was evident that Lord Montgomery’s group was anxious to get going. Harold could now be heard shouting to the young lad who seemed to panic and paused to fumble around with the arrows he held in one of his hands and then to throw them aside as he hastened to join his master. Anna had now nearly caught up with Harold, who was picking up what appeared to be pieces of wood from the ground.

“Harold,” she called out “what has happened?”

Harold turned around and showed her a bundle of broken arrows, all snapped in half. “I noticed that my arrows were no longer in the target and saw that lad running off with them and began to wonder why.”

Disappointment spread across her face as her father joined them. Harold showed them to Lord Trellian. “This seems to indicate an attempt to remove or destroy evidence of a misdemeanor, my Lord.”

Lord Trellian looked at the broken arrows. “All we can ever prove is that the arrows were not made by Llewellyn. What we don’t have is any evidence as to who made them and who might have exchanged them.”

“Yes, but at least from these pieces Llewellyn will be able to identify which were not crafted by him and possibly tell us why they did not fly true.”

The last they heard was yelling emanating from the departing Lord Montgomery.

“Sounds like our young friend is in trouble for leaving the evidence behind” Anna said.

Slowly they made their way to where two knaves were holding horses ready for them and, once mounted, slowly rode back to the castle. Lord Trellian felt deeply troubled by what he had done, what a fool he had been and now with suspicion of foul play in connection with the contest. Once they had arrived back at the castle, he placed his hand on Anna's arm.

"I will eat alone tonight my dear and contemplate how I am going to inform the villagers of their fate. But with God's help I will redress this wrong and the sorrow that will befall my people and hope that they will forgive my arrogance and stupidity."

Anna said nothing; but that evening she did confer with Harold and Llewellyn, who both confirmed that three of the broken arrows were indeed made by someone other than Llewellyn and certainly not anywhere near his standard.

"At some point, someone must have exchanged your arrows, Harold, prior to us leaving the castle" he suggested.

"Then it must have occurred last night" Harold confirmed. "I remembered carefully selecting them for today's contest."

"Whoever it was, must have been well informed about the arrows you would be using today and gone to a lot of effort to procure one for replicating in time for the contest. It all smacks of preplanning," added Llewellyn.

"Maybe there is a spy amongst us" queried Harold.

"That wouldn't surprise me" interjected Anna. "I have heard that Lord Montgomery has spies everywhere."

"All we need to do is to track him or her down" suggested Llewellyn.

"Easier said than done" replied his brother-in-law.

"We shall work together" said Anna, getting up from where she was seated. "Until tomorrow."

She left the two men to retire to her room contemplating until late how she could save her father from sacrificing his people on the altar of his gambling weakness. She was to find out the next day and in the weeks following how the situation would turn out and how her future was to change forever.

The following day, Lord Trellian and his beautiful daughter Anna were eating a light early morning meal when they were interrupted by a page boy, who looked very ill at ease.

"My Lord," he stammered.

"Yes Cecil. What is it?"

"Lord Montgomery is here with his chancellor" he replied almost apologetically.

"Thank you Cecil. Please show them into the audience chamber and inform them we will join them shortly."

"Yes my Lord." Cecil turned to depart.

"And fetch Brother Hubert and Chancellor Barlow."

"Yes my Lord." Cecil hurried out of the room, the sound of his footsteps fading as he virtually ran down the hallway.

“They didn’t waste any time” Lord Trellian muttered, and then turned to his daughter. “Oh dear Anna. I only wish this moment had never come. I was beginning to think it a bad dream but ...”

“Don’t worry father.” She placed her hand gently on his arm. “We will find a way to right this wrong, I am convinced.”

“I wish I had your faith my dear. Even if I could find a way to challenge Montgomery to another tournament I don’t believe he would agree. Now that he is about to claim part of my estate he is not going to give it up easily.”

They both rose and, smoothing their clothes, made their way to the audience chamber.

Lord Montgomery was sitting at the desk with his chancellor standing beside him and two armed knights just to their rear. He didn’t rise when Lord Trellian entered but glanced up with a smug expression on his face. He also didn’t waste much time either.

“Richard has raised the necessary documentation.” He proffered a hand towards his chancellor without bothering to look at him. The chancellor immediately passed him a rolled document which Lord Montgomery proceeded to roll out across the desk in front of John Trellian, who had just sat down opposite Lord Montgomery. “Our chancellors can be our witnesses.”

Lord Trellian hesitated. “Look Stephen, we have been .. er .. good neighbours for some time and have engaged in many friendly tournaments to settle minor differences on occasion. Surely now you would not like to spoil this relationship with this ... er ... tally.”

Lord Montgomery’s expression changed in an instant and at the same time he rose to his feet. “You knew the rules, John, and you played by them. You lost and now it is time to collect.” He raised his hand and stabbed his index finger towards the man sitting opposite. “If you are intending to renege on this deal, then the consequences will be....”

“Of course not” Lord Trellian replied hastily, “as God is my witness. However, I was thinking that perhaps instead of land I could pay you in taxes. This would save you having to administer a much larger estate and allow you to receive your dues with little or no effort.”

Lord Montgomery’s eyes flickered for an instant as though he was thinking through the offer but soon broke into uproarious laughter. “God Trellian, what do you take me for? A fool?” He sat down again. “No. Sign the document so that I can leave and arrange for my men to take control.” He leant across the desk running his forefinger down the parchment. “This document includes the new boundaries that we have drawn up and procedures for the handover. It’s quite straightforward and, in fact, more in your favour than you deserve.” He nearly spat out the last statement. “However, if you need time to study the document then I will allow until mid-day.”

Anna now stepped forward. "My Lord Montgomery." She spoke firmly and clearly. "Surely we can come to some more amicable settlement. Your ways are ... different to ours." She was thinking of the poor villagers and the disruption to their lives.

Lord Montgomery's attention suddenly snapped to Anna, although he had been giving her sideways glances on and off throughout the meeting.

"The villagers ..." She didn't get time to finish before Lord Montgomery stood up and began pacing back and forth.

'What's he up to now?' Wondered Lord Trellian as they all watched him with his head down, thinking. At last he stopped, approached the desk, placed his hands on the surface and leant forward.

"This is my alternative proposal and the only one." He glanced at Lord Trellian and then Anna. "I offer the following arrangement in settlement of your debt." A tense silence followed. "Instead of your lands ... I will take your daughter Anna as my wife."

Lord Trellian jerked forward. "No. Out of the question. Take the land and be damned." As his hand moved towards the desk to sign the document, Anna grabbed it.

"No father. Agree the proposal. Let me go instead."

"I will not"

A grin had returned to Lord Montgomery's face. "I will allow you some moments to confer." He quickly stepped out of the room beckoning with a wave of his hand for his chancellor and the two knights to follow.

Brother Hubert quickly crossed the room and closed the heavy wooden door and stood with his back to it. Anna stepped in front of her father and grasped him by the shoulders.

"Father, you cannot let our people down and forfeit their loyalty and love. You cannot deliver them into the hands of Lord Montgomery. I must and will go for all our sakes; and besides ..."

"Besides what?"

"If we are able to find out who committed the treacherous act, it will redeem us and besmirch Lord Montgomery's name. No one will ever trust him again."

"No one trusts him now" interjected Chancellor Barlow.

"But I can't bear to think of you in his clutches and what he might do to you, Anna" pleaded Lord Trellian.

Anna tried to reassure her father. "Don't worry father, I can look after myself."

"I know you are a strong willed woman Anna but this man is ... a rogue, a demon. He will not stand for any nonsense."

"Then we must attach conditions" added Brother Hubert.

Their attention flicked over to the monk, who had been quietly observing the proceedings.

"Conditions? What conditions can we specify?" Asked Lord Trellian angrily.

"You heard the man, take it or leave it."

“Pardon me my Lord.” Chancellor Arnold Barlow’s quiet, soothing voice seemed to calm him down somewhat. “It is obvious that Lord Montgomery really ... er ... desires Lady Anna and, if you will excuse me for being so bold, I therefore feel that we may well be able to attach certain conditions as Brother Hubert suggests.”

Lord Trellian turned to his daughter again. “Anna ...”

“No father, let me make this small sacrifice for you and our people. Justice will be done ...”

“But not before you are ruined my child.” There were tears in Lord Trellian’s eyes as he caressed his daughter. ‘*Maybe he was giving in too easily. Could he really let his daughter walk into the clutches of that ruthless man?*’ “You are just like your mother.” He added finally. “You have her determination, strong will and always put other’s welfare before her own and look where that got her.”

“I will continue the battle that mother began” Anna replied, “and win!”

Lord Trellian turned back to Hubert. “What are the conditions you are proposing?”

Brother Hubert outlined his proposal, but many other thoughts were passing through his mind. ‘*If only. Will it be possible?*’ “Lord Trellian, there may be another solution to this dilemma.”

Lord Trellian was about to enquire about this ‘solution’ but Brother Hubert held up his hand to stop him. “As what I am thinking has no guarantee of success or whether it is even feasible, I need to discuss it first with Father Bernard.”

Lord Trellian appeared downcast. “Anything is worth trying” he sighed, then spoke to Arnold Barlow, who nodded in agreement. “Let them back in, Brother Hubert” he said.

Brother Hubert opened the door and disappeared for a few moments before returning with Lord Montgomery and his company. Stephen Montgomery approached the desk in an arrogant manner.

“Well Trellian. What have you decided?” He demanded.

“My daughter Anna will go with you under the following conditions.”

“No conditions” bellowed Lord Montgomery. “The deal is ...” He was interrupted by his chancellor who whispered in his ear. After some moments he continued.

“What are these conditions?”

“I wish to see my daughter on a regular basis. She will be escorted to my castle as and when she desires and will be treated kindly and honourably.”

Lord Montgomery’s face was like thunder but, following more whispers from his chancellor, relaxed his expression.

“But of course. So be it. I will have the marriage contract drawn up instantly.”

His chancellor hastily amended the interim agreement, which Lord Trellian reluctantly signed, and rolled it up as Lord Montgomery turned to leave.

“I will draw up the new formal contract as soon as possible for your signature, Lord Trellian” the chancellor said as he followed Lord Montgomery towards the door.

Lord Montgomery then hesitated and turned around. "To allow you your farewells I will send an escort to collect Lady Anna in two weeks."

Later, as Lord Montgomery was heading towards the castle exit, he leant over to his chancellor and quietly said. "Good thinking Richard. Once we have sealed the marriage contract, all we need do is to arrange for the demise of Lord Trellian and I will inherit his lands through marriage. We can then be done with that strong-minded daughter of his."

They both laughed and returned to Montgomery's castle.

Lord Trellian sank into the chair as Lord Montgomery strode out with his men to collect their horses and were escorted out of the castle. He grabbed hold of his daughter's hand and squeezed it tightly. "I have agreed this with great reluctance and concern for your happiness my dear. If it were not for your strong will and the optimism that you convey for a successful resolution to this situation, I would challenge Montgomery myself."

"Father, there is no need. We must now spend what time there is left to us to investigate the circumstances leading up to the contest before I depart."

Anna helped her father up and they both left the room followed by Chancellor Barlow.

Brother Hubert waited a few minutes before hurrying off to his room. He had an urgent task to attend to. Something that would change the course of events more than he or anyone would know. Seated at his desk he quickly wrote a letter, rolled up the parchment and sealed it. He then hurried down the corridor to the room of his assistant, Cedric. Cedric looked surprised when Brother Hubert entered, looking rather flustered and concerned.

"Brother Hubert. You look stressed. What ails you?"

Brother Hubert thrust the parchment at the novice Cedric. "Cedric, I have a very important errand for you. We have no time to lose."

"Then it must be important. What do you wish me to do?"

"You must deliver this to Father Bernard at Old Sarum as quickly as possible."

"I will leave first thing in the morning."

"No Cedric. You must leave now. It concerns our Lady Anna and it is vital that this reaches Father Bernard without delay."

Cedric rose up from his chair. "Of course, but what has happened to Lady Anna?"

"Nothing yet, but I fear a dreadful fate awaits her unless we can do something soon. Father Bernard is the only one I can turn to. He will know what to do. Now please, be on your way."

Cedric rushed over to a small closet to put on his habit, took the scroll from Brother Hubert and hurried out. Brother Hubert watched him go and stood thinking to himself. *'Father Bernard is our only hope. I do hope he will know what to do, and I*

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can only hope that we will be in time.’ He left the room to spend long hours waiting for a reply.

* * * * *

Father Bernard was in his study dealing with administrative matters when there was a knock at the door. “Enter” he called out, continuing what he was doing.

A monk entered and stood in front of his desk.

“Yes?” He muttered, not looking up.

“Brother Cedric is here with an urgent message from Brother Hubert.”

“Thank you Thomas. Please show him in.”

Thomas disappeared for a moment before showing Brother Cedric into the room.

Father Bernard stood up to greet him. “Ah, Brother Cedric. Good to see you, and how is my dear friend Brother Hubert?”

“He is well thank you Father” Cedric replied, handing the note to Father Bernard. “But he is very concerned about something to do with Lady Anna.”

The abbot frowned, took the parchment and unrolled it. The concerned expression that showed on his face as he read it told Cedric that it was certainly not good news.

“Thank you very much Cedric” he said in a somber voice. “Please return to Brother Hubert and inform him that I will be with him as soon as possible.”

Cedric gave a short bow and hurried out to return to Lord Trellian’s castle. The abbot sat down again and put his head in his hands.

Later that day after compline when all the monks had retired for the night Father Bernard sat alone in his room. “I must do it” he muttered to himself, then opened a drawer in his desk and took out two keys: one large and a second much smaller one. He rose and made his way silently to the crypt. Collecting an oil lamp on the way, he took some steps down to a long corridor that ended in a room with a locked door which he opened with the large key. It was a plain circular room, more like a cell. It was about ten feet in diameter and had no windows. It had three items of furniture: against the wall was a cot with a straw mattress and in the middle a circular table with a chair alongside. He closed the door behind him and locked it. He then placed the lamp on the table and walked over to the wall opposite the cot where a large wooden cross was hanging. Carefully, he lifted down the cross and removed one of the stones behind it to reveal a small niche. Reaching inside, he took out a casket and carried it carefully to the table where he set it down. Taking the smaller key out of his robe pocket he unlocked the casket and lifted the lid. A blindingly pure white light immediately burst forth illuminating the room. Although he felt the strong attractive power emanating from the item within the casket, he had been immune to its pull for some time.

“I must do it” he muttered to himself. “Even though it is fraught with risk, I must do it for Lord Trellian and his daughter’s sake.”

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He reached into the casket, lifted out a polished plinth on which sat a large crystal, the source of the light, and placed it on the table. Slowly, a mist began to form above it and the image of a being began to appear.

2. Present Day: The Exhibition

Philip Hamilton was sitting on his blue leather sofa with a glass of Merlot, his favourite red wine, reading some recently published papers on Augmented Reality published by a scientific team in China. A CD of concertos by Vivaldi was playing quietly in the background helping him to relax after a particularly challenging day at the office. Sleepiness was beginning to wave over him when a single high pitched ‘ping’ on his mobile phone immediately had him alert. ‘*Contact?*’ He thought to himself. He got up, put the papers down and walked quickly over to the bookcase. ‘*After all this time.*’ He removed a copy of ‘The Siege of Leningrad’ which he had recently read and pressed a button in the panel behind it. With a ‘click’ a section of the bookcase case was released. Philip grabbed the end to pull it open to reveal a plain door with a recessed keypad. He entered a code which was followed by another click. The panel swung open and Philip descended the wooden staircase thinking ‘*I wonder what they want this time*’ as lights automatically came on. The storeroom at the bottom contained surplus furniture and other household goods along with an old TV and vacuum cleaner. He walked straight ahead to a door at the end with another keypad into which he keyed another code. Closing the door behind him he walked over to the safe to take out the crystal.

Henry had a feeling it was going to be one of those days. He glanced over at his bedside clock again, which told him it was 7.30, and felt like turning over and going back to sleep. He reckoned he must have spent the last four hours watching the hours ticking by in between his dozing on and off. In the end he rolled out of bed to have a shower and a cup of coffee, but didn’t really feel like eating anything. His uncomfortable stomach was probably a result of the night before, when he had gone drinking with friends from the office and ended up having a few too many glasses of wine. He never was a big drinker and excess alcohol always upset his stomach invariably resulting in a headache as well. After wandering about slowly getting ready for work he suddenly remembered that on this particular day he wasn’t going into the office but to attend an Information Technology Exhibition that he really wasn’t looking forward to. Still, when one is ‘elected’ to go on behalf of the Company one has to show some enthusiasm.

“After all, it’s a day out away from the office” commented one of his colleagues. “Consider yourself lucky. I wish I was going.”

Lucky? The only trouble was that he was going to have to write a report afterwards summarizing his impressions and recommendations, just to make sure that he had attended as instructed. Writing the report was what he certainly wasn’t looking forward

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to at all. He was to find out later why he, in particular, had been 'elected' to represent the Company at the exhibition.

The drive to the Exhibition Centre was tedious to say the least. Half the rest of the country also appeared to be attending. The traffic was awful, the weather not much better, and Henry arrived still with his headache - a bad start to any day. There was a bit of a queue to get into the car park but the exhibition staff had things well under control so he was soon parked and walking through the tunnel to the exhibition hall. He had a cup of warm coffee and a bacon roll from one of the food stalls as a late breakfast then set off on his tour armed with a map of the exhibition layout. As he expected, most of the exhibits were not particularly awe inspiring. Those using the latest technology were running simulations and one couldn't help have that gut instinct that testing was far from complete and that product launch dates were widely optimistic. He could foresee hours of maintenance to fix undiscovered bugs that had burrowed their way into the depths of the code. Too many times new technology had been used - complete with bugs and long extended delivery dates. There were, however, some quite interesting exhibits that included artificial intelligence systems, numerous robotic demonstrations and displays, including some really sophisticated touch screen applications. There was also a booth demonstrating predictive software, where attendees were trying to construct 4-dimensional images. That certainly looked interesting. Henry chatted with the technical guys at the more interesting booths and made notes during his walk about, collecting the usual free carrier bags full of literature which weighed a ton. Towards noon he bumped into a couple of old colleagues, so joined them for a quick chat and lunch consisting of a salmon & cucumber sandwich, a cookie and another cup of coffee. One of them mentioned a booth demonstrating virtual reality software but Henry failed to locate it so let it slip out of his mind. By the middle of the afternoon, and after another coffee he felt that he had had enough, along it seemed with everyone else, and slowly headed with the surging mass towards the exit.

A crowd of people to the right drew his attention to the booth that he had failed to find earlier during his wanderings, the occasional retracing of his steps or even on the exhibition map. It was the booth demonstrating Virtual Reality and exhibition visitors were being welcomed inside for 'The experience of a lifetime.' The name above the booth was VIRMAN Ltd., which stood for 'Virtual Reality Management' but there were so many people waiting that he didn't see much hope of getting inside and turned to continue towards the exit when one of the booth staff called out to him.

"Excuse me. You zer".

The man's accent was West Country and, when Henry turned to see if the voice was directed at him, he saw what resembled a country bumpkin. The owner of the voice was wearing ill-fitting brown corduroy trousers and a green tweed jacket with a red tie loosely hanging around his open collar. Slightly plump, he had thinning hair and

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a stubby nose that looked as though it had been stuck on his face. He was beckoning at Henry to come forward.

“You’d loik to cominzoid? Oi’m szure you’ll foind zummet in’eresting ’ere.”

Henry glanced about and was surprised to see nobody objecting to his possibly jumping the queue. He also felt like a well-needed break and hoped that by the time he came out, the crowd of departing people might have diminished.

“Okay” he replied, shrugging his shoulders and climbing up onto the platform. “I’ll give it a go. You never know, I might even find an application for it.”

“Thart you moight well do szir” the man replied, guiding Henry into a module crammed full of electronic gear. “Moi name’s Alexander Studley, but you can just call me Alex.”

“Thank you Alex. I’m Henry, Henry Longford.”

“Yes. Over ‘ere please.”

‘Odd.’ Henry thought. *‘Alexander Studley didn’t acknowledge the name exchange with any comment or action like shaking my hand and saying “Pleased to meet you”.’* It was as though he already knew Henry’s name and was half expecting him. The thought passed from his mind.

Alex took him into a booth containing a long bench on which two systems were set up, one of which was already in use by a young woman seated in a chair with a helmet over her head which reached down as far as the point of her nose covering her eyes. A bundle of cables from the helmet wound their way to a computer sat on the bench in front of her where another young woman in a grey suit was seated at the keyboard tapping away. Henry couldn’t help noticing that the woman with the helmet on was a long haired brunette (her hair flowed from the base of the helmet) wearing a red dress of length to reach just above the knees and with three quarter length sleeves. She was also wearing red high heel shoes at the end of a pair of very shapely legs. Henry didn’t envy her walking around in them all day.

‘H’m.’ He thought. *‘Wouldn’t mind meeting with that in reality, let alone virtual reality. I wonder what she looks like.’*

“Zit ‘ere please zer”.

His mind was dragged back to the demonstration as Alex indicated a chair for Henry to sit on. He made himself comfortable as Alex picked up a second helmet, complete with attached cables, from the bench.

“Neow, put this over yore ‘ead and place your arms straight out to rest on the arms of the chair.”

He did as he was instructed and then tensed as his arms were secured to the chair arms with leather straps.

“For yer own prodection, to put yer moind at rest” the voice said. “Yous will foind these demonstrations very realistic. Noiw, if you would move your two ‘ands you will find a button on each arm just under your finger tips. When we get star’id a menu will

appear giving you various arptions. Just press the roight button for *Yes* and the left button for *No*. Okay?"

"Fine" Henry replied.

"Okay, then off we go."

Henry heard the man step over to what he presumed was the laptop he had noticed next to the system that he was wired into, type something and hit a key.

Henry instantly found himself in what appeared to be a waiting room in which there was row of seats to the left. Some were occupied by clients, he presumed, reading magazines. There was a door straight ahead over which was an LED display. A sign on the door had the words

Demonstration Rooms.
Please be seated and wait to be called.

He was about to take a seat when a buzzer sounded and the display lit up which made all the people in the room, including Henry, look up. He was surprised to see his own name displayed. He hesitated for a moment and looked around the waiting room, noticing a couple of clients glancing at their watches with looks of impatience on their faces. He then walked towards the door somewhat guiltily and, as he reached it, a soft female voice asked "Would you like to enter?" He glanced back at the other people waiting, some of whom didn't seem to be aware of his presence, and pressed the *right* button on the chair arm. The door swung open to reveal a cream corridor with grey coloured doors on either side. It had no windows but was lit by overhead strip lighting. As he started down the corridor the door behind him slammed shut, making him jump. The first door on the right said **Flight Simulator** which he ignored. The door opposite read **Underwater Exploration**. '*That sounds interesting*'. He thought. The door had no handle, so he stood there for a couple of minutes; but as nothing happened he continued on until he passed a door which said **Conference Demonstration**. This seemed appropriate and possibly useful to his employer, so he hesitated. This time the response was more or less instant and the soft female voice popped into his ears again.

"Would you like to join the conference, Henry?"

He had that odd feeling again as though he was being guided to make the *correct* choice. He pressed the right button again and the door swung open. A rectangular conference table was in front of him with eight chairs arranged around it. At the far end of the table was some equipment consisting of a laptop and a large monitor mounted on the wall. To the side was a white board with a set of coloured markers. A long unit on the left with cupboards underneath was equipped with refreshments and plates of biscuits covered in clingfilm. Opposite was a door, presumably leading to another office. The door opened and the sales representative Alex, whom he had met outside, entered.

"Hello zsir. Pleaze zsit down and I will explain."

Henry sat on one side of the conference table with Alex seated opposite.

"Now I may look real to you but this is in fact a 'virtual' me and I am actually in another booth."

He went on to explain that with the technology being demonstrated a client can have a virtual conference with colleagues anywhere in the world such that it would appear that they were all in the same room in the form of holograms like himself. He even used the presentation equipment to give Henry a slide show. They were interrupted by a knock on the door which opened when Alex called out "Come in." Henry was surprised to see the woman in red enter and was once again captivated by her appearance. She had beautiful brown eyes and looked very sexy, he thought. She passed a note to Alex who, after reading it, nodded and quickly looked up at Henry with a rather strange look as she left the room. He broke into a smile.

"Sorry zsir, some unexpected news." He noticed the quizzical look on Henry's face. "Yes, I can see what you are thinking. To prove this technology we persuaded the young lady using the other system outside to join our conference. What do you think?"

"Fantastic" Henry replied, relishing the thought of having a dialogue with the woman in red and possibly even getting to know her, in the real world that is and not the virtual one. He thought about asking her out for a drink after the conference.

"Zso you think you moight be interested in the kit?"

Henry nodded. "Possibly."

Alex went on to describe a special promotion with a variety of finance options and service arrangements. Henry indicated the possibility that his employer might invite them in for a demonstration, at which point Alex thanked him for attending, told him that the conference would begin in one minute, when a number of other holographic participants would attend, then made his excuses and left the room.

Henry waited for the conference to start but after about ten minutes, got up impatient and unimpressed and walked over to the door, which opened once again for him to rejoin the corridor. He was about to leave by the way he had come in but exit signs hanging at regular intervals pointed him further down the corridor. As he approached the exit door at the end he noticed that most of the rooms off of it were presenting game-type experiences or 'Holidays of a Lifetime'. He passed a door labeled **Rescue the Maiden** but only gave it a cursory glance thinking that he'd wasted enough time and really wanted to get off home now, but still thinking about the woman in red. However, the voice again interrupted his thoughts.

"Would you like to rescue the maiden?"

Not being one for computer games he just smiled to himself and hit the *left* button. The door opened. He pressed the button again but found himself being drawn into the room. He kept on pressing the button.

"Bloody software bugs" he mumbled to himself crossly. He stepped into the room. "Oh well, why not. A bit of fun to end the day."

The door slammed behind him and immediately Henry found himself in a forest or woodland with the sun's rays piercing the canopy and highlighting patches of golden leaves. Ahead of him was a narrow well-trodden path covered in brown, dry leaves. It appeared to be nearing dusk and a moderately strong but cool breeze was blowing through the trees. He didn't know what to do so commenced walking along the track crunching leaves and twigs underfoot. Shortly, the land began to fall away to his right and he thought he detected the sound of running water. *'Hm, must be a river nearby'* he thought, but the tree cover was too dense to make anything out. He carried on walking, not paying particular attention to the time but just listening to the evening birdsong and the distinctive sound of the blackbird. From the low rays of the sun broken by the tree cover, it looked as though it had been a fine day. After a while he thought he heard a faint shout or scream. He stopped and peered through the undergrowth and trees but couldn't see anything. He wasn't even certain from which direction the scream came, but it was certainly a woman's. He started off again but walked a bit slower and then heard it once more coming, it seemed, from the lower ground to his right. Then he thought he saw a flash of white through the trees and peered hard. Yes, there was someone down there. *'Perhaps she is in trouble.'* He thought. *'Maybe fallen in the river or something.'* He looked for a route down and soon found another narrower track on the right zig-zagging down the slope. It was quite steep but he was able to make quite good headway without making too much noise other than collecting occasional painful scratches from brambles and branches protruding into the path.

Another much louder scream pulled his attention over to his left and, with the trees thinning, he thought he saw two people struggling. He looked about for some sort of implement that he might need to threaten whoever was attacking the woman and found a hefty branch broken off one of the trees. He picked it up and slowly crept forward towards the struggling couple. A woman or girl in a long white dress, though it looked more like a nightgown, was being dragged struggling towards a black horse by a figure dressed completely in black with longish black hair. He looked exactly like a knight from King Arthur's time. A scabbard hung by his left side which contained what appeared to be a large, hefty sword. He couldn't actually see what the woman looked like as she was hidden from view by the man in black but he did glimpse long strands of flowing blonde hair. Henry found himself in a dilemma. Should he just go for it and try and smack the guy over the head with the branch or just approach him civilly and try and sort the problem out. Neither option seemed attractive. The first would probably result in him being skewered on the sword and in the second scenario he would probably be told to mind his own business or end up ... skewered on the sword. Still, he didn't feel that he could just ignore the situation. The poor young woman was obviously in distress and being taken against her will. Henry knew that he was putting himself in danger but crept nearer, treading carefully to avoid making any sound. He grasped the branch tightly with both hands and had to try and catch the man by surprise.

, 'Yes' he thought. *'It should be thick enough to hopefully knock the man out.'* Fortunately, the abductor wasn't wearing a helmet.

He had now reached the end of the undergrowth to a clearing where the struggle was taking place. The maiden suddenly glimpsed Henry creeping up behind her abductor with the thick branch in his hands. Henry couldn't help notice how attractive she was with her slim features, long flowing blonde hair and pale skin. She responded to his appearance by intensifying her struggle with louder screams to cover the sound of Henry's approach.

"It is useless to struggle my lady". The man's voice was deep and harsh. "You belong to my Lord and I will return you to him."

Henry was now just a few feet away when the black figure sensed his presence and spun round. Swinging the branch down, Henry caught the man on the side of the head. He shouted in pain and fell to the ground, stunned and seemingly unconscious, but as Henry was about to turn to speak with the damsel he heard scuffling, turned around and saw the man raising himself off the ground and reaching for his sword with his right hand. Henry dashed forward and swung the branch down again before the man had got to his feet but he stopped it with his left arm. From the expression on his face it must have hurt him but he managed to shuffle away from Henry and get to his feet, pulling his sword out.

"You'll pay for this, whoever you are."

Henry backed away from him as he started to swing his sword. *'Oh God'* he thought, *'What do I do now?'*

He backed away in the direction from which he had come whilst the man strode forward swinging the blade to the left and right. As he reached Henry he lifted the sword and swung it down but Henry caught the blow on the branch he was still holding with both hands. Fortunately the sword did not penetrate the whole way through the branch but stuck about halfway in. Henry pulled to free the branch or take the sword with it, but the man had the same idea and they were both pulling. The man decided to move forward and tackle Henry or push him to the ground but a commotion behind him made him turn around. The damsel was mounting the horse. The man hesitated trying to decide whether to stop the woman escaping with his horse or deal with Henry. He decided on the former but it was apparent that he was too late as she galloped off with him running after her. Henry took the opportunity to climb back up the slope before the man changed his mind and came back for him. He turned and ran straight into a large overhanging branch that smacked him on the head.

The next thing he knew was being shaken by someone.

"You okay zsir?" Alex was leaning over him.

Henry found himself lying on some sort of bed and pulled himself up onto his elbows. "What happened?" He asked, aware of his throbbing head. "Where am I?"

He looked about and found himself in what he assumed was a first aid module.

“Sorry zsir.” Alex had a look of concern on his face. “You must have had quite an experience, because you suddenly yanked your head back and slammed it into the back of the chair. Are you okay?”

Henry’s headache had returned but he climbed down off the bed. “Yes, I’m fine thanks. I think. Just a headache.”

He saw the woman in the red dress peering through the module opening.

“Is he alright?” She asked.

“Yes, oi believe zso” replied Alex.

“Perhaps she would like to nurse me.” Henry suggested as an aside to Alex, as she disappeared.

“Chance would be a foiner thing” Alex replied, with a grin on his face. Then he continued. “What happened? Was it a good experience?”

Henry was rubbing his sore head and felt a bump, but at least the skin wasn’t broken.

“Yes” he replied thinking back. “All very realistic. In fact too realistic.”

“What do you mean?” Alex asked, with a questioning look.

“I was trying to rescue this maiden from abduction by a knight, or some guy dressed in black with a big sword. I think she escaped but I was in danger of being sliced in two.”

Alex nodded with understanding.

“Then, when the knight ran after the maiden, who’d made off on his horse, I ran off straight in to a tree and ... that’s all I remember.”

“Oh, very exciting.”

“Not for me” Henry replied. “I can’t help wondering what might have happened if I hadn’t knocked myself out.”

“Good job you did then” Alex laughed, somewhat falsely.

Henry didn’t laugh. Alex helped him off the bed and followed him out of the module back towards the demonstration area, which was now empty. As they passed the display area, where the two systems were set up, Henry glanced at the chair he had been seated in and wondered how he could possibly have knocked himself out. His attention returned to the exhibition stand.

“What? Where is everyone?”

He noticed staff packing things up in boxes and then glanced at his watch. Two hours had passed. Now he was annoyed at the thought of having to join the rush hour on his home journey.

“Sorry zsir” Alex replied. “You were out for some time. It was certainly a violent jerk resulting in quite a hard knock.” He fished inside the top pocket of his suit jacket. “Anyway, here’s my card zsir.” He handed Henry a ‘VIRMAN Ltd.’ business card with two purple stripes and a hologram of himself on it, along with his name and contact

information. "We'll be hearing from you I hope and trust that the Company receives a favourable report from you on our research."

Henry was annoyed, still wondering how he had received the bump on his head. He mumbled a 'thanks' turned and left the module thinking 'Well, maybe you won't'.

"I'm glad you enjoyed it anyway" were Alex's last words.

Henry didn't reply.

Two first aid staff, standing to the side, watched Henry as he walked past rubbing his head. They were drinking cups of tea or coffee accompanied by idle conversation about how busy they had been, especially with volunteers for the virtual reality demonstration.

"Shouldn't allow it" said one. "It's far too dangerous if you ask me."

The other nodded in agreement and spoke to Henry as he passed them. "You feel okay sir?"

Henry rubbed his head feeling the tender bump again. "Yes. I'm fine thanks; just anxious to get back home now."

As he walked away from the booth a slim middle aged man in grey slacks, a white short sleeved shirt and red tie watched him leave, smoothed his dark hair back and started making notes on a clipboard that had a photograph of Henry attached to it with a paperclip. He also glanced at the club that he had hit Henry with, relieved that he hadn't hit him too hard. He then picked up a mobile phone and made a call. Moments later the woman in the red dress approached him.

"I hope you didn't hit him too hard, Alan."

"No. He will probably end up with a bit of a headache but he should be okay. It was an appropriate action to take at that point and just leaves that degree of inquisitiveness."

It wasn't until he had left the Exhibition Centre that Henry thought about the last statement the sales rep Alex had made. 'I do hope the Company receives a favourable report on our research.' 'Strange phrasing' he thought and wondered why the rep said 'The Company' and not 'Your Company'. He had made the statement in a very knowing manner as though he was familiar with Henry's employer. In fact the whole experience with the rep and the demonstration seemed a little odd. Then he thought further back to the 'election' of him to attend the exhibition and his manager's apparent insistence that 'he' should go; and only him, due to all other staff being busy and the expense of sending more than one delegate of course. He was also annoyed because he was going to miss his fencing lesson that evening and had also missed the opportunity to meet up the woman in the red dress. It was unlikely that he would ever see her again, so just shrugged his shoulders, tried to ignore the fact that he was probably reading too much into the day's events and looked forward to getting home to relax and maybe think about the report he was going to have to write.

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He'd actually taken up fencing for mental relaxation several years prior, finding it therapeutic. He never considered the sport for serious competition but soon developed the skills to be a worthy partner and to help with the training of new members. Little did he know that these skills would one day help to save his life.

3. 1140: A few days later

“Father Bernard, we are most honoured with your visit; but what brings you to my home on this occasion?”

Lord Trellian interrupted his discussions with Arnold Barlow, and rose from his desk to greet the abbot. The chancellor stepped back to the right of Lord Trellian. Father Bernard was in his early eighties but from his demeanor and looks one could have easily mistaken him for a man ten years younger. He was accompanied by Brother Hubert, who stood in the background.

“You are certainly looking well.”

“I am well thank you Lord Trellian and I trust I find you the same.”

Lord Trellian’s expression changed to one of sorrow. “I would be ... but for ...”

“Yes, I have heard.”

Lord Trellian looked surprised. “You know? About my daughter Anna?”

Father Bernard nodded solemnly.

“But how?” He then glanced at Brother Hubert, who now looked somewhat embarrassed. “What have you been up to Brother Hubert?”

Before the Brother could reply Father Bernard continued. “Your good, loyal friend and God’s servant sought my help in this matter.”

“But how can you help Father? I foolishly gambled and lost; now my debt to Lord Montmery is to be settled by my one and only beautiful daughter who is sacrificing her future happiness to spare my people.”

“That is the reason I am here. I believe I may have a solution to your predicament ...”

“But ...” Lord Trellian started, but Father Bernard continued.

“It does not involve you or anyone at your court. The ... er way out of this dilemma will take place once your daughter has left your fiefdom and is in the ... er ... should I say custody of Lord Montmery.”

Lord Trellian looked puzzled. “What are you trying to say Father? Lord Montmery will be sending a company of his knights soon to collect my daughter and take her to his castle. Are you suggesting that we hide her away somewhere or prevent them taking her?”

“Oh no, nothing as open and bold as that” continued Father Bernard. He started walking around the room and stopped. “I am very weary after my journey. May I suggest ...”

“Of course Father. Please excuse me for being a poor host.”

Lord Trellian called out to one of guards standing outside the door, which had been left partially open when Father Bernard had entered. “I will arrange accommodation so that you can refresh yourself immediately.” The guard appeared and was instructed to summon a page boy.

“Thank you Lord Trellian. May I suggest we talk more over dinner?”

“But of course.”

“And I would suggest ...” he glanced around the room “... that the four of us be present.”

Lord Trellian glanced at his chancellor. “Of course, but what about my daughter?”

“I am sorry, I meant Brother Hubert, Lady Anna and you.”

Arnold Barlow looked taken aback and a bit annoyed.

“Not that I don’t trust you Chancellor Barlow.” Father Bernard added hastily. “On the contrary, I have always been most impressed with your skills, loyalty and honesty but this is a rather delicate and sensitive situation with many risks. For all our sakes the fewer who are aware of my proposal the better.”

Arnold Barlow nodded. “I understand Father and appreciate your comments, but if you require my services I will be most honoured to assist.”

Father Bernard continued. “I was even hesitant about including even you Lord Trellian but as we are talking about your daughter’s future and happiness I considered it your right to know of any plans involving her.”

Lord Trellian nodded in acknowledgement as the abbot continued.

“Thank you Lord Barlow for your offer but now please excuse me so that I can freshen up, then we will meet for dinner.”

Anna appeared quite excited when she joined the three men. Lord Trellian was somewhat surprised that his daughter did not appear too distraught at the thought of being delivered into Lord Montgomery’s hands. He continually felt pangs of guilt that he allowed himself to agree to her departure and even now lacked the courage to change his mind and take a more firm stand. Anna commenced the discussions with what seemed at first a strange statement.

“Father, I do have some good news”

“Oh?” He glanced at the two monks, who both became alert at what she was about to say.

“Harold and Llewellyn have been making enquiries around the castle and have discovered that the night before the contest the guards admitted a group of three villagers into the castle to deliver farm produce.” She paused.

“And?” her father questioned.

“Although there were three of them, all the supplies were unloaded by just two of the villagers whilst the third initially remained on the wagon holding a small but long bundle across his lap.”

“So, what is unusual about that?”

“Well, what seemed strange, according to the guards when they thought back, was that during the usual exchange of greetings this particular man was very quiet. When they jokingly challenged him asking what the bundle was he appeared to grasp it tighter and said it was something special for the cook. This was of course followed by many

lewd jokes. The guards suspected nothing untoward and let them carry on with their delivery.”

Lord Trellian seemed a bit embarrassed in front of the two monks.

“Yes, yes, of course but what has this to do with ...”

“When I spoke with the cook” Anna continued, “she said that no one had given her anything special; but what is more interesting is that she did notice that this villager, who she believed was called Jean, disappeared whilst the other two were unloading the goods. They also had to wait for him to return before leaving.” She was now talking so fast and excitedly that her Father had to slow her down.

“Slow down Anna. Where is all this leading?”

“Well,” she continued, “when they started making jokes about him having a secret liaison he initially got quite annoyed and denied the suggestion but then suddenly agreed with them with ‘impish smiles’, so they told me.”

“How do you know all this?”

“Because I made the point of talking with the guards in the kitchen in front of the cook.”

Anna sat down at the table looking pleased with herself and obviously expecting more questions.

Her father seemed a bit annoyed at the diversion. “So, what relevance does this have to the issue we are about to discuss?”

“Well, that’s just it. We, meaning I, Harold and Llewellyn, think that this man exchanged the arrows that Harold had selected for the archery contest. This then resulted in Lord Montgomery winning the contest unfairly.”

Her father listened carefully. “This is all supposition and can never be proved. How would anyone know which arrows he intended to use?”

Brother Hubert leaned forward. “If I may add something.”

“Please” added Father Bernard.

“It is well known that Harold has a special quiver he always uses for archery competitions, as he does quivers for other activities like hunting. It is also well known that all his arrows are made by the skilled craftsman Llewellyn who only supplies his best arrows to his brother-in-law Harold.”

“So it wouldn’t take much imagination” Anna added, “to exchange some of his arrows for identical but poorer quality ones.”

“But how would this person know where Harold kept his arrows, and by that I mean that he would have to locate the quiver and exchange the arrows without being seen?” Lord Trellian was shaking his head not believing this a likely scenario.

“Maybe Harold wasn’t around that day and it wouldn’t take much to find out where his dwelling was.”

At this point Lord Trellian called the page boy in to go and check with the gatehouse if Harold had been in the castle on the day of the deliveries.

“Hm. If all this is true then we don’t have much time to follow it up.”

They sat in silence waiting for the boy to return, which he soon did with positive news. Yes, Harold had been away for most of the day visiting his brother-in-law. Apparently, he had received a message that his brother-in-law was sick and left the castle to visit him. It also transpired that the message was false and that his brother-in-law was in fine mettle after all. It was obviously a ruse to get him out of the castle when the villagers made their delivery. They concluded that this indeed needed to be followed up post haste. Lord Trellian once again motioned, with a hand signal, to the page boy who was now standing just inside the door. The lad turned and scampered off down the corridor towards the kitchen.

"First thing tomorrow" he continued, "I will instruct Chancellor Barlow to send a couple of knights to accompany the guards, who were on duty, to the local villages to seek out this 'villager' and find out what he was doing in the castle. If there is evidence of treachery we will uncover it and expose Lord Montgomery for what he is."

"That might be easier said than done" added Father Bernard.

"Why?" Queried Lord Trellian.

"No doubt our villager has a contact or accomplice who is in the employ of Lord Montgomery" suggested Anna. "Not only do we have to identify our man but also find out who his accomplice was."

"But we also have to prove that the villager we suspect is actually the person who betrayed us." Brother Hubert shared his questioning look with the other three."

"That's true" said Anna, now looking doubtful.

"All we can do is follow this up and see what develops." Lord Trellian's final statement on the subject was interrupted by the arrival of dinner.

With the meal over and the dishes cleared away, the page boy closed the door and the group turned to Father Bernard to listen to his proposal

"Well Father Bernard" began Lord Trellian. "After that digression, what is the solution to Anna's situation that you propose?"

Father Bernard cleared his throat and began. "Firstly, I must ask that you trust what I am about to say and refrain from asking any questions. The plan is one of utmost delicacy and it is vital that no one outside this group is aware of what I hope will take place and what might follow subsequently."

Lord Trellian looked concerned. "I don't quite understand what you are saying and the reason for all the secrecy"

Father Bernard stood up and began walking around the room, the others following him with their eyes and shifting positions.

"The plan is this. You will send a message to Lord Montgomery informing him that it might be more appropriate for his men to collect Lady Anna somewhere other than your castle. Instead, you will deliver her to the inn on the western road near Lyneford to be collected there."

Lord Trellian interrupted angrily rising from his seat. "Now just a minute Father; you expect my daughter to be"

Father Bernard held up his hand in a gesture of silence.

"She will be escorted to the inn on the evening of the 17th but you will inform Lord Montmery that the exchange will take place on the 20th."

Anna looked questioningly at Father Bernard. "Why three days before, Father?"

"Do not ask questions that I am not able to answer easily my dear" he replied.

"Let's just say that the time lapse is very important for my plan to work."

Anna and her father both had puzzled looks on their faces. Brother Hubert sat passively during these exchanges. Father Bernard continued.

"You, Lord Trellian, will detail a company of knights to escort Lady Anna and Brother Hubert to the inn. The knights will then depart before dark."

Lord Trellian spoke again. "But that inn is in Lord Montmery's lands."

"Exactly."

"And how can you expect me to leave my daughter alone in an inn, where many travellers ...?"

"You will inform Lord Montmery that the only other persons in the inn must be the inn keeper and his wife, other than Brother Hubert who will remain with Lady Anna until her collection. You will instruct Lord Montmery that these are your final conditions and you will then have fulfilled your bargain."

"What if he rejects these 'final' conditions?"

"He won't."

"You have plenty of confidence."

"I do."

"But how? What is going to happen? Will my daughter be safe?"

"Trust me, Lord Trellian, and ask no questions. All I suggest is that we pray to God for the safe deliverance of your daughter." His voice and expression suddenly turned grave. "I will not attempt to raise your hopes too high. What I hope will take place may not succeed and then our hopes and efforts will come to nowt; but if there is goodness on ... the other side ..." he added hesitantly, "... then Anna will be safely delivered from Lord Montmery's clutches." He sat down looking exhausted and relieved that the burden had been lifted from his shoulders. "God bless you all and may good fortune be the outcome; and you Lord Trellian" he continued, looking him straight in the eyes, "excuse me for being so bold as to reprimand you for the sorrow that you could be bringing on yourself. You should suffer penance for your sins and put your trust in God."

Lord Trellian couldn't get angry. He knew it was true and that somehow he had to make amends.

"You will excuse me now" Father Bernard said "as I am feeling rather weary and could do with some rest."

"But of course Father Bernard" Lord Trellian replied, rising from his seat.

The two monks left, leaving Anna and her father alone.

“Anna, I feel heartfelt sorrow that I have brought this tragedy upon us. Belatedly, I believe I have learnt my lesson and can only hope that Father Bernard’s plan, whatever it is, succeeds.”

Anna put her arms around her father. “Don’t worry father. I am sure everything will turn out well in the end. Father Bernard is a wise and intelligent man and if anyone can devise a successful plan I am sure it must be him.” She kissed her father on the forehead. “And don’t worry about me. God will be my protector.” She left the room leaving her father wondering how things might turn out and praying for his daughter’s safety.

Brother Hubert was in the chapel praying when Father Bernard entered. He heard the Father but did not move from his prostrate position in front of the altar. Father Bernard knelt down beside him.

“I believe I do have a solution to Lady Anna’s predicament.”

“Yes?” replied Brother Hubert, glancing at the Abbot.

“I have thought about this for a long time and have concluded that we must summon the gateway once again.”

Brother Hubert swung his body round with an expression of shock. “No, not again. It is too risky. Look what happened last time.”

“I realize that but it is the only way to achieve our objective without leaving any evidence or incriminating anyone who is likely to be traced. I have already been in contact with the guardian and have received an encouraging response.”

Brother Hubert raised himself up and followed Father Bernard to the front pew, where they sat down side by side. “Do we have a subject?”

“Yes we do.”

“What do we know about him? How will we know if he is suitable?”

“I am assured that the subject is a very intelligent man with all the right qualities to maximize our chance of success.”

“Has he got a name?”

“Henry Longford.”

“Where will he be transported?”

“We have to take the crystal to the inn where Lady Anna will be lodging, prior to her being collected by Montgomery. We must then acquire the room next to Lady Anna’s where we will activate the crystal to achieve the transfer.”

“Will it work again?”

“I hope so for all our sakes.”

“So what do we do when he arrives?”

“We must merely inform him of his mission and then leave immediately. It is important that he uses his own initiative as much as possible.”

“Will the people at the other end be ready for us?”

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“Yes, I hope so. I managed to communicate details about our problem and received an acknowledgement.” The Abbot rubbed his head. “But I ended up with a terrible headache after the link.”

“You should take care.”

“I realize that, particularly after the last time. Not something I would want to do very often.”

“One day it will be the death of you I am sure.”

“No doubt. Anyway, we must hurry. I suggest that I follow your group someway behind and bring the crystal in just after dusk.”

“You are sure this is going to work?”

“It has to.”

4. Present Day: The Inn

It was now late afternoon and Henry Longford was grateful to get back to his car in the now nearly empty underground car park but he wasn't looking forward to joining the queues of traffic departing from the City Centre. After about an hour crawl he finally reached the main trunk road out of the city and started to make a decent speed. The headache was much worse, even after taking analgesics as often as he dared. He knew from experience though that it was probably a futile exercise and usually found that they only worked for him if he just rested awhile with his eyes closed, which unfortunately he wasn't able to do. He was not, therefore, looking forward to the long drive home. What made it more arduous was that he lived to the south west of the city on the opposite side of the moors to the route taken by the main road, which ran more or less due south. He would then need to turn off at Loddington and take the North West main road to his hometown. Of course he could take the road across the Moors, which cut at least three quarters of an hour off the journey, but not many drivers tended to use it after dark. Apart from being narrow and completely unlit, it twisted and turned with many hairpin bends and ran over a hilly, deserted landscape. There were no buildings or farm animals; just scrub land, forested areas and valleys with the usual variety of wildlife. Streams and rivulets also drained across the moors which were prone to flood the low-lying sections of the road during heavy downpours. Needless to say, he had no intention of taking this road.

He was now driving along the eastern edge of the moors and actually quite relieved that the traffic had thinned out, when, just over the brow of a hill, he saw a man in a yellow fluorescent jacket on the side of the road. When the man saw Henry's car approaching he appeared to briefly raise a pair of binoculars to his eyes before waving him down, at which point Henry came to a stop and wound down the driver's window as the man came around to the side of the car.

"Sorry sir but there has been an accident a few miles further on, so I advise you to take the diversion up ahead."

"Okay" he replied, then added "So what's with the binoculars?"

"Oh, just checking for the rescue services."

Henry thought it odd and didn't really believe him but just shook his head, thanked him anyway and drove on, not noticing that the man then took out his mobile phone and proceeded to dial a number. He did, however, notice headlights in his rear view mirror from cars coming up behind him, albeit a long way off, and guessed that the man was stopping them all. *'But why bother?'* He thought. *'Normally, they just put a diversion sign up.'* That is exactly what he eventually found across the road just before the turnoff to the Moors road. The sign was in the middle of the carriageway and stated the

road ahead was closed due to a major accident. He hesitated a bit wondering whether to back track and find another route, which would mean a lot more mileage and a very late arrival home.

Instinctively, he looked up at the sky. The Moors Road was not a welcoming prospect but dusk was still some time off so he thought it should be okay. It was still a fine evening and if he put some speed on in the few sections where the road ahead was fairly straight he should be able to get most of the way across before it got really dark then the last section wouldn't matter too much. He glanced first at the sign, which read:

The Moors Road
CONNINGTON
No petrol for 40 miles

and then down at his petrol gauge, but knew the tank was nearly full, having filled it up before he had set out that day. *'Well, barring major mechanical problems,'* he thought, *'I should be okay.'* He drove up the slip road and followed the road as it curved to the right, over the main road and into the start of scrubby vegetation. Back on the main road the man in the yellow jacket proceeded to remove the diversion sign.

The waving branches of a clump of trees drew Henry's attention to a strong breeze that had got up and a mass of cloud to the north drifting slowly south but the evening was still bright and clear, so he did not pay much attention to it. He was just grateful to be on the move again and the approach of dusk now prompted him to switch the headlights on. He tuned the radio in to a classical music station and felt relaxed driving along the quiet empty road. The thought did cross his mind that there did not appear to be any cars following as he might have expected but he assumed that perhaps they were very careful drivers and less familiar with the road than he was. Funny though, that there was no traffic coming the other way either but that did not bother him; better than having to face glaring headlights. His mind was so preoccupied with various thoughts and the background music that he failed to notice the approaching gloom until a few large splodges crashed against the windscreen. He glanced up at the sky and saw the fast disappearing blue as huge mountainous clouds billowed overhead. The rain began to get heavier accompanied by gusts of wind and flashes of lightening. *'Looks like a storm is brewing. Just my luck.'* The car rocked slightly as the rain began to lash heavily against it. He switched the radio off as it was now a distraction and he needed to devote all his attention to the road. Although he was not expecting many, if any, cars to come from the opposite direction, the increasingly poor visibility forced him to slow down to a near crawl.

Soon the rain was pelting down accompanied by stronger gusts of wind. Jagged forks of lightening were now lighting up the sky highlighting the torrential rain and surrounding scrubland that was just about visible in the dark. Water was running across

the road in places like rivers causing that familiar rumbling tyre noise and throwing up huge sprays of water. He began to fear that water might get into the engine electrics and cause it to cut out so slowed down even more. There was no way of knowing whether he might find the road ahead completely flooded. The storm had now turned to a gale and he was getting more than a little worried. He began to wish he could find a layby to sit out the storm; better than driving in this.

The road dipped slightly followed by a moderately steep hillock topped by a knoll of trees, which he could just about make out when the sky lit up again from the lightening. In the bottom of the dip was what appeared to be a fast-flowing stream. He hoped that it would not be too deep, so slowed down as much as he dared and crawled through the water. His heart sank when the engine hesitated momentarily as he left the river but on hitting the accelerator it picked up again. For a brief moment he couldn't see the road ahead but then noticed it curved to the right just before a pile of brushwood and he quickly climbed the hill ahead. The road from here seemed narrower from what he remembered but then his heart sank again as he started downhill again to another deep stream. Suddenly something caught his eye. The road ahead inclined slightly after the stream and he was sure that he could see some lights of what appeared to be a house. *'Impossible'* he thought. *'There isn't anything out here. Perhaps it is a caravan or motor home but then again the light seemed rather bright for that.'* Knowing how there was now a lot of interest in nature holidays maybe he shouldn't be surprised to find someone parked up by the road. He just hoped that whoever it was would not mind letting him rest up until the worst of the storm had passed.

Once more he eased the car through the stream and up the incline towards the light. Another blinding flash of lightening lit up what appeared to be an old inn set slightly back from the road on the right. *'A period built rest house?'* It all seemed so strange. A building stuck out here all on its own with nothing around for miles and he had never been aware of it. *'Oh well, who's complaining.'* He pulled the car over off the road in front of the inn. As he came to a stop he could just about make out in the headlights another tumbling stream emanating from somewhere past the building and pouring across the road. Not bothering to grab anything he leapt out of the car, locked it and lunged towards the front door through the lashing rain, ending up with soaking shoes, jacket and trouser bottoms.

Henry could see a dim light through a small glass panel at head height in the wooden door as he tried turning the doorknob. Fortunately it was not locked so he pushed it open and quickly stepped inside, closing it with some effort against the gale. As he turned around, he saw that indeed it was an inn. He was facing a bar opposite the door with tables and chairs arranged to the left and right. There was no one around as he glanced around the room, noting that the lighting was provided by oil lamps. *'No electricity?'* He thought. *'Crumbs, who would want to live out here without power for*

lighting, heating and even cooking?’ He walked up to the bar thinking that someone must be able to hear his squelching shoes. He bent down to take them off and then jumped with a start as he straightened up and found himself facing a slim, gentle faced, middle aged man standing behind the bar. His black hair was swept back over his head; Henry thought it needed cutting.

“Awful night sir, don’t you think?”

“Dreadful” Henry agreed.

“You got here then?”

“What?” Henry said, suddenly feeling uncomfortable. “Were you expecting me? I didn’t”

“Oh, sorry sir” he stammered in reply. “I meant that I ... er ... saw your headlights over the hill and wondered if you would make it when you didn’t seem to be moving. I ... guess I would have come to look for you if you hadn’t ... made it by yourself.”

“Thanks” Henry said gratefully; and then thought that he had better ask if he could stay the night. “Any chance of a”

The man interrupted before he had finished, anticipating the request. “A room for the night and something to eat and drink no doubt?”

“A room definitely” Henry replied eagerly. “I’m exhausted; and a light snack – just some bread and cheese, if you have it, and something to drink would be very much appreciated.” He removed and held up his soggy shoes and indicated his soggy trouser bottoms. “I hope you don’t mind but ...”

“We’ll dry all those for you sir; and we do have spare nightclothes left by other passing travellers. You can borrow those if you wish. All washed and ironed of course” he added hastily.

“That’ll be great thanks. Although most of my clothes aren’t too wet - just my suit - a bit damp I think.”

Henry removed his wallet from his jacket pocket and handed the garment and the pair of shoes to, who he assumed was the landlord. “I’ll give you my trousers later if that’s alright.”

“No problem sir. Glad to oblige. Please take a seat while I rustle up some food and check if the room is ready for you.”

Henry had that strange feeling again as though he had been expected. Why say ‘... *the room is ready for you*’ rather than ‘... *a room is made up*.’ Maybe he was reading too much into what the man was saying.

The bread, cheese, cold meats and pickle provided, satisfied Henry’s stomach nicely, except that he had that weird sensation that he was being given many sidelong glances by the landlord as he was rummaging about the bar. His comings and goings between the bar and kitchen made it impossible to start any conversation. The impression Henry got was that the landlord was busily doing nothing but trying to avoid getting involved in conversation, not that it bothered him very much. With his persistent headache he was not really in the mood for talking a lot and just wanted to lie

down and get some sleep. He was just feeling grateful for finding the inn. He was leaning back in his seat after the meal with his eyes closed when the landlord appeared again.

“Would you like me to show you to your room now sir?”

“Yes please, if you don’t mind” Henry replied quickly, opening his eyes and getting up.

The landlord led Henry around to the right of the bar where an open doorway led to a narrow flight of stairs, which creaked as they climbed to reach a gloomy corridor with bedrooms on either side. He led Henry all the way to the end room.

“I’ll put you in our best room sir as ... we aren’t very busy.”

Henry had the feeling that there were no other guests in the inn and thought it strange that there didn’t seem to be anyone else in the inn helping in the kitchen or at the bar.

A worn reddish patterned carpet over polished floorboards ran down the centre of the corridor, which was wide enough for the occasional chair positioned outside some of the rooms. The walls were wood paneled and oil lamps hung at regular intervals along the wall interspersed with paintings of various medieval scenes and portraits. Some were rural scenes and others of bustling villages. The portraits appeared to be mainly of stern, unfriendly looking people with similar features - no doubt of all the same miserable family.

“Interesting pictures” Henry commented.

“Like you say sir, interesting” was the only reply he received. “Here you are sir.”

He bent forward and opened the door beckoning Henry to enter before him.

“Thank you” Henry said, walking into the room.

“If you’d like to leave any clothes outside the door on the chair” the landlord said, nodding to the piece of furniture.

The seats of the chairs were upholstered in worn red cloth similar in design to the carpet. Henry thought that maybe it was of Elizabethan or probably a much earlier, maybe medieval, style. That nagging thought came back to him again so he felt he had to ask. “How long has this place been here?”

“Oh, a long, long time” the man replied matter-of-factly.

His response, again, gave Henry the impression that he was not in the mood for talking so he decided he would try and find out more about the place during breakfast. He even thought that he might come back to the inn for a long weekend of nature studying. It was certainly a quaint, interesting inn probably with lots of history.

“Goodnight sir” the landlord said, somewhat hurriedly. “I’ll leave you to get some rest. Oh, and the toilet is right down the other end of the corridor.”

“Oh, thanks; and goodnight” Henry replied.

The man was just pulling the door closed when Henry grabbed it.

“Er, what time is breakfast?”

“Whenever you’re ready” he replied, letting go of the door and turning to return downstairs.

Henry shook his head. *‘Strange fellow’* he thought, as he commenced an exploration of the room.

In the centre against the right hand wall was a four poster bed with red drapes, a similar colour to the upholstery on the chairs, standing on a worn red carpet, again, much the same as that in the corridor. The bedcover was a peach colour with a floral design turned back revealing white pillows on one of which was laid a clean, ironed nightshirt. Henry thought that he would rather have had pyjamas but beggars can’t be choosers. A lighted oil lamp stood on a small bedside table on the left side of the bed. Just behind the door stood a table equipped with washbasin, a jug and towel. He walked over to the jug and found it full of warm water, which he assumed the landlord had taken it up whilst he was eating. A mirror hung above the table with a mug, shaving brush and soap in a dish set neatly to the right of the washbasin. A shaving knife was also laying there. He was surprised how old everything was in the room. There was a writing desk against the wall at the bottom of the bed above which hung a picture of a young woman in a white robe but at this point he did not pay much attention to it. Set in an alcove to the right of the bed was a glass fronted bookcase full of an interesting collection of books. He wandered over to it but found the door locked. The light from the lamp was too dim to make out any of the titles on the worn spines so he turned away from the bookcase and noticed the worn red drapes at the window opposite the door. Moving around the bed he noticed a door, next to the small bedside table, that he presumed allowed access into the adjoining room. He tried turning the handle, but the door was locked.

Feeling exhausted, he proceeded to undress, had a quick wash using the jug of water provided and donned the night shirt. He put his trousers on the chair in the hall, closed the door and climbed into the bed. It was extremely comfortable and surprisingly warm as he lay there contemplating the day’s events; it was as though the whole day had been planned out for him. Feeling very drowsy, and having decided that he would make an early start in the morning, he was about to douse the oil lamp by the bed when the picture on the wall caught his eye. It was a full-length painting of a young woman in a long white dress which had a v-necked collar with puffed up sleeves ending in frills around the wrists. She had a round but slim face with large brown eyes and long arched eyebrows. Rosy cheeks accentuated shapely alluring lips and long blonde hair fell about her shoulders. He put her in her early twenties with a magnetic but sorrowful expression on her face. Henry could have sat admiring her beauty for hours, a flicker of recognition passing through his mind, but found himself nodding off so doused the lamp and turned to enjoy some welcome sleep.

The technician and his assistant stood looking at the body lying on the bed with the head encased in a mesh with wires leading to a laptop computer sat on a trolley.

“You would make a good innkeeper, Alan” the assistant said.

“Thanks” he replied. “Maybe I’ll take it up one day.”

They stood staring at the inanimate body silently whilst Alan was mulling things over in his mind. “I think he fancied you, Alice.”

“I know he did.”

“Why should I be surprised, with such a good looking brunette in a very sexy red dress as my assistant?”

“Always trying the flattery.”

“If I wasn’t already married ...”

“Well you are, so don’t get any ideas.”

“We work well together.”

“Yes, we do.”

“Maybe we should set up a business partnership and open up an inn when we retire, whenever that might be.”

“Yes. Maybe. We could be joint owners of the enterprise. After all, these days one never knows when one might get that handshake due to cutbacks.”

“You’re right of course. I know quite a few folk who have been served ‘voluntary redundancy’ notices.” He hit a key on the keyboard and the screen came out of its sleep mode. A pattern of sharp peaks and troughs appeared. “I guess we had better get started.”

There was a period of silence whilst Alice made some notes on a clipboard she had just picked up.

“How did they find this guy and how do you think he will react to being transported back nine hundred years? It might be too big a shock for him. Who knows how he will react.”

“According to Philip he ticks all the boxes. He is reported to have a stoic approach to life, has a very inquisitive mind and is very imaginative. He devotes a hundred percent concentration to the tasks he tackles and works doggedly until he finds or formulates a solution. Loyal, no effort spared and always up for a challenge. What more can I say?”

Alice leafed through the pages attached to the clipboard. “Yes, I can see here there is a complete profile of him.” She continued to scan other pages. “Sounds like my kind of guy.”

Alan was still fiddling around with the computer and cables.

“I’ve just been looking at his hobbies” Alice said. “It says here that he enjoys fencing. That might come in handy for where he is going. Does he know the task he has been assigned?”

‘
“No, but I understand that it will be explained to him when he arrives at wherever he is going.” Alan paused. “I just hope he understands and accepts it.”

“Couldn’t we have just told him what the task is?”

“No. Strict instructions. We are here just to transport him back in time.”

“I hope it works.”

“So do I.”

Earlier, Alan had drugged the Henry’s coffee, so he was likely to be out for several hours. They had moved the equipment from a storeroom just along the corridor alongside the subject not long after Henry had fallen into a deep sleep. Alan had placed the large aluminium case on the floor and unlocked it with the key he took out of his pocket. He had taken out the laptop computer and placed it, along with a metallic head mesh piece and an assortment of cables, on to the top tray of the trolley. Whilst Alice had fitted the metal mesh around Henry’s head, Alan had taken out a flat-topped ebony stand and placed it on the small bedside table. Cables led from the headpiece to both the laptop and into sockets in the base of the ebony stand.

Now Alan took out a felt covered box, akin to a jewelry box, and placed that beside the stand.

“Ready?” he asked Alice, as their eyes met.

“Ready” she confirmed, picking up two pairs of dark spectacles from the case, handing one pair to Alan. Once they had put on the spectacles Alan carefully lifted the cubic cover off the box. They were both immediately dazzled by the brilliant white light that emanated from a crystal large enough to just fit into a man’s palm.

Alice paused to stare at it. “Incredible, isn’t it!” She exclaimed. “The way the light radiates from it and snakes its way throughout the crystal. It’s as though it is alive and trying to draw me to it.” She moved her hand towards the crystal as though to touch it.

“No! Don’t touch it!” Alan warned quickly and sharply.

Alice snatched her hand back. “Sorry. I ... I wasn’t intending to ...”

Alan pondered the pulsations intently. “I believe it is alive. Alive to extent that it is said that it will consume anything with which it comes into contact.” He paused thoughtfully for a moment. “How are you doing?”

Alice was checking the cables linking the metal mesh to ports on the side of the computer. “All connections look okay. So now we activate the link?”

“As soon as I start the program.” Alan returned to the keyboard and shrank the EEG window to the top half of the screen.

The lower part displayed the desktop with a row of icons along the bottom. Alan selected one with his forefinger and a second window appeared, which Alan shrank to fill the bottom half of the screen. It read: **Virtual Reality Transfer** with a logon box displayed. He typed in a User ID and a password followed by a six-digit security code when a **Pin Number** box appeared.

“Security needs some improvement” he muttered, entering in the pin number.

The screen immediately displayed a new box with a bold message warning the operator of the risks associated with activating the program and requesting confirmation to continue. He replied affirmatively and progressed through the setup procedure keying in details of the subject and activating the sensors attached to the head-cage. Henry’s EEG immediately appeared in the window at the top of the screen. Alan studied it for a moment.

“All parameters looking good.” He paused and sighed.

“Anything wrong?” asked Alice.

“No” he replied in a disconsolate manner. “I just wish this guy the best of luck. Here goes.”

“Wait!” Alice suddenly uttered loudly.

Alan looked up with a worried expression. “What?”

“The ring. You’ve forgotten the ring.”

“Oh hell, that would have messed things up.” He reached back into the case moving things around. “Ah, here it is.” He picked up a small ring box, opened it and took out a silver ring with an embedded crystal band around the circumference. It had the appearance of a single diamond which glistened and sparkled like the crystal stone on the bedside table. He got up and carefully removed Henry’s right arm from under the bedclothes and placed the ring on his middle finger. “Okay, now we’re ready to go. Thanks Alice.”

She nodded in acknowledgement.

Alan’s finger momentarily hovered over the **Abort key** on the menu, but he finally selected **Establish Link** and waited. A new message box appeared on the screen: *Searching* in a horizontal box displaying a blue square moving from left to right. It seemed to happen quite suddenly: the crystal suddenly shot out rays of pulsating light, well, more like tentacles seeking out prey as they wavered about. It seemed that they finally detected Henry’s prostrate form as they coalesced to form a single beam which made contact with the ring. The next message that appeared on the screen was: **Link established** which prompted Alan to glance at the upper window noticing that the EEG pattern had changed, signifying increased activity.

“We’ve got it!” he exclaimed excitedly. “We’ve got the link.”

Alice looked over at the screen, not there was much to see: only the same message. She then turned back to look at the crystal. “It’s beautiful isn’t it.”

“Certainly is” he agreed.

“And to think that we have really established a link to the twelfth century. It doesn’t seem possible.”

A new message suddenly flashed up.

WARNING! TRANSFER MUST BE ACTIVATED WITHIN TWO MINUTES.

Alan bit on his lower lip. “No point in hanging about I suppose. Ready?”

‘
“Go for it.”

His finger hovered over an elongated green button labelled *Activate Transfer* on the modified keyboard. He hit it and they both waited, transferring their gaze to the crystal. The light began to pulsate faster, the crystal taking on the appearance of a cloudy plasma. What happened next caught them both by surprise. A dazzling wide beam of light shot out of the crystal and arced across to the ring and then enveloped Henry’s complete form. It seemed to move around all over his prostrate form as though it was seeking a way to enter body itself. Over several minutes his form began to fade.

“I think it is working!” Exclaimed Alice, excitedly. “He’s going. He’s being transported back, we hope, to the 12th century.” Suddenly, the light beam arced back to the crystal, which immediately went dull.

“Sod it!” Alan exclaimed.

“It hasn’t worked, has it” Alice commented gloomily.

“No. We momentarily had a link but his mind must have resisted the transfer for some reason.”

Alice sighed. “I did read in his notes that he also has tenacious attributes and once he has made up his mind about something nothing can divert him away from that goal. So, what do we do now?”

“We might have to try and persuade him to agree to the transfer.”

“But how?”

“No choice. Tell him everything.”

“But ..”

“We can’t take the risk of another failure. If it doesn’t work, then we will have to abort the project and our heads will roll.”

“They can’t blame us.”

“We both know that; but they will.”

“We do have three days, so we could try again tomorrow night.”

“Hm, I guess so but it’s cutting it a bit fine. If it fails again we will have to tell him. Agreed?”

“Agreed.”

“Oh, and maybe it’s best to remove the ring from his finger.”

They packed all the kit back onto the trolley which Alice wheeled back into the storeroom leaving Henry to wake up, hoping that they would be able to keep him at the inn for another day.

* * * * *

At some point during the night Henry had awoken with a start straining his ears and positive that he could hear someone quietly crying or sobbing. The gales had ceased so it was quite audible. It sounded like a young woman and his thoughts automatically went to the picture on the wall. He laid there for a while, suddenly becoming aware that the room smelt different, but the sobbing went on so he sat up

, slowly and listened for two or three minutes before climbing out of bed in an attempt to locate where it was coming from. As he stood up, dizziness overcame him with a fuzziness in his head, so he sat back down on the bed for about half a minute before getting back on his feet to stagger across the room and put his ear against the wall, moving along until he reached the door to the adjoining room. The sobbing was definitely coming from in there. Knocking on the adjoining door, he thought, might frighten the occupant so he stumbled to the door of his room, managed to find the doorknob to open it and grope his way along the corridor to what he thought was the door to the adjoining room. Just before he reached it, a floorboard creaked and the sobbing abruptly stopped. He waited outside the door leaning against it for a few minutes but heard no more sounds so returned to his room wondering what to do. He still felt as though he was drifting in and out of a dream so got back on the bed and laid back down.

'It is her!' The thought suddenly entered his mind as the fuzziness ceased. *'It is her who is crying.'* His mind jumped back to events earlier in the day. *'The virtual reality demonstration: Rescue the Maiden'.* *It is her. The woman being abducted by the figure dressed in black. She is the one in the painting. She is the one who is crying.'* These thoughts did not make sense. Pure coincidence. He turned over and tried to get back to sleep, but the sobbing resumed and the fuzziness returned. Although something told him that maybe he ought to try and find out who she was, he felt tired and strange so decided against any further nocturnal wanderings and that he would tackle the landlord or speak with the woman in the morning. After all, he might be poking his nose in where it was not wanted. The sobbing never ceased but he eventually went back to sleep. Throughout the whole experience he was completely unaware of the presence of two fuzzy hooded figures standing in the darkest corner of the room watching him.

He woke up to what appeared to be a bright day, from the light filtering through chinks in the curtains, and immediately climbed out of bed to pull back the drapes. Although he still felt tired, following a night with strange dreams, something told him that it was late. He picked up his watch from the bedside table. It was ten o'clock. "Crikey!" he said to himself. He had not slept on so late for years. *'It must have been that disturbed night.'* The jug with the washbasin had been refilled with hot water, which made him wonder how the landlord knew that he would wake up around this time. Intelligent guess he presumed. He had a wash and shave, got dressed - his dried and pressed suit had been deposited in his room whilst he was asleep - and made his way downstairs to the bar.

The landlord was there shuffling through some papers. He looked up as Henry entered. "Are, there you are sir. Have a good night's rest?"

“Yes thanks. Slept like a log.” Henry lied, stifling a yawn. He did not feel like indulging in a conversation about the sobbing in the adjoining room and put it down to the strange dream.

“You certainly did at that. Take a seat and we’ll have your breakfast for you shortly.” The landlord went out to the kitchen before Henry could say anything else, but within minutes he returned carrying a tray containing a plate with dish cover. He put the tray in front of him and lifted the cover.

“There you are sir. Nice Full English breakfast with bacon, sausages, tomatoes and all the trimmings. It should be hot. I cooked it when I heard you getting up. Would you like tea or coffee?”

“Coffee please” Henry replied. The landlord was just turning to leave when Henry felt he had to ask the question that was burning in his mind. “Is anyone else staying here?”

“No sir. Why do you ask?” His expression looked a bit uncomfortable as though he was trying to hide something.

“I thought I heard someone in the room next to mine.”

The landlord tried to look composed but was obviously struggling to provide a convincing answer.

“I’m sorry if we disturbed your sleep moving about, sir.”

“Oh no, it wasn’t that,” Henry clarified quickly, “I thought I heard someone crying.”

The man’s expression abruptly changed as he turned quickly and started back towards the kitchen, muttering “No, no sir. There’s no one else staying here.”

Something in his bones told Henry that the man was not telling the truth. The complete silence in the inn suggested that he was the only guest staying there, until half-way through the breakfast the landlord re-entered smiling, the embarrassment now gone.

“Everything all right sir?”

“Great thanks.” Henry replied, putting the landlord’s odd behaviour to the back of his mind. “Really delicious. I wish I was staying longer.”

“You leaving soon sir?”

“As soon as I’ve finished this excellent breakfast I’ll be on my way.” He glanced at his watch. It was 1130.

There was a silent pause before the landlord spoke again. “You’re most welcome to stay longer if you wish. The countryside around here is wonderful.”

“Very kind of you”

The landlord knew Henry was prompting for his name. “Alan” he replied, finishing Henry’s statement.

“Alan ...?”

“Just Alan is fine.”

Henry was about to put the last forkful of breakfast into his mouth. "Well, Alan, just going back to last night I am sure that I was woken up a couple of times by someone crying in the next room."

"Must have been the wind sir." Alan suggested, smiling. "It makes strange noises up on the moors here."

Henry finished the last mouthful and turned to face the landlord full on. "But there was no wind last night. The storm had passed over."

"No sir, the wind picked up again during the early hours" he said sternly. "You must have been too sleepy to notice or perhaps you had a bad dream."

Henry did not feel like getting into an argument so decided to drop it. "Oh, not to worry" he said, getting up from the chair. "I must leave now. How much do I owe you?"

The landlord suddenly seemed in a panic. "Oh, nothing sir. With the compliments of the house after all you've been through and what with the disturbed night."

"I can't blame you for that, Alan" Henry laughed. "Please accept something" he added, reaching for his wallet.

Alan put his hand up. "No sir. We don't want payment and..." he hesitated for a moment, "... as for other people staying here we'll show you the other rooms to put your mind at rest."

"There's no need." Henry replied hastily, wanting to get away. "I should mind my own business. I'm sorry."

"Quite alright sir" he said. He started to pick up the breakfast dishes. "I'll go and get your bags in a moment."

"I don't have any, remember?" Henry said, getting up and downing the last mouthful of coffee. "But that's okay. I will go and check that I haven't left anything and then be on my way."

Whilst Henry returned to his room, Alan stepped over to the window and glanced briefly at Henry's car standing outside and suddenly remembered that he had left the car keys on the kitchen table. He heard Henry coming back down the stairs.

"You haven't seen my car keys have you? I seem to have mislaid them."

"Oh yes, sorry sir. I took them out of your pocket when we dried and pressed your jacket. I forgot to put them back in. I'll just go and get them where I left them." He disappeared into the kitchen and returned with the keys. "Here we are sir."

Henry took them from the landlord, bade him farewell and thanked him for his hospitality. As he left the inn he thought he noticed a rather strange look on the man's face.

It was bright outside but still a little cloudy with a strong breeze. Henry opened the rear car door, took off his jacket and flung it on the seat. Closing the door, he moved around to the driver's door, opened it and climbed in. He pushed the key into the ignition and turned it. Nothing. Dead as a Dodo, as the expression goes. '*Oh what now!*' He thought. '*The battery must be flat. But how?*' He tried once more with the

same result, so reached under the dashboard, released the bonnet and climbed out of the car. As he walked around the car he glanced at the inn and noticed the landlord watching him slightly back from the window as though he did not want to be seen standing there. Henry raised the bonnet and groaned with dismay. The engine was soaked and the battery had obviously shorted. He slammed the bonnet down angrily, wondering how the engine had got so wet when he had driven up to the inn, unless of course the gale force winds had blown the rain under the bonnet; but that seemed unlikely. He could not understand it. It looked as though someone had thrown a bucket of water over the engine. He turned and looked back towards the inn but the figure had disappeared. Cursing under his voice he grabbed his jacket from the back of the car and locked the vehicle.

On re-entering the inn, there was no sign of the landlord, but he soon reappeared carrying some glasses to the bar and seeming not to notice Henry standing just inside the door. Henry coughed slightly to attract his attention. He looked surprised when he saw Henry.

"Oh, you're back sir. Problem?"

"Just a bit", Henry replied, clenching his teeth. "Battery's completely flat. Don't suppose you have a charger?"

"Oh no, sorry sir. Nothing like that I'm afraid." His response seemed to be both hasty and one of relief. "What will you do now?"

Henry looked about the bar. "Do you have a telephone? I seem to have mislaid my mobile, unless I left it at the exhibition. I could swear I had it with me yesterday."

"A what sir? Oh, telephone? Er, I'm afraid it's dead sir. The line must be down. The storm certainly seems to have caused a lot of problems; what with your er car ..." he said somewhat guardedly, "... and the phone line as well." He wandered behind the bar as though searching for something and changed the subject. "I suppose you'd like a spot of lunch then sir if you are going to be here a bit longer. What are you going to do?" He did not bother to look up when he spoke.

"Any chance you could give me a lift into town, if it's not too much trouble?" Henry asked, hopefully.

"Oh, sorry sir. The car is in for a service and some repair work. George will drop it back when he's finished."

"Is that likely to be today?"

"Hm, I doubt it. There is a fair bit to do, so can't say when exactly. It's a bit of an old banger."

Henry was thinking that something was definitely not quite right. '*Flat battery; no phone line; no car.*' It all seemed rather odd.

"You're most welcome to stay until we can get you to the next village."

"No thanks" Henry replied hastily. "I think I'll take my chances and walk to the next town or village and look for a garage. It shouldn't take me too long if I set off right now."

The landlord's head came up like a shot. He seemed to be fighting for something to say before blurting out. "Oh dear, I wouldn't risk that if I were you sir."

"Why not?" Henry snapped back with some annoyance.

The landlord fought again for words. "Er, the weather sir."

"What about the weather?" Henry said.

"It can be very changeable up here on the moors and the forecast says it's going to turn nasty again."

Henry recalled the impression he had earlier, that the landlord wanted to keep him here. He decided that he was not going to be put off though and turned to leave.

"I'll take my chances" he called back and stepped back outside, but his heart soon sank. Big black clouds were rolling across the sky again and faint rumbles reached his ears. '*What is going on?*' He asked himself. His aggressive feelings began to abate and he reluctantly went back into the inn. The landlord was still standing there and looked pleased when Henry sat down at one of the tables.

"Looks like you're right" Henry admitted. "Guess I'll sit here and do a bit of work until it clears. If it doesn't soon, I wonder if you would mind if I stayed another night and I'll leave first thing tomorrow; but I insist on payment in full."

"No problem sir" the landlord gasped, with an apparent sense of relief. "You'd like some lunch now?"

"Okay, that would be nice thanks."

Admittedly, it was a very enjoyable plate of fish and chips that went down well, especially with a glass of Sauvignon Blanc. After lunch, Henry fetched his briefcase from the car and took the opportunity to start writing up his report on the exhibition, taking a few steps outside between the downpours to investigate the surrounding area. He didn't venture too far as the ground away from the road was rather muddy from the recent storm. At one point he thought he could detect the faint sound of a waterfall somewhere through the trees opposite the inn and thought that if there was one nearby it would be quite impressive after all that rain.

Following a very pleasant evening meal and idle chatter with Alan, he retired early to bed so that he could set off for the nearest village at the crack of dawn, weather permitting. The landlord didn't seem to have much to say about himself and when Henry questioned him about the lack of clientele he just shrugged and said it was probably the time of year or the weather or not the sort of place to which people normally come. It struck Henry as a string of excuses.

"I survive" he replied, when Henry suggested that he couldn't be making much money out here on the moors and running the inn on his own.

"Oh, it does get busy at times and I can always call upon help from the village when it does. It's very seasonal you know."

Henry was glad to get to bed and looking forward to getting away from the place as early as possible. He was put in the same room with the same worn soft furnishings and

,
found himself staring at the painting of the beautiful woman in white for a long time, amazed at how attractive and captivating was her appearance. He pondered over the 'dream' he had had the previous night and started to conjure up scenarios as to why the woman might have been sobbing before dowsing the light and wondering if he would hear her sobbing again. He did.

5. The Gateway

Alan and Alice stood staring at Henry as he lay on the bed surrounded by the same paraphernalia as on the previous night.

“Did you put a higher dose into his drink?” Alice asked.

“Yes. It should keep him out for longer than last night and hopefully relax his mind a bit.”

“I hope it works this time.”

“So do I, and I’ll be glad when all this is over; it’s so boring.”

“I know.” Alice replied slowly.

“Huh! It’s all right for you. You can just drive off and live a normal life.” Alan was feeling a bit grumpy. “I’ve got to keep the guy entertained and dream up answers to his bloody questions; and he’s getting suspicious. He’s not stupid you know.”

“Yes. I’m sorry Alan.” Alice put her hand on his shoulder. “I certainly don’t envy you stuck out here with nothing much to do other than entertain a man who doesn’t want to be here; but I must say it isn’t much fun either, driving here over the moors in the dark late at night and then back in the early hours of the morning; especially with the weather as it is.”

“No” sighed Alan. They sat there in silence for a couple of minutes.

“No point in just sitting here hoping” Alice said.

“Sure. You’re right. Here we go again.”

Once again they conducted the usual checks, placed the ring on his finger and initiated the sequence as before, with fingers crossed.

Henry awoke to the sound of a strong wind and that same intermittent sobbing that he had heard the previous night and which definitely came from the adjoining room. The room was not in complete darkness due to moonlight filtering through gaps in the window shutters. ‘*Window shutters?*’ He thought. He didn’t remember there being window shutters; rather, curtains. Although there was a strange smell about the room, where everything about him appeared new, the fuzziness in his head was playing tricks with his vision. It was as though there were two interchangeable but superimposed images of the room: one where the walls and furniture looked old and dated and the other, where they appeared much newer. He waited a while until the sobbing ceased for an instant before climbing out of bed and making his way towards the adjoining door. The dizziness came back as the ‘old’ image faded to be replaced by the ‘new’ image and the smell that he had noticed earlier returned. It was a smell that he couldn’t quite recognize. Standing at the door, he thought he heard the sobbing again so tapped it gently, at which point the sobbing stopped. He wanted to turn the handle of the door

, and open it but something held him back. It was not the sort of thing to do in a hotel or inn, to barge into someone else's room; besides, the two images swimming across his vision weren't helping. *'Maybe I need some light'* he thought, and moved over to the bedside table feeling for the lamp. He picked up something and, bringing it closer to him, found himself holding a rod of metal with a round base at the end fitted with a holder containing a candle.

"What the" He was confused as the 'new' image faded. *'Could the landlord have changed the oil lamp for a candle whilst he was asleep? But why? Maybe he's run out of oil.'* The candle wasn't lit and he couldn't find anything to light it with so walked unsteadily over to the bedroom door and out into the corridor. There he found burning oil lamps hanging at intervals and received another surprise. The lamps were nothing like the ones that had been hanging there when he retired to bed. He lifted one off its hook and paused to shine the light around him with a confused expression on his face. Even with the light from the lamp, everything around him - the walls, the flooring - looked different, newer; but once again his vision was throwing confusion into his mind. It was full of unanswerable questions as he carried the lamp back to his room. Everything about him was odd, in that he felt that he was in two different time eras at the same time. As he passed back through the door into his room, something made him turn to his left: a presence.

He lifted the lamp up and thought he could make out two figures standing in the corner of the room. Just as quickly, they disappeared and the 'old' image swam back into view. He peered hard but they seemed to fade away. His head was now aching and the room was now becoming a blur with ever changing images. He sat down on the bed and placed the lamp on the bedside table before lying back on top of the bedcovers with his right hand holding his forehead. His mind was now in turmoil trying to work out whether he was in the real world or back in the world of virtual reality again. With his head now thumping he drifted off into sleep.

"I don't believe it" shouted Alan, as the crystal's light withdrew rapidly from the ring.

"It hasn't worked again has it?" Alice responded, despondently.

"No it hasn't" he replied with a raised voice.

"Ssh, not so loud. You might wake him up."

"Unlikely" he muttered in frustration. "I thought the larger dose of the tranquilizer might have suppressed his brain activity sufficiently but it just seems to have muddled his mind instead." He started removing the cables. "I thought we had it but his mental link with the present time is still too strong for the crystal to overcome."

"We were close though" she said. "His body certainly faded more than last night as though the transfer was occurring."

“Not close enough” Alan said. “This doesn’t look promising.”

“Well, what are we going to do now?”

“We will have to tell him and hope that he accepts the challenge.”

“But you said they didn’t want him to know.”

“No, because they were certain that he would refuse, which he may well do. Would you be happy to be transported back to the 12th Century?”

“So why should he change his mind after what we have been trying to do without his knowledge? Personally, I don’t think it is right that he should be sent off somewhere without informing him. It’s immoral.”

“I’m just hoping that he has developed an affinity for the maiden he supposed to be rescuing. I must admit that the picture in his room portrays an amazingly beautiful woman who must be the most attractive and desirable woman I have ever laid my eyes upon, present company excepted of course. If Henry does succumb to forsaking his present lifestyle to help this woman, my only fear is that he might not want to come back.”

“Is that really likely? Look what he will be giving up: a life with modern technology, challenges and opportunities to be replaced with one with many threats and dangers.”

“I don’t know about technology but there will be plenty of challenges and opportunities to test his intelligence and skills.”

“Rather him than me. What about you, Alan?”

“No way. I am too fond of my home comforts and the familiar environment.”

“There we are. It proves my point.” She removed the mesh from Henry’s head.

“Well, we’d better get this stuff packed away and discuss how we’re going to handle this when he wakes up. He must now suspect that something funny is going on.” Alice started to pack things back into the case whilst Alan removed the ring for the second time.

“What time will you be back?” He asked.

“I think I will stay here tonight so that when he wakes up I can be present when we can both confront him.”

“Thanks; but there’s only one other room made up so ..” he paused a moment “.. we could share the room.”

“In your dreams. I’ll manage somewhere else.”

“No, sorry” he said, reddening slightly. “You take the room and I’ll sort something out.”

“But ..”

“No. I insist. I apologize for being too forward.”

“No need to apologize. I’m flattered and, let’s be honest, it is only natural under the circumstances: a man and woman together with not much to occupy their minds.”

They laughed to themselves, finished packing the kit away and returned downstairs to discuss the following day’s approach.

A bright morning and singing birds woke Henry up. He lay there for a few minutes listening and thinking that he would be able to get away from this place at last before, before noticing the picture on the wall once again. *'She really must be the most beautiful woman I have ever seen.'* He thought to himself. *'If only ...'* Then the 'dream' came flooding back. It all seemed so real and he was ready to dismiss it, looking forward to getting on his way even if it meant a long walk and hitching a lift. Something prompted him to turn his head. Where he expected to see a candle on the bedside table he saw an oil lamp. Now he was getting confused again, believing that he was mixing up reality with his dream, which he now recollected in detail. He leaped out of bed and gingerly tried the door to the adjoining room; it was locked. Wandering back to the bed he picked up his watch: eleven o'clock. "What?" He said out loud. "What the hell's going on?" Still feeling a little drowsy he refreshed himself with the jug of hot water that had been left in the room but didn't bother to shave. Then another thought struck him. *'The water was hot, so must have been brought up quite recently as though it was expected that he would wake up late.'* Anger was building up inside him and he was now convinced that there was some conspiracy to keep him at the inn; but why, he had no idea. He dressed and hurried out of the room, pausing briefly in the corridor outside the door of the room next to his from which he had heard the sobbing of the young woman. He knocked gently before trying this door. It opened and he peered inside to see an empty room with the same drab, worn upholstery but no sign of the room having been occupied for some time. At that, he bounded down the stairs into the bar. A table was already laid with utensils and condiments for the standard cooked breakfast. He felt too angry to sit down and noisily paced up and down instead so that the landlord couldn't possibly fail to hear him.

The landlord came out looking a bit sheepish with a tray, on which he brought out Henry's cooked breakfast

"First put the tray down" Henry said abruptly. "Then tell me what the hell's going on, because something is."

Alan put the tray on the table, stepped back and looked at Henry without replying.

Henry ignored the food and carried on. "The night before last I hear someone sobbing in the room next to mine and you said it was just the wind, even though the night was quiet AND windless as far as I remember. Then I find my car battery flat as though someone had poured a bucket of water over it which prevented me from getting home. And guess what? Your phone isn't working and your car is in for repairs. I can't explain this sequence of events but it just doesn't ring true." Henry paused to allow his verbal onslaught to sink in and then continued. "Now, last night I hear the sobbing again and, hey presto, there is no one there." The landlord moved his lips as though he was about to say something but Henry carried on with his barrage. "Another thing, someone changed the oil lamp in my bedroom to a candle, which I couldn't light,

, then changed it back to a lamp. There're so many weird things going on here that I am now convinced that you are involved and I am sure that someone was in the room next to mine: a young woman. Look, I don't want any more crap about dreaming. You are hiding something from me and, I think, trying to keep me here. I don't know what your ulterior motive is but I want an explanation before I say sod to the weather, walk to the next village or town that has a phone box and call the police." Even as he made the last statement he knew that it wouldn't do much good with such a cock and bull story. The police would say that he had been dreaming or was delirious, but at least he thought that the threat might frighten the landlord. It didn't.

"Please." Alan beckoned him to sit down and then turned as Alice emerged from the kitchen and stood next to him.

Henry gawked at her. "You" he stabbed. "You are the woman from ..." He fished in his pocket and pulled out the business card that Alex Studley had given him. "... VRM." He looked up at her.

"Yes." She replied, expressionless.

Alan raised his hand. "Might I suggest you start eating your breakfast, Henry, whilst I explain."

"Oh, on first name terms now is it?" He responded angrily.

Alan ignored the remark. "This is Alice" he said, indicating her with his hand, "and, yes, we are both employed by VRM. What I am about to tell you, and you will find it hard to believe, is the truth; and although I realize that we have taken liberties and can't apologize enough, we would really appreciate it if you would bear with us and allow me to explain everything. I do sincerely apologize for the deceit but we have now decided it best to be frank with you about what we have been trying to do before you make your decision."

Alice nudged him, meaning that it was the wrong thing to say.

Henry felt threatened. "Decision? What do you mean? What is this decision I am supposed to make?"

"Sorry, I'm getting ahead of myself" Alan replied, looking very embarrassed. "Maybe I should start at the beginning and fill you in with the background as to why you are here."

His expression was quite serious, which worried Henry, but nevertheless he moved over to the set table and started on the breakfast; better than to waste it. "Yes, maybe you should, so start talking. Let's hear what you've got to say, and it had better be good, or VRM might well be hearing from my solicitor."

Alan and Alice ignored the meaningless threat as Alan started talking, as Henry took a sip of coffee.

"We already know a lot about you, Henry."

Henry stopped eating and looked up, about to interrupt, but Alan held up his hand.

"Please let me continue Henry and hear me out. I will attempt to answer any questions you might have about what I am going to say, during my narrative."

Henry nodded and bit into a sausage; good it was too.

"You are perceived to be a very intelligent and clever person with excellent imagination and intuition. It has been noted that you have a number of admirable qualities like patience, loyalty and perseverance and ... you are single."

Henry felt a little embarrassed with the comments until the words '...you are single' were mentioned. He seemed to portend something unpleasant.

Alan continued. "Two days ago you attended a technology exhibition and you had the opportunity to visit the VRM booth marketing virtual reality equipment."

Henry had just finished the piece of sausage and couldn't help but comment. "Don't I know it! I suppose you know my age, schools and colleges I attended, my employment record and what I have for breakfast each day."

"Apart from breakfast, yes we do" Alice replied. "Your boss, Philip, is a co-director of AVM."

Henry stopped cutting another piece of sausage as his attention snapped back to Alice, whom he just stared at without saying anything.

There was a pause in the dialogue as Alan could see that Henry was piecing things together in his mind. Henry was recollecting his 'election' to attend the exhibition: the VR experience, with its flashes of the beautiful struggling woman interwoven, the picture on the bedroom wall, the young woman that he was convinced was in the room next to his and even to the engineered diversion to get him to the inn. Slowly the jigsaw was coming together with just a few pieces missing, like, why was he being kept here against his will! His gaze switched back to Alan as he nodded for him to continue. "This has all been planned hasn't it? But go on."

"You remember quite vividly what happened to you during your experience at VRM?" Alan questioned..

"I certainly do. It was quite eerie; in fact very life-like, particularly when I hit my head. In any other situation I would have complimented you on having developed a very impressive product. It is certainly interesting how far virtual reality has come in the last few years." Henry was feeling a bit calmer now and becoming interested in what was to follow.

"A lot further than you think." Alan said. "Actually, the fundamentals behind the concept have been around longer than you can imagine." He noticed Henry's expression of disbelief.

"What do you mean? It can only have been around since the microchip age. It isn't possible without the computing power that's available today."

Alan shook his head slowly. "There are many things in this world that defy logical explanation and some phenomena that have happened and still do happen owe their origins to times long ago."

Henry leant back in the chair chuckling and returned to his sausage. "I suppose you're going to tell me that virtual reality has been around since the middle ages." He was thinking back to the virtual reality experience.

Alan's face was expressionless and Henry stopped eating again. "You are joking. I don't believe you. I can't believe you. It isn't possible."

Alan nodded his head slowly. "It's true. The reality behind the concept of virtual reality has been around for hundreds if not thousands of years."

Henry shifted in his chair leaning forward as though he couldn't hear what was being said to him. In fact he was only half listening, tossing what he was hearing in his mind.

Alan continued. "The process of transporting the mind into an environment different from what is normal has been around a long time and has actually been taken further than any of us can imagine. As with virtual reality that creates a portal for your mind, so to speak, physical portals are known to exist that allow both mind and body, a living being in fact, to move between different environments both geographically and through time."

"So you're telling me that time travel is possible?" Henry asked, aghast at what Alan was implying. "Oh come on. We all know that's impossible."

Alan ignored Henry's ridiculing and continued. "Then I would ask how you would explain your experiences, your so called 'dreams', in the chamber upstairs; but first I will continue and to try and convince you before I ..."

Alice gave him another nudge. "Before you what?" Henry replied sharply, eyes flicking between them both.

"I will elaborate in a moment."

Henry glanced at his watch noting how late it was getting again and becoming ever more convinced that they were trying to keep him here for some unpleasant reason. He began to get fidgety.

Alice noted Henry's discomfort. "Please Henry. Bear with us. You are in no danger."

That comment still made Henry feel even more uneasy.

"As soon as Alan has finished, you are free to leave whenever you like." Alice added hastily, no doubt trying to reassure him.

"Not that you can stop me leaving now, if I wish."

"No, but I do beg you to hear what we have to say. If, when we have finished, you wish to go, we will help to sort out your car."

Henry began to relax, but there remained an element of uncertainty regarding his continued presence in the inn.

Alan continued with his monologue. "Some time ago, a portal was discovered that provided a passage into a different time zone both past and future, but the future only to the present time. What I mean is that one cannot be transported to a future time beyond one's own current date."

"Say that again" Henry said.

"Sorry. What I mean is that if we sent you back into the past we could bring you back to the present time; so, we cannot transport anyone born in, say, the 12th century to the present time, if you know what I mean."

“Okay, I understand.”

“Anyway, as with virtual reality, one can exist in the portal for a definitive period – call it ‘suspended reality’. However, once one has mentally accepted the new environment in which one finds oneself it is possible to physically pass through the portal; then for all intents and purposes one becomes physically part of that new environment.”

“Does that mean there is no return?”

“No. As I said, it is not a one-way trip and the key is knowing both the location and date from which one started for one’s life to continue as normal. After all, you wouldn’t want to return to, say, the 16th century.”

“That might not be a welcome prospect, depending on the situation one finds oneself in.” Henry added, somewhat jokingly, but still feeling uneasy.

Alan latched on to the momentary humour. “It certainly could.” He chuckled and paused for a moment to sip a glass of water that Alice had brought to him during his narrative. “Now to get to the crux of the matter.”

Henry tensed again, half guessing where this was leading.

Alan noted his tension. “Relax, Henry” he quickly added. “I am now going to outline the scenario of what one might call an ‘opportunistic challenge’.” He lounged back in his chair which seemed to imply that he could be talking for some time yet.

Alice remained quiet, ready to offer confirmation or support at the appropriate moment.

Henry had finished his breakfast with questions still on his mind. “Before you continue, Alan, I would like to know or understand more about this portal, as you call it.”

Alan lifted his hands and steepled his fingers with his elbows on the table. “Sure, what do want to know?”

“What is this portal; who created it; how was it discovered; and how does it work? How do you activate it?”

Alan lowered his arms to place his hands on the table. “Four good questions, Henry, which I will attempt to answer. Would you like a top-up of coffee?”

Henry nodded. “Yes please.”

Alan got up and disappeared for a short period whilst Alice went into the kitchen and emerged with three cups of coffee and a plate of biscuits. Henry thought ‘*Looks like we are in for the long haul*’ but decided to hear them out, now that the urgency to get away wasn’t so critical and with their offer to recharge his car battery.

Alan returned and grabbed a couple of the milk chocolate digestives from the plate. “Where shall I start” he said, and proceeded to munch one of the biscuits. “The portal is created by a crystal which emits high energy beams in the form of light, as in a laser.”

“But surely this crystal can’t exist in both the past and present at the same time?” Henry said.

“Let’s use an analogy. A castle has been built in the middle ages but it still exists in the present time for you to enter and when you do you could actually be in the middle ages.”

“It would look entirely different, what with the ravages of time.”

“Ah, but imagine a situation where it hadn’t deteriorated and remained with all its facilities in the same condition as when it had first been built along with its sounds and smells. If you entered that castle, for all intents and purposes you couldn’t confidently say which century you were in, could you?”

Henry pondered on that statement. “I suppose that’s true; but ...”

Alan continued. “If you had suffered a loss of memory you might very well believe you were in the medieval era, particularly if people around you were wearing 12th century clothing.”

“I suppose you could be right.”

“Well, that’s the crystal. It exists in continuum – a time continuum – never changing. In other words, the past, present and future all exist in the universe.”

Henry looked confused. “So we could travel to the future as well?”

“In theory yes, but in practice not beyond the present day because we have no concept of the future. We can define the past and present, and we can try and predict the future, but we cannot define it.”

“So what you are saying is that the crystal is a portal to the past for us but not the future for our ancestors.”

“Exactly.”

“You say it can it transfer a person; so how does it work, this transference?”

“Let’s consider it in simple terms: consider, for a moment, the ‘dream’ that you had. When one enters a dream state one is in effect transferred to a different environment or place and the experience is not just a mental state. You are physically in a different place and affected by what’s happening around you. You might be driving a car, running away from something or even experiencing something very satisfying. That ‘dream state’ has been shown to actually exist but you will never remain in that state because your mind still retains the ‘normal’ state which predominates and returns you to it when you begin to wake up.”

Henry nodded, trying to comprehend what Alan was telling him.

Alan continued. “Now, imagine that we have the ability to suppress the normal state of your mind and bring to the fore the dream state; to ‘solidify’ it in effect. This would mean that you would be transported to the dream state and become part of it. The link between the ‘dream’ and ‘reality’ states thus exists in a state of equilibrium which is held within this space time continuum whereby we can jump from one to the other.” Alan drew a simple diagram for Henry and let him mull over this point.

REALITY ←====→ DREAM STATE

“Doesn’t that imply that the subject is willing to have his or her mind ‘locked’ into the dream state and be transferred to a different time period?”

“Exactly.”

“So what happens to the subject’s mind and body and the link between the two states?”

“We believe an image is held within the crystal, so to speak, so that the transference between the two states is reversible.”

“In other words, a two-way process.” Henry stated, looking for confirmation.

“Of course. The equilibrium mechanism is monitored and maintained by the crystal and in theory the subject would just need to re-present him or herself at the appropriate place and time for the reversal process.”

“This all sounds very complex and difficult to comprehend.”

“Okay, so let’s try and explain it in terms of quantum mechanics.”

“Go on.”

“Looking at it from a philosophical angle one could say that Democritus and Leucippus were close to the mark with their theory of atomism. They postulated the theory that when we die our atoms are dispersed. We believe that this what the crystal does: it atomizes or disassembles our bodies but retains them along with a blueprint, so to speak. It can then reconstitute our bodies at a different location determined by space and time. Whether it achieves this at the atomic level or at the fundamental particle level we don’t know yet.”

“Well that probably explains it a lot more clearly for me; but going back to this reversible process, what if the subject dies or disappears?”

“As far as I know that scenario has never been tested, fortunately, but the theory is that if the recipient dies the crystal is able to detect this and reverses the transference. However, in the latter case the status quo will remain until the recipient seeks to return to his or her own time period.”

“And if the subject decides not to return or is not in a position to return to his or her era for a number of years?”

“I don’t believe that situation has ever occurred but as far as I am aware, the crystal will hold the equilibrium for the subject indefinitely, but if it doesn’t then I don’t know what the prognosis would be; and that could of course be potentially fraught with risks.” Alan noted the look on Henry’s face. “But to be honest I don’t really know how the crystal would behave. It would be the responsibility of guardian to determine a course of action.”

“Guardian?” Henry queried, looking alternatively at Alan and Alice.

“We have been informed that some form of intelligence, accorded the title ‘guardian’, controls the crystal; although we, personally, have never had contact with it, whatever it is.”

“We only ever receive instructions from Philip” added Alice.

“Philip? What’s he got to do with this?”

‘
“It was Philip who discovered the crystal and its properties. We don’t know much about its discovery. Suffice to say that Philip and one of his really close friends were exploring some underground caverns, they are keen speleologists you know, when they discovered the stone. Apparently, as soon as they found it they experienced a tremendously powerful attractive force but something held them back from touching it. Anyway, they managed to secrete it away and in time discovered its powers.”

Alice had disappeared for a few minutes to brew yet more coffee which she brought over to them.

Alan continued. “I could go on for hours but I really think we should now get to the point of why the three of us are here.”

Henry glanced at his watch again. “Yes, do.”

"Just under a thousand years ago, during King Stephen’s reign, a feudal lord by the name of Montmery administered this area of the country you are in right now. As you probably know from your history books some lords were reasonably benevolent in supporting their serfs or villeins in return for a fixed number of days labour per week plus the usual taxes. Such communities therefore had a reasonable standard of living, for the time. Now, as it happens, this Lord Montmery was, on the contrary, not at all benevolent. In fact he was a gambler, womanizer and fancied himself as a great warrior. He maintained favour and his way of life by supporting the King in whatever way he could - hosting various events, participating in the various conflicts and battles that were going on at the time and generally making himself appear much more loyal than he really was. He survived by never exposing himself to any personal risk or compromising situation. In battles he always managed to keep a low profile and, it is said, that he usually entered the fray at the point where victory was more or less assured and then made a great show of slaughtering opponents. However, he was playing a double game in clandestinely supporting Matilda against Stephen."

"What about peasant opposition and uprisings? Surely some message would have got to others?"

"He was clever and devious. Like the early communist regimes of our times he had his men pay visits to a potential troublemaker at night when the individual concerned was alone and vulnerable. So, rather than setting examples to the others, he just had the troublemaker disappear without any trace. Well, you can imagine what local peasants thought, what with the religious beliefs at the time. It was just a reign of psychological terror."

"Sounds like you are looking for a crusader to dispose of this guy. However, the fact is that you can't change history, by definition. Anyway, if you are implying that you want to send me back in time to meet this guy and dispose of him, then forget it."

Alan was ready for just that response. "Of course not. As you say, we can't change history, at least for major historical events; but when it comes to minor, less significant happenings that are not chronicled and have no impact on the general course of events then history can be tweaked."

Henry surprised himself by suddenly becoming interested in Alan's postulation.

"You remember the young woman in the picture upstairs?" Alan continued.

"Yes" Henry drawled suspiciously, with images of the beautiful woman in the picture and of the one trying to escape from the black knight in the virtual reality experience. The image of her beauty passed through his mind again. The pieces of the jigsaw in his mind were now coming together as he deduced what Alan and Alice had been up to over the last two days, but decided to keep quiet for the moment to hear how Alan was going to explain why he had been doing everything to keep him here.

Alan was now getting to the crux of the matter. "Her father, Lord Trellian, was another local landowner of Saxon stock of more modest means and not in any way as powerful as Lord Montgomery. He had high morals, for the time, and strove to maintain sufficient favour with King Stephen to ensure his survival. However, he had one great weakness - gambling. Apparently, his beautiful and caring wife, when she had been alive, had managed to keep it under control; but sadly she died in a tragic accident. This had a devastating effect on him resulting in his gambling becoming increasingly reckless as he lost more and more contests to Lord Montgomery. There was, of course, talk of trickery and cheating but nothing could ever be proven. Finally, Lord Montgomery demanded settlement of the debt in a rather subtle way. As I hinted earlier he was a very lustful man and, as it happens, Lord Trellian"

"Had an extremely beautiful and desirable daughter." Henry completed the statement.

Alan nodded. "Lord Montgomery demanded land and peasants in value equivalent to the debt or possession of Trellian's daughter, Anna. When the peasants heard about the initial agreement they were of course fearful beyond measure, seeing their relatively peaceful lives being destroyed by their Lord's stupidity. However, Anna, being in the same mold as her mother, volunteered to sacrifice herself by submitting herself to Lord Montgomery but vowed secretly that should her life become intolerable with him she would commit suicide. Her father pleaded with her not to go to but she was of strong mind and left her family home agreeing to be at a pre-arranged location for Lord Montgomery's men to collect her. The transaction was duly agreed but it is reputed that Lord Trellian was heartbroken, but it did change him. He never gambled again."

"And this is the Anna who is featured in the painting?"

"The same one" he affirmed.

"So what happened about Lord Trellian's heir and his estate?" I presume he never had a son."

"Well, on Lord Trellian's death his whole estate would of course pass to his daughter and thence to Lord Montgomery. The plight of Anna's situation became known to a large number of people and many feared for her wellbeing and safety at the hands of Lord Montgomery. His reputation was such that he would probably treat her like a whore, using her body when his desires moved in that direction and here we come to the crux of the matter." Another drink and shuffle in his chair followed as Alan continued.

Henry had a puzzled expression. "The way you are relating this story to me is as though it hasn't happened, but isn't it an historical fact?"

"This is the point where we hope to come to your possible involvement: to 'tweak' an historical event" he continued, with the emphasis on 'possible'."

Henry was shaking his head slowly knowing where this was leading.

Alan continued. "Now, there was a certain abbot with knowledge of the crystal and its powers residing in Old Sarum and who was also well known to a monk in the Trellian household. This monk decided to seek the help of the abbot to ascertain if there was any way that they could help Anna. As you have already intimated, there was a reluctance to interfere with the natural course of events but this abbot was, or should I say 'is', in possession of the crystal and thus able to create a portal to another time and location. He surmised that the best option with the least risk would be to employ someone completely untraceable to 'remove' Anna from the inn and convey her to a place of sanctuary."

Henry listened to all this, finding it difficult to absorb what he was hearing. He leant forward in his chair. "Although you are still telling me that it is possible to go back in time I still find the concept of making contact with someone a thousand years in the past difficult to accept and say that it must be impossible."

"That's what we thought; until it happened."

Henry sat back shaking his head. "What happened?"

"Using the portal that the crystal constructed, the abbot managed to make contact with Philip and enquired as to whether there was a way that he could send someone to help this Anna avoid falling into the clutches of Lord Montmery. Philip and his colleague undertook to try and identify an individual with the right qualities to tackle this problem." He paused for a moment. "By examining a group of selected individuals with specific characteristics and qualities, they drew up a ranking and"

"I drew the short straw." Henry replied, knowingly.

Alan nodded. "You were selected as the individual most likely to succeed. They want you to go and secrete Anna in a place of safety and then return."

"And if I decline?"

"Then the prognosis for Lord Trellian's daughter is very grim to say the least. You see, you actually tick all the boxes."

At this point Henry got up and wandered about the bar area holding his chin, deep in thought about the woman in the painting and his brief encounter with her during the virtual reality experience. It already seemed unreal and far away, so his inclination was still to get the hell out of there and back to his orderly techie life that he enjoyed so much. He turned to face them both and began to speak.

"Look, I don't know what you guys are up to but you can't change history; it's past, gone, so don't ..."

Alan didn't let him finish. "Please Henry, we really need your help. Look, take one more look at her before you make your mind up." He glanced over at Alice who,

with a little hesitation, decided to tell Henry what had happened during the two previous nights.

“You’ve already been there Henry, or nearly, for two short periods.”

Henry’s head snapped around to stare at her. “Don’t you think I know that? Trying to transport me back to the twelfth century without my knowledge is despicable.”

His outburst of anger took them by surprise.

“We had strict instructions from Philip not to tell you as you would have refused” Alice blurted out apologetically.

“Too true” Henry snapped as he thought back to the previous two nights and his weird ‘dreams’; except it was now obvious that they weren’t dreams at all. His body or mind had actually been transported back in time for two short moments. Although he was angry, he was also curious: the candle, the strange odours and the beautiful woman in the picture. It all came back to him. “So you obviously have this ... crystal here, now, in the inn?”

“Yes.”

“So why wasn’t the transfer successful?”

“Your mental links with the present time were too strong to sever. Your empathy with the plight of the woman was not strong enough to dominate.”

“So what was I supposed to do when I arrived a thousand years in the past?”

“It has all been planned out. You would have been met by two monks who would have given you instructions as to where to escort the damsel to safety, but so as not to compromise her father. All you would have had to do is collect her, take to the agreed place of sanctuary and then return.”

“So how long was this round trip supposed to take?”

“Our best estimate, based on what Philip was told, was about five days.”

“Couldn’t you have found someone else?”

“No, and besides, we have run out of time.”

“What do you mean?”

“The transfer now has to take place tonight, the twentieth. We had three days but, as you now know, we have lost two days.”

Henry was still feeling annoyed. “So why are you bothering to ask me when you have already have already tried without success?”

“Because we require your commitment and willingness to undertake this journey.”

“What’s her name again, this “Lord Trellian’s daughter?”

“Anna.”

Confusing thoughts were circulating around Henry’s mind. *‘So beautiful. Maybe he was falling for her. Does it really matter what happened to her? After all, it happened nine hundred years ago – in the past. Whatever happened to her has already occurred. It’s history. What if he got killed or couldn’t get back? What a dilemma.’* He returned his attention back to Alan and Alice.

“There is no decision. I don’t want to go back in time and put myself at risk, for what? The gratitude of a stupid father and a bunch of peasants? What do you take me

for.” He saw the expressions of disappointment and concern on the faces of Alan and Alice. “I am not going back to look at that seductress in the painting and am leaving right now, so please sort out my car so that I can be on my way.” He pulled on his jacket and made for the door, suddenly realizing that he had left his briefcase in the bedroom. “I’ve left my briefcase upstairs. I’ll just go and get it.”

Alan and Alice rose to their feet and Alan started walking back to the kitchen. “I’ll need to charge your battery.”

“We can only apologize for how we’ve handled this, Henry” Alice said, “but it is of course your decision.”

Henry felt that he had let them down but there were too many unknowns and risks as far as he could see. He tried to wipe it from his mind and bounded up the stairs and into the room to find his briefcase on the bed. A last look around the room with the worn upholstery and he made for the door. Unfortunately his eyes fell once again on that painting of the beautiful woman, Anna. Weirdly, her appearance seemed to have changed. The beautiful woman now looked pitiful in one sense but her beauty seemed more enhanced and her expression was one of pleading and of impending doom. His heart was now pounding and he started to feel an intense desire for this woman who was no longer alive, in present day terms. He tore himself away feeling guilt, remorse, you name it. He also felt that he was letting her down but didn’t know why he should.

Slamming the door behind him and bounding back down the stairs his exit was blocked by Alan and Alice at the bottom. The annoyed look on Henry’s face caused them to part allowing a passage between them. The sorrowful statement from Alice was spoken softly as Henry passed between them.

“You’ve decided then.”

Henry walked towards the door to leave the inn without turning round. “Yes, I’ve decided.” He stopped in his tracks and swiveled round to face them with arms dangling at his side, one hand gripping the briefcase. He was fighting to find the right words to say. “Look, I’m sorry to disappoint you but you have to see it from my point of view.” Images flashed before him: his lifestyle, the exhibition, his journey to this inn, the incredibly beautiful Anna and her plight and then back again to the present day. Thoughts and questions in rapid succession raced through his mind. *‘Could he really help her? Maybe. Could he get back to the present time? Probably a good chance. Could she come back with him? No. How long would it take? Probably not too long that he wouldn’t be missed. Would he come back to the same point in time? Most likely.’* There were hundreds of questions, to which he would probably never get answers, and so many unknowns. *‘Bad risk.’* He thought to himself and then gave his reply to the pathetic looking couple standing before him. Unfortunately, on reflection, the wrong answer came out. “I’ll do it.”

The expressions on Alan’s and Alice’s faces said everything.

The problem was that Henry hadn't asked enough of the right questions, not that he knew what to ask, and therefore hadn't received any answers. He was going into this blind and not even sure of the outcome, but had somehow convinced himself this was a panglossian situation. After all, it had always been that way throughout his life and he was taking a gamble now that things would turn out okay once again on this occasion. He excused himself for a moment putting down his briefcase and taking his leave to wander about outside for what seemed a long time contemplating what he was letting himself in for and drawing up various scenarios in his mind. *'Does this portal really exist? Is it really going to happen or was this yet another instance of virtual reality and not really happening? Was he still dreaming? What would he do when he arrived at wherever he was going? How was he going to rescue her? What if a bunch of knights came at him with those huge swords they carried? He was only used to competition swords like the foil, épée and sabre.'* His mind was too confused, going round and round. He saw his car with the bonnet up and red and black cables dropping down to a charger on the ground with a power cable snaking into a garage at the side of the inn. He sighed, turned around and went back into the inn to see Alan and Alice looking pleased, or relieved more like.

"We shall forever be in you debt, Henry" Alice said.

"And we know you will be successful" Alan added.

Henry nodded. "There is one condition however."

Alan and Alice glanced at each other, thinking the worse.

"Which is?" Alan asked.

"That Alice will let me take her out for dinner on my return."

Both initially looked surprise at the suggestion.

"Er, by all means" Alice replied. "I would be delighted."

Alan was a bit put out. "We could make it a threesome?"

"You're not the one being transported back in time nearly a thousand years" Alice quickly interjected. "It's the least I can do, under the circumstances; and I can hear first-hand about Henry's experiences."

Alan was still annoyed.

Following a decent lunch, an evening meal and a lot of talking and discussion, accompanied by a few pints of ale, the time passed surprisingly quickly. During their discussions, Alan handed Henry a ring to wear on his finger. It was a wide silver ring with an inset band of crystal around the circumference.

"Whatever you do" Alan said "do not lose this ring. You will need to wear it in order to return to bring you back here; to our own time."

Henry studied the ring fascinated by the crystal band.

Alan noticed Henry staring at it. "It records the date that the transportation takes place. If you don't wear it you may well return in the 16th century; and even in a different location."

They shared a few laughs about ending up in different eras and places but eventually Henry decided on an early night and wandered up to his room, suddenly feeling very drowsy once again. He had agreed to take the sedative to help his mind relax. Sitting on the bed contemplating the picture woman in front of him, he had the impression that her expression had changed once again to one of hope and new life. ‘*Strange*’ he thought, eyelids suddenly feeling very heavy, ‘*maybe he would be able to influence her fate*’; but he still harbored doubts about what he was going to do, even with help from the abbot, once he found himself in the past. After all, whatever happened hundreds of years ago wasn't really going to affect him and he would have no regrets. He could still walk away from it; yet Anna was so beautiful, so magnetic. No wonder that Lord ‘whatsisname’ fancied her. Who wouldn't!

Henry changed in to the nightshirt, flopped back on the bed and lay there with hands behind his head briefly before succumbing to heavy sleep. His last thoughts were that this would still probably turn out to be a dream after all and that a big joke was being played on him. He had thought about trying the adjoining door again, glancing out of the window to watch the darkening sky or to poke around the books in the cabinet, but he was much too tired and now just waiting for morning to come so that he could off home.

6. The 20th

During late afternoon of the 17th Anna had packed her essential effects for the journey to the inn, the rest of her wardrobe to be transported to Lord Montgomery's castle later. She had no ladies-in-waiting. Lord Montgomery had insisted that he had ladies who would be only too pleased to attend to her, but his real motive was that he didn't want any spies in his castle. Anna bid her farewells to her father and close staff, the ladies of which were in tears. Her departure was watched in sadness by all those in the castle, and there were plenty of them, who saw her ride off with Brother Hubert and four knights. Father Bernard stated that he would join them later.

On the evening of the 17th six riders on horseback rode up to the inn on Lord Montgomery's estate. They had not encountered anyone during their journey but knew that Lord Montgomery had received and accepted the final conditions stipulated by Anna's father. Rumour had it that he was looking forward to collecting Anna himself and to carry her off to his castle. Anna approached the inn with some trepidation. The inn keeper and his wife appeared at the door with knowing looks on their faces and bowed briefly at Anna as one of the knights helped her to dismount.

"Lady Anna" the innkeeper said with a look of surprise. "We weren't expecting you for two days."

"Please accept our apologies" answered Brother Hubert on Anna's behalf. "There has been a slight change of plan due to certain events that precluded us from travelling on the agreed date."

The innkeeper made no comment.

"Is the Lady's room ready?" Brother Hubert asked.

"Yes Brother. Please, this way." He stepped aside.

Anna, Brother Hubert and two of the knights entered the building in silence, the other two decided to return to report Anna's safe arrival. The four travellers were offered a meal of meats, salted fish and bean broth, after which the inn keeper's wife said she would show Anna to her room for the next three nights. She led Anna up the stairs and along a wooden paneled corridor with a red patterned carpet over polished floorboards stopping in front of a heavy wooden door slightly ajar. As they entered, Anna glanced around the room.

"These are the quarters are for her ladyship. I hope they are to your liking. They are normally reserved for his Lordship's special guests when he is hunting in the area. I'll leave you to make yourself comfortable my Lady" she continued, backing out of the room. "Oh" she added "the next room along the corridor is his Lordship's. It has an adjoining door but there will be no one in the room and the door is locked."

“Thank you” replied Anna, assuming that Lord Montgomery’s “guest” was more than likely a mistress. Now alone, she was beginning to feel an element of doubt that she had made the right decision and fearful for what the future held. She looked around the room, which was well decorated with good quality furniture. A four-poster bed was positioned midway along the wall backing onto the adjoining room and at the bottom of the bed was a long dark oak trunk. There were two small bedside tables, a table with a washbowl set in it and a writing desk. Tapestries hung on the walls, all depicting hunting scenes mainly with deer and boar being slaughtered. She unpacked some clothes for the following day and laid her nightwear on the bed, then left the room and made her way back down the stairs.

Two of the knights and Brother Hubert were seated at a table in deep conversation as Anna descended the stairs. They immediately rose and made their way to meet her at the bottom.

“Thank you, gentlemen.” She spoke softly and sadly, then addressed the two knights. “Tell my father that I have settled in and that the landlord and landlady are very accommodating and attentive. Tell him that I hope to see him soon.” *‘If I am still here.’* She thought to herself, wondering what Father Bernard was intimating when he had mentioned ‘the other side’. *‘Did he mean I am ... going to die? Is this going to be my release?’* Fear of the unknown permeated her thoughts with renewed feelings of dread.

“We will my Lady” the two knights replied, although she only half heard them as she turned her head away with tears in her eyes. They bid farewell to the innkeeper and his wife who stood by the door with Brother Hubert.

“Will you also be leaving now Brother Hubert?” asked the innkeeper.

“Shortly” he replied. “I wish to take prayers with Lady Anna before I depart.” The inn keeper and his wife nodded and disappeared into the kitchen. Brother Hubert turned to Anna.

“God be with you child. May he protect you and deliver you safe from all dangers.” He took her hand and kissed it and was taken aback when she gave him a hug.

“Thank you, Brother Hubert. God will be with me everywhere.”

“Now get some rest” he suggested “and pray that God will help you in your predicament.”

As Anna started to climb back up the stairs the landlady appeared.

“Is there any else you require my Lady? Lord Montgomery instructed us to make you as comfortable as possible.”

Anna smiled. “I will be fine thank you.” She continued her way up. “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight my Lady” the woman replied.

Anna ascended the stairs and made her way down the corridor to enter her room. She slowly undressed, put on her night clothes and finally knelt by the bed to pray before climbing under the sheets. She lay on her back for what seemed hours with the same thoughts passing through her mind and wondering how she ended up here waiting

to be picked up by a man she distrusted and disliked. Being completely alone didn't help. Fear and emotions slowly built up until finally she turned on her side fighting back tears that were welling up in her eyes. "Lord. Someone. Help me." She wiped the tears from her eyes and started to doze off when she heard voices coming from downstairs.

Father Bernard had arrived and as the innkeeper opened the door to admit the newcomer, Brother Hubert, who was sipping a glass of ale, feigned surprise and called out. "Father Bernard. What a surprise to see you here."

The innkeeper turned to look at him and then back to the newcomer.

"My Lord Abbot?"

"Yes my son?" he replied.

"What brings you to my humble inn?"

"I am here to provide solace for the Lady Anna who, I understand from Brother Hubert, is lodging here. I presume this does not inconvenience you."

The innkeeper pulled the door open wider to peer out wondering if anyone else was going to turn up unexpected. "Why of course not my Lord. Is there anything my wife and I can do to help?"

"Thank you but, no, my son. I just require time with Lady Anna whilst she has the need for God's comfort."

The innkeeper stepped aside to allow the abbot to enter.

"I was hoping that Brother Hubert and I could stay a couple of nights before Lady Anna departs. I presume that is no problem?"

The innkeeper gave a nervous, uncertain reply. "No, no, of course not. I would have put you up in my best room but that is occupied by the Lady, who arrived earlier accompanied by Brother Hubert."

"I am sure you have a suitable alternative room of equal comfort."

"Y..e..s. I would put you in the room next to the Lady's but it is Lord Montgomery's and ..."

"Perfect" interrupted the Abbot. "We will not disturb the Lady and I assure you that we will take great care not to disturb anything in his Lordship's room."

The innkeeper looked past the Abbot. "Well ... I ... his Lordship is very fussy about ..."

"Don't worry about Lord Montgomery" the abbot said quickly "I will explain it all to him and ensure that you will not get into any trouble."

The innkeeper looked worried and unconvinced. "I understand" he answered hesitantly, then noticed that the abbot was carrying a fairly large bag. "Do you require any assistance with your bag up to your room my Lord?"

"No thank you my son, I can manage fine. Please just show me to the room."

Brother Hubert brushed past the innkeeper to join the Abbot, calling out. "I'll show him where it is; but some refreshments would be most welcome for the abbot after his journey."

“Certainly” replied the innkeeper in a groveling manner and hurried back to the kitchen.

“Quick” said the Abbot handing the bag to Brother Hubert. “Let’s take this to Lord Montgomery’s room. Have you spoken to Lady Anna regarding the plan?”

“No, your grace.”

“Then let’s hope she is still awake.”

They climbed the stairs and deposited the abbot’s bag in Lord Montgomery’s room. Father Bernard stepped over to the adjoining door and knocked gently.

“Who is it?” Anna called out.

“Father Bernard and Brother Hubert.”

“A moment please.” Anna climbed out of the bed, put on her dressing gown and sat on the chair. “You can come in now.”

The two monks entered.

Father Bernard immediately asked “You are well my dear and Brother Hubert has been attending to your spiritual needs?”

“I am well, Father, but wasn’t expecting to see you quite so soon. What brings you here tonight?”

“Would you mind, Lady Anna, if I sit on the bed before I begin as I am a bit weary after my journey?”

“By all means do” she replied. “Do you have something to tell me? Have you spoken with Harold and Llewellyn?”

“No. I regret not, but I am now going to outline what is going to happen, hopefully in the next few hours, before you are collected by Lord Montgomery on the 20th.”

Anna looked a bit anxious. “What do you mean, Father?”

Father Bernard sat on the bed and cleared his throat. “A man will be arriving here shortly, hopefully tonight. He is to receive strict instructions to escort you to a place of sanctuary until this case of deception, of which I am aware, has been resolved. Brother Hubert told me that your compatriots are investigating this as quickly as they can.” He withdrew a parchment from beneath his habit.

Anna’s expression changed to one of concern. “Who is this man? Can he be trusted? What is to stop him taking advantage of me and leaving me a violated woman?”

“We are assured that he is a man of the highest integrity, honest and loyal. His name is Henry Longford and he is about your age – a little older perhaps.”

“Where will he be taking me and how does he propose we leave the inn against the wishes of the landlord? Will not Lord Montgomery suspect my father’s hand in all this?”

The abbot handed Anna the document. “Give this to Henry Longford. It is a map which suggests that you are best to head south, possibly to Lord Geoffrey de Champ’s estate as I believe he may well be willing to provide sanctuary for a limited period. Geoffrey de Champ is an honest man and will see that fair play is exercised. No one, other than the four of us, has any knowledge of this plan and to all intents and purposes you have been abducted by a passing traveller. I would also suggest that in the event

that you are unable to reach Lord de Champ's castle you head for the coast and cross the channel, but I believe it unlikely that it will come to that."

"What does this Henry Longford look like?"

"He is of good proportion, about five foot six inches, dark hair and clean shaven and will be dressed in dark green. Oh, and I have also brought you some suitable clothing so that you will be perceived by the casual observer as a couple of peasants. I also considered it more practical and it will provide better camouflage as you journey through the forest; but remember to avoid the main highways."

Brother Hubert opened the bag Father Bernard had brought and took out a set of clothing suitable for a man or young lad. "Apart from your long hair you could well be mistaken for a couple of young male travellers, Lady Anna."

She thanked Brother Hubert and smiled and then turned back to Father Bernard. "It sounds like a very risky plan. Lord Montgomery's men will surely come after us."

"It is the only option that is feasible and, as you are reasonably familiar with the topography of the area, with God's help we will succeed in saving you from the clutches of Lord Montgomery and expose his treachery before he manages to find out where you are hiding."

There was a pause as Anna mulled things over in her mind.

"Any further questions or concerns my dear?"

"No Father. I just wish to thank you both for your efforts and the help you are giving me."

"Then we will bid you goodnight." He was about to leave with Brother Hubert but stopped as he reached the door. "We will not be here to greet Henry Longford on his arrival. It is better that way so that the landlord will not make any connection between Henry Longford and us or your father."

"Thank you, Father Bernard and Brother Hubert."

They left the room and Anna returned to her bed to await the mysterious man's arrival. She soon fell into a fitful sleep but woke at some point during the night finding herself sobbing at her predicament. She thought she heard someone moving around in the adjoining room but when it all went quiet she attributed it to the monks moving about.

Once they had taken leave of Anna the two monks returned to the lounge to enjoy a light supper and talk with the landlord, feigning interest in Lord Montgomery's plans for collecting Anna. Following the meal the two monks bid the man and his wife goodnight and went up to their room. Brother Hubert fetched an oil lamp from the corridor whilst the Abbot lifted a padlocked wooden box out of the bag and placed it on the desk in the room. He reached into his robe and pulled out a small key and opened the padlock, placing it to one side. Lifting the lid he took out a small ebony stand and placed it on one of the bedside tables. Reaching in again he then took out a black bag that was about the size of his hand.

“I believe everything is just about ready” Father Bernard said, seating himself on the chair by the desk. “Now we wait a bit.”

“I hope they remember the ring” Brother Hubert stated, blandly.

“Yes, to link the person being transported by the crystal to his or her original era and location. It is necessary for the transfer to take place and is also important so that the process can be reversed.”

“What if the connection is not made?” Brother Hubert stated, knowing full well the answer; but the Abbot replied anyway

“Then there is nothing more that we can do, which saddens me a great deal.” He paused a moment before carrying on. “Who knows how things will turn out, but I have serious concerns regarding Lady Anna’s fate.” He sighed audibly before carrying on. “But let us not be pessimistic; as soon as we know the transfer has been successful we must depart with our equipment post haste.”

They sat there for some time during which they were nearly interrupted by the innkeeper, who knocked on the door.

“Anything I can get you Father?”

“No. We have all that we require my son and please do not disturb us until the morning.”

“I understand” came the reply.

They now sat waiting until the inn had gone quiet and were confident that the landlord and his wife had retired for the night. Brother Hubert eventually stepped over to the adjoining door.

“It seems very quiet. Do you think she is asleep?”

“Very likely, but let’s resist the temptation to have a peek.”

Father Bernard rose from the chair and undid the string tied around the neck of the black bag. Reaching in, he carefully lifted out a plinth on which sat a large crystal that glistened and radiated a brilliant white light. He placed the plinth on the stand by the bed. Even though Brother Hubert had seen the crystal several times he still marveled at the object which seemed alive as it emanated waves of light in a multitude of directions. On closer examination one could almost detect images as though it contained a microcosm of people and lands.

They didn’t have to wait long before the crystal began to glow brighter. Brother Hubert’s eyes opened wide as he nudged Father Bernard.

“Something is happening.”

They both became instantly alert as the brightness grew and the pulsations of light grew faster and more intense. The sudden beam that emanated from the crystal caused them both to jerk back slightly. It arced across to the bed and shortly the quivering image of a man in a nightshirt slowly formed on the covers. He appeared to be asleep. The human form never solidified completely as they watched it wake up, climb out of the bed and move about the room but remained as a diaphanous image. It then went out into the corridor to stand outside Anna’s room momentarily before returning to the

room, laying back down on the bed and going back to sleep. Suddenly the light beam shut off as it arced back to the crystal and the brightness sank to a dull pulsating. In the ensuing silence the two monks just stared at each other and thought they could hear Anna sobbing.

After a few minutes Father Bernard shook his head slowly. "Something is wrong" he mumbled, grimly.

"What's happened?" Brother Hubert asked anxiously.

"It has not worked. I believe there may have been some resistance on the part of our friend from the future.

"What do we do now?"

"We will have to try again tomorrow night. My plan was to give Anna and her rescuer a couple of days to make their escape but now we have lost a day so let's hope it works tomorrow night."

"What about the landlord? How are we going to explain our continued presence to him, and Lady Anna come to that?"

"Don't worry" he replied. "I will think of something to extend our lodging."

The following morning Father Bernard informed the Landlord that Brother Hubert had taken ill and asked if they could stay another night. The landlord agreed, with some trepidation, and looked uncomfortable with the situation. He apologized to Anna telling her that Henry Longford appeared to have got delayed, which she accepted with no questions. Most of that day she spent with Father Bernard, who reassured her that Brother Hubert's illness was not serious. They spent much time talking and walking in the area around the inn, closely observed by the nervous landlord.

"So, Father Bernard, tell me more about this mysterious gentleman who plans to rescue me from Lord Montgomery's clutches. You have provided a good physical description of him and mentioned his high morals but nothing about his background, where he comes from and how you come to know him."

Father Bernard of course was unable to answer any of these questions; he was none the wiser himself. He was forced to improvise and provide her with a believable profile of the man so that she would put her trust in him and endear him to her.

"I understand that he is well educated, having been taken into care into a religious house after his parents died when he was very young. I can't say exactly where he comes from but I believe he received much of his education in France. When he arrived or returned to England I can't say but I only met him once or twice and was immediately impressed."

Anna seemed to accept what the Abbot had told her and moved on to talk about the escape plan. They spent mealtimes together and kept each other's company intentionally avoiding the landlord and his wife.

On the second night the two monks repeated the process to facilitate the transfer once again. As on the previous night, they heard Anna sobbing again as the crystal

repeated its attempt to effect the transfer. Once again the man rose from his bed, but was obviously still confused as on the previous night. This time however, he appeared to be more solid as he moved about the room feeling his way to the adjoining door and reaching momentarily for the door handle. He then changed its mind and stepped over the bedside table to pick up one of the candle holders. He studied it for an instant, then put it down and stepped into the passageway to collect one of the oil lamps hanging there. On returning to the room with his back to the monks, he suddenly stopped and slowly turned lifting the oil lamp up. He was looking straight at them. Father Bernard was about to speak when the man shook his head from side to side, lowered the oil lamp and turned back towards the bed to lie down and fall asleep. As before, the light withdrew suddenly from the body and shut off.

"I thought it had worked this time" Father Bernard said, with concern.

"So did I, especially when he turned and looked at us."

"But did you notice how glazed his eyes looked as though he wasn't really seeing us? It's failed again I'm afraid."

"We have a problem then." Brother Hubert commented.

"I fear that our friend from the future is not accepting a complete willingness to join us."

"What are we going to do Father?"

"That, I am uncertain about at the moment but we are now running out of time. It must happen tomorrow night and we can only hope that our friend becomes more willing to join us."

"And if he doesn't?"

"Then we are indeed doomed and ..." he hesitated for a moment "... I will be obliged to help Lady Anna in ... some other way."

Brother Hubert knew what he meant but dared not ask. Now he had to spend another day with his 'illness' while Father Bernard continued to collect his meals as before from the landlord, with the request that he not be disturbed. He just hoped that the landlord did not become suspicious.

The following morning Anna was beginning to feel uneasy as Henry Longford had still not appeared but felt a little more at ease when Father Bernard appeared again when she went down for a light breakfast brought in by the innkeeper's wife. "Father Bernard!" She exclaimed, with a look of relief on her face. "How is Brother Hubert? I presume he is still unwell."

"He is feeling much better thank you, my dear."

Anna turned to thank the landlady and noticed the worried look on her face. "Thank you" she said, and then added. "Something seems to be bothering you though."

"I am very well my lady and, no, nothing is bothering me at all thank you." The worried expression remained however.

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“I hope for us to depart early tomorrow morning.” Father Bernard said, to put the woman at ease, which it did when a look of relief swept across the landlady’s face as she returned to the kitchen to tell her husband.

Anna then turned back to Father Bernard. “Thank you Father. I must admit that I was dreading the thought of being here on my own or spending awkward hours with the innkeeper and his wife; but is there any news of our visitor?”

“I am afraid not” Father Bernard replied, “but we can talk about that after we have finished eating and after I have taken some food up to Brother Hubert.”

“Yes, we need to” she agreed, increasingly concerned about what the future held for her.

The two of them once again spent most of the second day together with Anna reiterating the plans she had discussed with Brother Hubert and others to find out who was involved in the deceit at the tournament. However, Father Bernard was very much aware that she was trying to convey a calm, controlled disposition but in reality he knew that she was becoming very apprehensive about her future prospects. He didn’t dare tell her the truth about his and Brother Hubert’s attempt to transport someone from the future to help her. It would not only confuse her but might even impact her state of mind. They took more strolls in the forest opposite the inn with Father Bernard surreptitiously pointing out the inviting paths that would have been worth exploring, should they have had the time. The innkeeper wasn’t at all happy seeing them wandering off but Father Bernard had promised that they had no intention of renegeing on the arrangement. The old abbot also informed him that he and Brother Hubert would be leaving before Lord Montgomery’s men arrived to collect Lady Anna.

Although the day dragged, dusk finally descended and eventually Anna retired to bed once again after bidding goodnight to the two monks and dreading waking up the following morning to be taken to Lord Montgomery’s castle. Before retiring to her bed in the inn for the last time she carefully hid the small bottle of dark coloured liquid that Father Bernard had given her in her bag, hoping that she would never have to swallow the contents. Father Bernard also retired to rejoin the “sick” Brother Hubert. When confident that the innkeeper and his wife were asleep, they brought out the crystal again for a third and last attempt and prayed for success.

Once again the crystal lit up with the light beams winding their way throughout the crystal trying to escape into their surrounding until the beam shot out as before and lit up a shape that appeared on the bed, to the immense relief of the two monks.

“It seems that our Henry Longford is still there and making the journey once again” Father Bernard stated with relief.

“I pray to God for success this time” Brother Hubert joined in.

Slowly, the image of the man appeared once more on the bed; but this time it appeared more solid. Once the image was fully formed, unlike the ethereal formations on the two previous occasions, the beam suddenly shut off but this time the crystal

retained its brightness with the light still snaking around inside. The man appeared to be breathing deeply with a peaceful expression on his face.

"I believe it has worked this time." Father Bernard stated. "The crystal is behaving as expected and our visitor appears to be whole. Now, quick, we need to pack everything up and be prepared to make our departure. Now that Lady Anna has the map, and the suggested destination, the two of them should be able to make their way to the place of sanctuary. With the help of our friends from the future we have done all we can and must now put our faith in God for their deliverance."

Brother Hubert packed the crystal away whilst Father Bernard carefully opened the door to the landing and peered out straining his ears for any sounds. "It is all very quiet. I think it safe to go now so let's be on our way."

With everything packed away they stepped over to the bed to observe the body on the bed looking for signs of consciousness. At first glance there appeared to be no signs of life.

Brother Hubert was beginning to look anxious. "What if it hasn't happened as expected?"

"Do not be negative brother. I am confident that the Lord has answered our prayers."

A murmur made them both suddenly alert as they moved closer to him.

Brother Hubert nodded as the man began to stir. "His breathing has changed" he said, moving away. "And I do believe I detected movement in his face."

"Time to go" whispered Father Bernard. "Quickly."

Brother Hubert picked up the bag and they crept out of the room. A stair creaked as they descended the staircase which made them freeze for a moment, listening for sounds of movement; but all remained quiet so they continued to the inn door. Fortunately, the key was in the lock which made their exit much easier, but they had to slowly draw back the bolts with bated breath. Father Bernard hesitated and pulled another parchment from beneath his habit.

"I gambled on this working so prepared a message for the landlord stating that we decided to leave in the early hours and to thank him for his hospitality. That, hopefully, will allay any suspicions."

Brother Hubert nodded as they made their way to the stables to collect their horses. "But now it is best that you get back to Lord Trellian's and I will make my way to the Abbey of Montraie to visit my old friend Father Brian. All we can do now is trust that God will answer our prayers."

"God be with you father."

"And God be with you too Brother Hubert and no mention of what has happened here."

They slowly walked the horses far enough away from the inn before mounting and riding off at a steady pace.

Alan and Alice looked at each other apprehensively as they made the final checks of the equipment. Alan hit the key to initiate the transfer. As on the two previous occasions the arcing light sort out the ring on Henry's finger then enveloped his whole body for about five minutes before it suddenly disappeared, when the beam suddenly shut off whilst the crystal maintained its brilliance. The EEG display showed flat line with the previous wave pattern now transferred to the output from base of the plinth. The next message:

TRANSFER COMPLETE

appeared on the screen.

"This certainly looks more promising" Alice said.

"And the crystal's behavior is completely different" Alan added.

They sat in silence for about fifteen minutes and both sighed with relief.

"Goodbye Henry" Alice said with a touch of sadness. "I hope you have a good time, succeed in your mission and return safely."

"Yes, have a nice day" Alan joined in, chuckling.

"Not funny" commented Alice. "I suppose we will have to sit around here now until he returns?"

"Just because you want that dinner date with him. I told you he fancies you."

"You're only jealous."

"I wouldn't want a dinner date with him." Alan replied, pretending to be annoyed.

"I guess we had better contact Phillip and let him know what's happened and when Henry is likely to return." *'If he returns'* Alan thought to himself. "I must admit though that I was convinced that he was not going to go along with it. Something must have changed his mind."

Alice turned to stare at the picture on the wall whilst Alan packed the crystal away and closed down the transfer program. "She is a very beautiful woman. In fact I don't believe I have seen anyone so lovely."

"Present company excepted of course." Alan smiled.

Alice swiveled around. "Oh come on. I wish I was as attractive as her. But then again I would end up attracting all sorts of lechers ... like you." She laughed and, still staring at the picture, said "I wonder if he will stay. He may even fall madly in love with her. Wouldn't that be romantic."

Alan sat down on an armless swivel chair. "I doubt it. It will be extremely dangerous for him. After all, she is a lord's daughter and he's a ... Systems Analyst." They both chuckled at the thought as Alan continued. "However careful he might be, he is bound to make a mistake sooner or later and then it's" He stroked a finger across his throat.

"I do hope he is successful; and stop being so pessimistic Alan. If we succeed, the Company stands to make a mint, should it be allowed to launch such a service. Think of all those 'real time' holidays."

“As long as people don’t want to keep skipping back to the past.” Alan replied, tongue in cheek. “History cannot be changed, as we well know. If a visitor caused a fundamental change to their environment, it is as likely that they would be unable to return and thus perish in their new time period.”

Alice picked up the clipboard and studied the photograph of Henry attached to it with the paperclip. “Hm. I wonder how long it took them to discover its potential.”

“Well, for one thing it was dependent on someone back in the past locating the crystal in their time period; and then they had to find out how to activate it.”

“I suppose that once one was activated it would automatically activate its counterpart.”

“Yes, I’m sure; but there must be a way of selecting the point in time to which one wishes to be transferred. Unfortunately, we are not privy to that information. Philip and Charles are keeping that under their hats for security reasons. They just loaded up the time coordinates before handing the equipment over to us.”

Alice was still holding the clipboard, staring at Henry’s photo.

“I still wonder when and where the crystal first appeared. It can’t be natural, certainly not here on Earth.”

“Aliens?” Alan laughed.

“What explanation could there be?” She thought a moment. “But why would they just leave it here and clear off?”

“One could come up with lots of theories to explain that one. Maybe they all died out for some reason; or then again, maybe they are even now sitting on another planet in our or some other galaxy trying to link up with us.”

“Just imagine” she suddenly said excitedly “if we could transfer ourselves to another world.”

“I think we are getting a bit beyond ourselves” Alan said, getting up and wandering over to look at the picture of Anna.

“Hm. I am getting that uneasy feeling that maybe we should not have gone along with this experiment, potentially messing up someone’s life.”

“But Philip and Charles both insisted with the full support of the board. If you, I or even Henry hadn’t agreed, someone else would have undertaken the project.”

“Surely they could have identified a different scenario with much less risk.”

“I doubt it. Once Phillip had outlined the project to Charles, who then realized what might be possible, there was no turning back. After all this could be culmination of Philip’s dream, from a purely technical point of view.”

Alice placed the clipboard back on the table. “I can see that. Anyway, I’m famished. Fancy something to eat?”

“Yes” he replied getting up off the chair. He glanced at the empty bed. “I guess Henry will be busy for a while yet.”

Alice moved to the door and grasped the door knob. “Is the mobile still synchronized with the computer in case the link reactivates?”

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Alan hit a couple of keys on the keyboard and made for the door. “Done. Have a nice day, Henry” he finally called out to the empty bed, and followed her down the stairs.

7. A Village on Lord Trellian's Estate

Two knights, accompanied by the two guards who were on duty during the evening prior to the tournament, rode into the village. Alerted to their approach, the headman was waiting in the small market square talking with a group of villagers. He turned as they appeared and slowly walked towards them.

"A good day to you sir knights."

"Good day Jonathan" replied one of the knights, named Edgar.

"What can I do for you? Would you care for some refreshments at the inn?"

"Not today my good man. We seek the three fellows who brought provisions into the castle the other evening."

Jonathan turned back to the others, who were still standing gossiping amongst themselves, and asked them. "Does anyone know who took the provisions to the castle the other evening?"

They conferred amongst themselves for a few moments until another villager, walking past at that moment and who overheard the question, called over to the men on horseback. "Ah, that be Peter, Matthew and Jean."

Jonathan turned back to the mounted group. "They are probably in the fields right now gathering harvest."

"Which way is that my good fellow?"

The headman turned and pointed to the opposite end of the square. "In the fields, down by the river."

"Thank you Jonathan" Edgar replied.

They made a start to move off.

"Is there a problem?" Jonathan asked, with some concern.

"We just need to talk with them."

Jonathan spoke again before the men could depart. "You will excuse our curiosity but we have heard that the Lady Anna is leaving us to ..."

"Yes. That is the reason we are here. Due to some duplicitous behavior on the part of a certain person, the Lady Anna is prepared to make a great sacrifice on behalf of many of you villagers but it is the general impression that she is unlikely to be well treated and will be used to satisfy the lust of our erstwhile neighbour." They began to move off. "Now we have no time to waste."

Jonathan bowed his head slightly. "We are all indeed extremely grateful. If there is anything we can do to help, please ..." The sentence tailed off as the mounted group moved out of earshot. He returned to the group in the square. "Rumour has it that our Lord Trellian nearly lost a third of his lands, which includes our village, in a tournament with Lord Montmery."

"That would not have been a good outcome" stated one of the others.

‘ “We certainly have a lot to thank Lady Anna for.” Joined in a third. “She is a lovely lady, just like her mother, and we must do our best to help her in any way we can.”

They all nodded in agreement and returned to their various activities.

The four horsemen left the village and trotted along a track which skirted around fields of barley. As they passed a group of serfs attending to the crops Edgar called out.

“We are looking for Peter, Matthew and Jean. Where would they be?”

Some just shrugged but one fellow called back. “Just follow the track until it reaches the river. They should be working down there clearing some of the reeds.”

The riders moved on glancing at girls working in the fields.

“Ah, there are some gorgeous wenches out here” muttered one of the guards.

“What I would do to frolic in the hay with some of those.”

“Oh come on Cedric, you’re married,” replied his companion, Geoffrey.

“So, wouldn’t you if it were on offer?”

“Hm, I guess maybe I would, as long as my missus didn’t find out, otherwise there would be hell to play.”

The two knights glanced at each other chuckling to themselves. Their own positions and standing meant that many a court lady was vying for their attention.

The track now split with the right-hand fork sloping down towards the river. They followed this until it ran parallel with the river for a while before they saw a group of three men working along the bank cutting back reeds. Two were in the water cutting and throwing the fronds onto the bank. The third man was collecting them into piles for later collection. One of those in the water noticed the four riders and said something to the other two. As they turned and glanced at the approaching horsemen the one on the bank wiped his arm across his forehead, said something to the other two and moved away into the field.

“Looks like he doesn’t want to talk to us” said Edgar.

“What’s the betting that’s Jean” added Godfrey, the second knight.

The two men in the water stopped as the riders drew up on the bank by them. The two guards, Cedric and Geoffrey, had already recognized the two in the water but now were watching the third man making his way off in the distance.

“Good day to you my lords and what brings you here?” The one called Peter asked.

“Are these two of them?” Edgar asked the guards ignoring the greeting.

Cedric turned his head and looked at the two men. “Yes, these were the two chatty ones. The other, with a bundle in his lap, kept rather quiet.”

Geoffrey was still watching the third man making for some trees. “Where’s he going?”

“I don’t know” Peter responded. “He said he had to go to the copse over yonder to get something that he had left there the other day.” He chuckled. “He’s a sly one. My

bet is that he is meeting someone. He has a secret lover whom he visits each time he visits the castle.”

“Does he now” replied Edgar “and how would you know that?”

“Well, er ...” hesitated Peter “... that’s what he told us.”

“Did he? Do you know who he was seeing?”

“No, he kept it very quiet so that his wife wouldn’t find out.”

“Otherwise his life wouldn’t be worth living” laughed Matthew.

“What did he say exactly?” Asked Edgar. “Did he happen to drop a name? Do you know if anyone else saw him?”

Peter and Matthew looked at each other. “No. We don’t really know anything about her or ...”

“So, you said that he told you he was seeing someone?”

“Well ... not exactly” Peter replied.

Edgar indicated frustration. “Come on man, you just said he told you.”

“In so many words, yes.”

“What was the bundle he was carrying on the cart?” Asked Geoffrey.

Again, the two men glanced at each other and shrugged. Peter started to answer. “We don’t know. He just said ...”

“That’s enough” interrupted Edgar impatiently. “We’ll go and ask him.”

They turned their horses back onto the track. There was no sign of Jean.”

“Where’s he gone?”

“Over that way, into the copse” answered Cedric, who had been watching him. “He couldn’t have got far.”

The four men rode off while Peter and Matthew watched them.

“Now what’s Jean got up to? He’s a strange and very secretive man.” Matthew said.

“And never wants for much.” Peter added. “I always imagined he received favours from friends in the castle.”

“Rumour has it that he received favours from folk elsewhere.”

“Oh, do you mean from another village?”

“Yes and not one near here.”

The two turned back to continue their work, both wondering what Jean was up to and hoping they weren’t going to be dragged into whatever illegal activities he might be involved in.”

Jean seemed to have disappeared completely.

“Where’s he got to now?” Asked Godfrey rhetorically.

“Gone off to hide no doubt” replied Cedric.

They sped up to a gallop scanning the horizon as they rode. They finally reached a small copse of trees where they finally stopped. Further on there was another large field of tall corn.

“My bet he’s hiding in that corn field somewhere” said Geoffrey.

“In which case it will take ages to find him” added Cedric.

A bird suddenly flew out from a tree causing Cedric to jump. Edgar laughed. “What’s up Cedric? Think he’s going to jump down on you?”

The subsequent laughter and jokes suddenly ceased as the group stopped moving around and raised their faces up slowly to look up into the boughs of the trees. There, crouched amongst the branches was Jean, quite well hidden by the leaves but visible enough for the group to see him.

Godfrey drew his sword. “Methinks you had better come down now Jean because if I have to come and get you, you will lack arms to climb again.”

Jean slowly climbed down and stood trembling slightly with a frightened look on his face.

“What’s wrong Jean? You look frightened and you are trembling. Did you think your wife had found out about your secret affairs at the castle?”

The four riders glanced at each other grinning.

Jean’s manner and face relaxed somewhat. “Yes my lords.”

“Ah, so you think she would send two castle guards and two knights to take you back to suffer her wrath?”

The relaxed posture disappeared instantly. “Well, I ...”

“Liar!” Shouted Edgar.

“Why did you run when you saw us?” Joined in Godfrey.

“I er ...”

“Enough of this” Edgar barked drawing his own sword.

Jean fell to the ground hunched over. “Please my lords. I have done nothing wrong. I may have been a bit foolish but ...”

The two knights dismounted and walked over to the trembling wretch. Edgar pulled him up and thrust him up against the tree pinning him back with his sword at his throat.

“Who did you go to see in the castle?”

“Just a lady my lord.”

“I don’t believe you. I ask again. Who did you go to see?”

“In God’s name, a lady my lord.”

“He isn’t listening to us” Godfrey added, mockingly. “Perhaps his ears are the wrong shape.” He placed his sword across Jean’s right ear.

Jean was now shaking visibly. “Please my lord, I tell the truth.”

The sword slid across Jean’s ear. He felt the burning cut of the blade and felt a warm wet liquid running down his cheek. “No, please, stop. They will kill my brother.”

The two knights looked at each other and then back at the trembling Jean.

“Go on” continued Edgar.

“They told me that if I didn’t do as they say they will cut off his head and send it to me in a bag.”

“And who are ‘they’?”

“Two men from a village on Lord Montgomery’s estate.”

The knights lowered their swords as Edgar spoke. “It is as we suspected then. Montgomery is behind this.” He turned back to Jean, who was now feeling his bloody ear.

“We need to know who these men are, which village they are from and most of all what they made you do.”

“Sires ..”

Godfrey lifted his sword and held it to Jean’s throat. “You will help us identify these men or I will end your miserable life now.”

“My Lords, I will identify them to you but I know not from which village they come. But please, what about my brother?”

“Regrettably for you we are not too concerned about your brother. It is the Lady Anna who is our greatest concern. What she has done for you people deserves more than being delivered into Montgomery’s clutches.” He lowered his sword once again. “Now tell us. What was the bundle you carried into the castle that evening and who did you go and see?”

Jean fell on his knees once again groveling at the feet of the two knights. “Please my lords I did not realize what I was doing I was just told to ...”

“Do what man? Come along. Our patience is near exhausted.”

“I was told to take some arrows to Harold’s lodgings in the castle and exchange three of his competition arrows for the ones I was given.”

Cedric entered the conversation. “A dastardly trick. That probably explains Harold’s apparent poor performance at the tournament. Three of his arrows were not true.”

“Even though we have a confession from this miserable wretch” joined in Godfrey, “we still need proof and a confession from his contact.” The knight turned back to Jean. “How did you manage to exchange the arrows without Harold knowing?”

“I bribed one of the attractive housemaids to use her charm to persuade him to take her to the local inn for a drink.”

“That’s true” added Geoffrey. “I remember them leaving the castle before these three arrived and returning after they had left.”

“Hm. Well, we can’t blame the wench. We have no choice but to track down the two Montgomery men.” Edgar said. Then, turning back to Jean. “Describe these two vile creatures.”

“One was a huge man with a big black beard ...”

“Will” stabbed Godfrey. “I always knew that giant was evil. You can see it in his eyes.” He turned subconsciously in an easterly direction towards Montgomery’s estate. “The other? What was he like?”

“He was more ordinary looking, about my height and build with a blue and yellow tunic. He was slim with short cropped brown hair. He had the appearance of a craftsman so I reckon it was he who made the arrows, as it was him who gave them to me.”

“How easy would it be to set up a meeting with this man?” Asked Edgar.

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“It may take a few days. We exchange messages under a rock down by the river boundary.”

“Do it.”

“What reason can I give?”

“You can say that someone suspects foul play at the tournament and is planning a night raid on one of the villages.”

“Isn’t that rather risky?”

“Idiot! We don’t intend to raid anything. We just need to apprehend the man and ...”

“Ask him a few questions” Godfrey added, grinning at his compatriot.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

“No you won’t. You will arrange a meeting with your contact or you will be meeting your maker instead.” The two knights sheathed their swords and mounted their horses.

“Come to the castle as soon as you have news.” Godfrey bent over and stared into Jean’s eyes. “And don’t leave it too long if you value your life or freedom.” They rode off with Cedric and Geoffrey following behind.

“We need to move fast Edgar.” Godfrey said. “There is not much time. God help Lady Anna if this ruse fails.”

8. Flight

Whether he had been dozing or not, he didn't know, but Henry's eyes suddenly flicked open and in the light of the candle, which had been lit, he could swear that the furniture and fittings had lost their worn look. He had just slid off the bed to investigate the furniture more closely and suddenly realized that the transfer had taken place; he was in the 12th century. He didn't hear the sobbing anymore but his heart started pounding as he thought about the beautiful young woman in the adjoining room, her plight and maybe how her fate hung on his next actions. He looked around for his clothes but then noticed that they had been replaced with a set consisting of a white shirt, a tunic and hose in dark green and a pair of brown shoes lying on a chair by the desk with a sword in a scabbard with belt leaning against it. It was a simple design with a leather handgrip and a straight cross-guard. He knew he had to move fast, so quickly dressed, belted up the sword and was about to pick up the candle from the bedside table when he became aware of the ring on his finger. He studied the silver jewelry with its inlaid crystal and remembered the advice that Alan had imparted to him. Fingering the ring for a few seconds he stepped over to the adjoining door, hesitated briefly then knocked gently turning the doorknob at the same time. He heard a quick intake of breath as he opened the door and entered. The occupant was obviously surprised by his entrance.

The woman was lying in the bed to the right of the door with a slightly fearful expression on her face. "Are you the man sent by Father Bernard to help me?" She asked hesitantly and nervously. "Are you Henry Longford?"

"Yes." Henry replied. "Yes, that's me, and I am here to take you to a place of sanctuary?"

"It will be dangerous with many risks, especially for you."

"I presume you are Lady Anna who I have been asked to help" he said, stepping over to sit on the bed beside her.

She responded by pulling herself up holding the bedclothes around her neck, so he immediately stood up again acknowledging her nervousness at him getting so close to her.

"I will be safe" she said, "but if you are caught you will be tortured and killed like all those who confront Lord Montgomery."

"I agreed to come and help you and don't intend to get caught."

"I appreciate that people are trying to help me but I would not want any of them to suffer on my account. You are on Lord Montgomery's estate and his men will spare no effort to track us down if they find out you have taken me."

Henry was a bit confused. Did this woman want his help or not? He wondered how he might console her and thought it would be appropriate to bring religion into it, even though he was an atheist. "I have God on my side and with his help I will deliver you from this Lord Monmery's clutches and help rectify the wrong doing that has been done to your father." He didn't know why he uttered the last phrase as it was his intention to return to his own time as soon as the prime mission had been achieved.

She relaxed a little and leant forward letting go the sheet to expose a v-necked night dress that offered a tempting glimpse of her cleavage. She sensed his gaze and pulled the sheet back up. "Where do you come from and when did you arrive?"

"It doesn't really matter where I come from but I arrived late last night from France. I know I should have been here two nights ago but I was delayed crossing the channel after receiving Father Bernard's note requesting my help."

"So the innkeeper knows you are here. He will try to stop us leaving."

"No, he doesn't know and fortunately he hadn't locked the door so I could get in without him knowing" Henry lied. "In case you are worried about having a strange man in your bedroom, let's just say that I am a scholar and traveller and have known Father Bernard for many years."

"Maybe that explains your strange dialect" she said looking at him, albeit with an element of suspicion. "How did you come to know Father Bernard?"

Henry was about to try and explain how he came to be persuaded to help her but couldn't think what to say and was also aware that they needed to leave the inn as quickly as possible so ignored her last question. She wasn't having that though, still a little wary of his presence and suspicious as to his true intentions.

"I still don't understand how you were persuaded to help me on such a dangerous mission."

"It's a long story of which we don't have time for right now. Let's just say that it was initiated by someone in your father's household."

"That must be Brother Hubert, who contacted Father Bernard" she responded, knowingly. "But I fear it might be too late. I am obliged to submit to Lord Montmery and his men are coming this day to take me back to his castle."

"Yes" Henry replied, "which is why we must hasten our departure before they arrive." He began to visualize a knighted swordsman barging in and running him through.

"You don't understand" she said. "My fate is sealed. I now belong to Lord Montmery and you should best go to save yourself. If I flee before he comes to collect me this morning he will think my father has taken me back and reneged on the agreement." She put her head in her hands. "Please, leave me. It is for the best."

"I can't do that" Henry said. "I agreed to help you escape from here and I cannot renege on my promise. All I can see is a woman in distress and it is my chivalrous duty to remove you from this threat to your happiness and future." He was wondering what had happened to this Father Bernard. "I thought Father Bernard was supposed to be here to explain where I should be taking you."

“He thought it best to leave before dawn just in case the landlord sees us leave. His presence would have compromised the plan; but he did give me a map and a suggestion on where we should go.”

“In that case My Lady, we really must be leaving at the first light of dawn, so please get dressed so that we can get a head start before Lord Montmery comes to collect you.”

She lifted her head and wiped her eyes. “Yes, I suppose so. Father Bernard and Brother Hubert were looking after me but now that they have departed, the landlord and landlady are responsible for me and will be making sure that I am here to be collected today. They may even try to stop us leaving.”

Henry got up from the bed. “Then we definitely need to make haste and make it appear that you have been abducted.” Then he had a thought. “I have an idea, so quickly, get dressed while I think this through.”

“But ...”

“No questions. Just do as I say, now.”

She hesitated until he sensed her meaning and returned to his own room to collect his sword. Whilst she was dressing, Henry started to think about constructing a fictitious self-profile to try and make himself appear untraceable: a complete stranger. Anna soon appeared in the doorway dressed in similar attire as to what he was wearing but still looking very attractive with her long blonde hair tied into a ponytail. Noting how much Henry was gazing at her she returned to her room to collect the knitted woolen bag she had brought with her.

“What now?” She asked. “Should I leave my other clothes behind?”

“No” replied Henry. “Anyone coming after us will be expecting you to be wearing the clothes you arrived in, so I suggest you put those on over the clothes Father Bernard left you then we can discard them once we have left the inn. Now, come with me.”

Once she had put the dress over the top of her tunic, Henry took her by the arm and led her towards the door but had a thought and returned to grab a couple of bed covers which he just about managed to stuff into the bulging bag. “They will probably come in handy” he said, as she watched him questioningly. Opening the door to the corridor he beckoned her to follow him along the corridor and started talking to her in a raised voice.

“De cette façon, madame.”

“You speak French?” She whispered. “But not so loud or you will wake the landlord.”

Henry was glad that he had kept up with his French, which proved to be useful when he made the occasional business trip to France. It also crossed his mind that this was another reason why he had been selected for this mission. As Alan had said to him: ‘You tick all the boxes’.

“That’s the intention” he replied, “and will hopefully confuse him. Oh, and pretend you are being taken against your will. I want him to think that you are being abducted.”

It worked. The next moment, as they reached the top of the stairs, the landlord stood at the bottom holding a rolling pin.

"What's going on? Who are you and where are you taking the lady?" His voice was angry and threatening.

Henry turned to Anna and whispered "excuse my next action." He grabbed her by the arm in the pretense of pulling her along. "*Allez wench*" he barked "*par ici*."

"Leave me be, you ruffian" Anna objected loudly, pretending to shake off Henry's grip on her arm.

The landlord started up the stairs. "How did you get in here? Who sent you? Lord Trellian?"

"Lord Trellian?" Henry mocked. "*Qui diable est que? Jamais entendu parler de l'homme.*" He continued in French saying that he had heard that a good looking wench was staying in the inn, so thought he would help himself. He said he could do with a handsome woman and was sure that her current owner would be able to find another just as attractive a woman."

At first the landlord looked aghast. "I don't know what you're saying but you can't take her. Lord Montmery will have your soul for the devil."

Henry played the game on. "*Seigneur qui? Mont Mary? C'est un drôle de nom.*" He laughed and then changed his tone to one of anger. "*Maintenant, hors de mon chemin.*"

The landlord didn't like that and started up the stairs. "Why don't you speak English? How did you get in?"

"*Par la fenêtre; the window.*" He gave the English translation in a fake French accent.

"But it was closed."

"*Pas à travers moi.*" Henry backed away slightly. This prompted the man to stop arguing and start ascending the stairs, which gave Henry his opportunity. The man's size was in Henry's favour so he lunged forward and kicked him hard in the chest. Caught off balance the landlord tried to save himself, but holding the rolling pin didn't give him time enough to stop himself falling. He tumbled backwards and hit his head on the bottom post. Henry and Anna stood there for a moment looking at his prostrate form.

Anna put her hand to her mouth. "Is he ... dead?"

Henry went to examine the man a bit warily, half expecting him to rise up, grab him by the lapels and smash his head against the post, but he was out cold. Henry moved closer and felt the man's pulse. Fortunately he seemed okay with not too much damage to his head. "Just concussed I think, but he will wake up with a headache in due course." He turned to Anna. "Now, let's get the hell out of here."

The commotion had alerted the landlord's wife who appeared at the top of the stairs in her nightgown. "Who are you?" She said, and then gasped when she saw her husband lying at the bottom of the stairs. "What have you done to my husband?"

“*Il va bien*” Henry said. “*Il vient de s’assommer sur le poteau d’escalier.*” He pointed to the stair post and slapped his head to indicate what happened. “*Mais excusez-nous, nous devons y aller.*”

“You can’t take the lady” she shouted, as Henry took Anna’s her arm again and pretended to drag her towards the inn door, darting briefly into the kitchen to grab some items of food left on the kitchen table and a couple of, fortunately full, leather drinking pouches. He managed to stuff the food in the bag but had to carry the pouches. They left the inn amid shouting from the landlady, who was now attending to her husband.

As they ventured out into the approaching dawn two conflicting images of the inn flashed through Henry’s mind; images that he hadn’t had time to absorb during the last half hour or so. He had hardly noticed as they made their way out of the inn, how new and bright the decor was compared to its appearance in the 21st century. He thought to himself that this was yet further confirmation that he had passed through the portal. Imagine his shock, though, when they stepped outside through the doorway. The scenery was completely different. Instead of rolling moors of mainly scrub and clumps of trees there was a forest with a wide dirt track running past the inn, which was set back from the track with a dirt courtyard in front, no doubt for parking carriages and horses. Henry stood there looking around at the completely changed environment but knew that the river lay somewhere opposite the inn, assuming that it was the same river he had heard when he was here in the 21st century. He stood there trying to decide whether to turn left or right along the track.

“What’s wrong?” Anna asked looking around. “Is someone coming?”

“No. I was just wondering whether we should turn left or right.”

“Ah, maybe I can help there. Whilst I was spending time with Father Bernard over the last two days, he pointed out a footpath not far from here that leads into the woods. It will take us to the river boundary between my father’s and Lord Montgomery’s estates. The land alongside the river can be difficult to traverse so it will not be easy for anyone to follow us, especially on horseback. This should give us time to study Father Bernard’s map.” She pulled a document out from her tunic “This is the map that Father Bernard gave me which shows the safest route through Lord Montgomery’s estate. We just need to turn right along the track”

“Good” Henry replied. “We can study that when we find a safe place to rest for the night.”

They hurried along the road and soon found an overgrown footpath track on the left through the trees.

“Down here?” Henry asked.

“Yes, this is it I think, and probably our best hope according to Father Bernard.”

They turned down the footpath which wound its way through the trees. At one point Henry considered clearing the path with his sword but thought better of it. It would only indicate to anyone searching for them which way they had gone.

“I’m glad we managed to get off the track quite quickly” Henry commented. “It is certainly too risky to say on the road in case Lord Montgomery and his men appear, or anyone else that might see us.”

“Yes,” Anna agreed. “We had better hurry. When the innkeeper wakes up he will certainly sound the alarm and may even come looking for us.”

“I think he might be out for some time.”

“What do think he will say when they come to collect me?”

“Well, I hope I convinced him that I was a complete stranger and nothing to do with your father. If Montgomery half suspected that your father was behind this we know where he would head straight away.”

“That is why on no account should we cross into my father's estate.”

“If he did approach your father he would probably be accused of severe negligence for allowing you to be kidnapped by a complete stranger. How do you think your father might react?”

“I dread to think, which is why he must not know what’s happened to me until we are safe.”

After a while, they stopped for a short rest and a drink from the pouches. It was a insipid ale that certainly didn’t match up to modern day beers, Henry thought, but at least it quenched his thirst. He was glad that he had managed to grab some provisions from the inn before leaving but eventually would have to find a village, hopefully friendly, that might be willing to help them. He suddenly noticed Anna was about to say something.

“Something wrong Lady Anna?”

”You can just call me Anna ... Henry.”

“So what are you thinking, Anna?”

“I was thinking that you seem very perceptive as to what is happening and knowledgeable about the background to my situation. Father Bernard must have provided you with a lot of information.”

“Yes, he was very helpful.”

“I must admit, though, that your appearance at the inn and our first meeting was a little unconventional and made me nervous, but as things now stand I do feel that I can trust you, even though I do find you rather strange.”

Henry laughed. Anna was right of course. He was a stranger in a strange situation. He really had no idea what their long term chances were with him in completely unfamiliar terrain surrounded by hostile forces and in a world centuries before his own. He had no plan other than to get a long way from the inn before Lord Montgomery’s men turned up to collect Anna.

“I think we had better get moving. We need to get as far away from here as possible and I agree that following the river as far as we can before it gets dark is probably our best bet.”

They carried on through the woods along a route that seemed to head in a south westerly direction and, fortunately, with the day warming up and a clear blue sky it was becoming easier to follow the path quite rapidly such that they were soon putting distance between them and the inn. Henry was praying that they weren't heading closer to the wolf's lair, so really needed to consult Father Bernard's map as soon as the opportunity arose. The more he thought about this whole enterprise the more ridiculous it seemed and he was beginning to have niggling regrets for agreeing to undertake it and wondering how soon he could place her in safe hands and get back to his own time, assuming that it was possible. A sudden thought prompted the next question but he did feel a bit foolish when he asked it. "Anna?"

"Yes?"

"Do you have any ... silver?"

She looked at him rather quizzically. "Yes, I do; but what about you? Surely you have the means of paying your way, considering the amount of travelling you do." There was an element of surprise in her voice. "How did you travel to the inn? Considering its remoteness I would have thought that you would have had a horse that we could have used to help our escape. In fact your appearance in the inn and what has happened since seems rather odd. You arrived, by some means, in the middle of the night two days later than expected, the reason for which you have already explained, with no means to pay for goods or services and, I would suggest, very dependent on Father Bernard's instructions. In fact this plan to rescue me appears to lack any real guidance other than Father Bernard's map." She stopped walking and looked at Henry with her beautiful but worried eyes. "I think it is time you told me more about how you met Father Bernard and became involved in my predicament."

"All I am prepared to say at the moment is that I was informed that Father Bernard would meet me when I arrived and provide me with instructions where to take you. That's all you need to know at present." He started walking again not sure how to reply or even what to say without raising more questions in her mind. He was saved when the ground started to slope down quite steeply, but he did turn around to check that she was alright. "I will tell you everything in due course, but at the moment we must move on and find somewhere safe where we can hide and rest. If we are caught, your life won't be much worth living and mine will come to an abrupt end."

She was visibly uncomfortable with the situation but followed on anyway, anxious to find out more about this Henry Longford.

For the next few hours they made good progress with little conversation and it proved fortuitous that Father Bernard had had the foresight to provide Anna with more suitable clothing, as travelling in a dress or robe would not have been practical. The ground continued to slope down getting steeper and rockier as though they were entering a valley, confirmed when Henry soon detected the sound of running water. That gave him some comfort. It was no doubt the river boundary that Anna had spoken of which meant that they were travelling in the right direction. Running water, apart

,
from being drinkable, would hopefully flow close to a village where they might be able purchase more provisions. He felt both relieved but still uneasy whilst they were still on Lord Montmery's estate. The last leg of the journey down to the valley floor was pretty tough going and by the time they reached the bottom they were both weary and tired. His guess was that it must sometime around mid-day so suggested they look about for a suitable place to rest and freshen up. They soon came across a fast flowing, tumbling river a few hundred yards in front of them and, although it was tempting to rest by it, Henry realized that it might be a bit exposed and risky, so concentrated on the area a little way back from the bank.

It wasn't long before they found a rocky limestone promontory surrounded at the base by gorse and tall bushes so he suggested they rest there whilst he investigated the surrounding area. The undergrowth at the foot of the promontory appeared quite dense as he approached it and he had to push the bushes aside to get closer.

"Take care, Henry" Anna called out.

He waved his arm in reassurance and on closer inspection found that the undergrowth concealed a small cave that appeared quite dry and well hidden. "Ideal" he said to himself and went back to rejoin Anna. "I've found a small cave that should be suitable to rest for a while. It appears to be well hidden."

"That's lucky" she responded. "But right now I need a drink and something to eat."

They wandered a short distance to find a grassy patch a little way back from the river where Henry put down the bag and pulled out the two bedcovers for them to sit on. "Please Anna, sit down."

"Very kind of you Henry." She lowered herself onto the cover that Henry had laid out. "Thankyou" she said. "But there is no need to wait upon me. You are not my servant." She smiled and sat down with her hands around her raised knees.

Henry sat alongside her and pulled over the bag to take out some of the bread, cheese and salted meat that he had hastily grabbed from the inn. "We need to dispose of your dress and other clothing that you wore when you arrived at the inn. The good thing is that our pursuers will be expecting you to be wearing them."

"Perhaps we should bury them."

As they sat eating and drinking, Anna noticed the ring on Henry's finger.

"That is a very unusual ring, Henry. It is so beautiful; the craftsmanship is excellent. Where did you get it?"

Henry lifted his hand up to show Anna, who gently fingered the ring.

"Oh, it was my mother's, but I don't actually know where she got it."

"It must be very valuable. Do take care you don't lose it as we move through the forest."

"No, I certainly won't."

He lowered his hand as they returned to eating.

"Gosh, I needed that" Henry commented as he started packing the bag back up when they had finished.

"Me too" she replied. After a slight pause she spoke again looking towards the river. "You said you were going to tell me about yourself and how you got involved with ... me."

"Yes I did; and where shall I begin?" Henry wasn't really sure how to start but knew that he would have to try and dream up some believable story, as it was likely that many more people would ask the same question. "I met Father Bernard some years ago whilst I was studying. We immediately struck up a close friendship and got to know each other very well: our interests, morals, sense of justice. We agreed that whenever the need arose we would call on each other for help. I haven't seen him much over the past years, being engaged in activities in France. Then, a couple of weeks ago I received a message from him asking for my help urgently for a very sensitive and secret task. Although I immediately accepted the assignment I didn't wholly understand what was involved or what the outcome was likely to be but I was more or less promised a handsome payment."

"That would be my father I am sure."

"I was informed that I would be undertaking a very chivalrous deed and helping a wronged noble lady in distress. He begged me to help as I was the only person in whom he had full confidence and trust. He said that he would provide me with some guidance and to meet him at the inn, where you were being held, well after dusk but left it to my knowledge and skills, which I have acquired over the years, to devise a rescue plan and take you to a place of safety. The four of us: you, me, Father Bernard and Brother Hubert are the only ones who know about this plan, and that's the way it must remain." He stopped there, hoping that would satisfy her curiosity for the time being, which it did.

"That gives me comfort, knowing how much faith Father Bernard has in you. Maybe, as we continue our journey you will tell me more about yourself, your family, your childhood and travel adventures. I think it best that we are completely open with each."

"Yes, I agree" he replied, hoping that he would be able to return to the 21st century before he had to tell her too many lies. He got up to his feet to stretch his legs, and sat down again. "Let's have a look the map that Father Bernard gave you so that we can get some idea of where we are headed and maybe get some idea of how long it might take, which may be difficult if the distances on the map are not to scale, which is likely."

Henry took a quick look at the document that Anna had handed to him. "It looks like we are headed in the right direction by following the river. We need to keep moving as much as possible, taking short rests only. If we are able to move at night so much the better but if it becomes difficult we will have to find suitable locations to rest with one of us maybe having to keep watch. Whatever route we take, we must try to

, avoid the main highways. Once we have finally reached Lord Geoffrey de Champ's estate or an alternative suitably safe refuge, hopefully you will be able to remain 'missing' until the situation has been resolved and then have you returned to your father."

It was late afternoon when they had finished reviewing the proposed route and discussing ideas on how they were going to procure enough food and drink for their journey. Following a day that had been pleasantly warm, Henry was relieved that with evening approaching it was still very mild, so hopefully they would get a good night's rest.

Henry got up off the ground and stretched. "I guess we will have to rough it tonight and sleep in the cave but first I need to stretch my legs a bit after sitting down for so long."

"I will come with you" Anna replied, getting up and shaking off the bed covers.

"Keep your ears and eyes alert" he warned needlessly. Although I doubt anyone will looking for us now at this late hour. There is a bit of food remaining which we can eat in the morning, but we will need to get some more from somewhere soon otherwise we will be going hungry."

They wandered back down to the river and stood staring at the crystal clear water bubbling over the gravel bed.

"The water looks potable: fast running and clear." Henry said, dipping his hand into the cool liquid. It was very inviting and he really fancied a dip to freshen up. *'Maybe there will be an opportunity for us tomorrow'* he thought, thinking about the young woman next to him and of her naked body in the water. He shook the thought from his head as they continued to wander along the bank. He slowly reached out his hand and took hold of hers. At first, she glanced at him in surprise but then seemed to accept this out of comfort rather than as an emotional link, which was just as well. He realized that he was enjoying her company and felt good being close to her but knew that he must avoid showing any signs of familiarity. He didn't want to end up in a situation he was unable extricate himself from.

As dusk started to descend he suggested that they get back to the cave before it got too dark to settle down for the night. "We can fill the containers with water from the river in the morning before we move on."

"Yes, at least it will be nice and cool" Anna agreed.

Fortunately the evening remained mild, so they were looking forward to spending a restful night safe in the cavern hidden behind the bushes and shrubs. Henry was glad that he had the foresight to grab the blankets from the inn before they departed which he now laid them out for them to lie on beside each other. Before they settled down, however, Henry dug a shallow pit with the help of his sword to bury Anna's clothes as they agreed. They lay there listening to the background gurgling of the river in the distance, talking quietly and waiting for sleep to come.

‘
“I wonder if Montgomery or his men turned up to collect you. It seems odd that here has been no indication that anyone has come looking for us.”

“Perhaps they just rode straight back to report my ‘abduction’ to Lord Montgomery”. Anna replied. “In which case, he will certainly be launching a major search for us tomorrow.”

As he lay there close to Anna, Henry found the experience quite tormenting but soon fell asleep after their tiring journey through the forest. At some point in the night he awoke to feel her snuggling closer to him as the temperature dropped a few degrees, so he turned so that she could lie in his arms. His body came alive once again so he was relieved when sleep finally returned.

.....

It was late morning when a group of four knights rode up to the inn. Their leader was tall, slim, with an athletic build, short black hair and a well-trimmed beard. He was dressed completely in black and wore black leather gloves. He dismounted, walked up to the inn door and tried to open it. Finding it locked he hammered on it with his right fist.

“Open the door landlord; we have come to escort the Lady Anna to his lordship” he shouted. Receiving no response he hammered harder. “Open up now landlord, Lord Montgomery doesn’t like to be kept waiting.”

A shuffling of feet from inside the building was followed by the drawing back of bolts at the top and bottom of the old wooden door and the turning of a key. The knight pushed open the door nearly knocking over the short plump woman on the other side. “Took your time madam. Where’s your husband?” He noticed she was shaking slightly and looked very nervous.

“He .. he’s in the kitchen sir but ...”

The knight brushed past her as she finished what she was saying.

“... he’s recovering from an attack and a fall.”

The black knight continued towards the kitchen ignoring her statement. “What are you on about madam?” He found the landlord sitting at the table nursing a gash on his head with a blood soaked cloth. “What’s this? Your wife had a go at you?”

“Not exactly sir” he muttered quietly.

“Is the lady ready to leave? Where is she?”

“Well ...” the landlord started nervously.

“Well what? Do I have to go and get her myself?” He turned around to the landlord’s wife who had followed him into the kitchen. “Go fetch the Lady Anna” he ordered.

The landlord’s wife shrunk back, shaking. “She ... she isn’t here sir.”

The knight’s expression took on a thunderous look as he turned to face the landlord. “Get up” he shouted.

The landlord rose unsteadily to his feet.

“What does she mean ‘She isn’t here’?”

The landlord was struggling to find what to say. “She was ... a man ...”

The knight strode around the table to grab the landlord by the neck with his left gloved hand. “Where is she? What man? Tell me before I silence you permanently.”

The landlord was half choking as he responded. “A man ... well dressed ... abducted her.”

“What? What are you saying?” He tightened his grip on the now red-faced landlord’s neck.

“He came down the stairs with her. I tried to stop him but he was too quick for me and knocked me down the stairs where I hit my head on the post and lost consciousness. When I came to, my wife told me he had taken some supplies and made off with the Lady.”

“What did this man look like?”

“I think he was in his thirties and dressed in a green doublet and hose. He had short hair and was clean shaven.”

“You were specifically instructed not to provide lodging for anyone whilst the Lady Anna was staying here.”

“I didn’t know he was staying here and don’t know how he got in.”

“How could you not know? Who brought the lady?”

“She was accompanied by four knights and a monk.”

“That Brother Hubert no doubt” he muttered.

“The knights then returned home and the monk stayed with her.”

“Don’t tell me – the monk abducted her in disguise.” The knight mocked.

“No sir. Another monk, more senior I think, turned up later and joined the two of them. They addressed him as Father Bernard and he spent two days talking with the Lady.”

“Plotting her so called abduction no doubt.” He loosened his grip on the landlord’s neck. “Go on.”

“Then the monk called Brother Hubert took ill, so the two of them stayed until the early hours of this morning when they departed before dawn, but I was unaware that they had left. Then I heard someone shouting and this man appeared at the top of the stairs with the Lady. I think he was French as he didn’t speak much English and the Lady appeared that she was being taken against her will.”

“How long ago was this?”

“Several hours my lord. They left as dawn was breaking.”

“Which way did they ride off?”

“They didn’t. They were on foot and headed down the track: south.”

“Was this ‘green’ man armed?”

“Yes sir.”

The knight released his grip, sat down at the table and stroked his beard, his eyes looking down. “Hm; they can’t have got far.” His eyes then came up to meet the

landlord's again. "Just a minute; from what you are telling me it sounds as though she arrived here earlier than planned."

"That she did sir. They brought her here on the 17th. I don't know why you didn't come to collect her before."

"The knight immediately rose to his feet. "What? Then why in God's name didn't you notify us?" He didn't give the landlord chance to reply but struck him hard across the face knocking the poor man to the ground. "Imbecile. Think yourself lucky that it is me that has come to collect the Lady and not his Lordship otherwise you would be a dead man."

The knight stormed out of the inn leaving the landlord's wife to help her husband up with blood all over his face. "It seems that she has been abducted by a young 'green' Frenchman" he growled to his compatriots when he rejoined them.

The others glanced at one another with questionable looks on their faces.

"Don't ask me how" the knight continued but Montmery will not be happy."

"Where have they gone, Guy?" One of the others asked.

"They must be four to five hours ahead of us but apparently on foot, so we should have a good chance of catching them. They probably headed into the forest."

"Well let's hope we can find them" stated another.

"We had better; so let's fan out but keep within earshot of each other as he is armed. If we fail to find them, we will meet back here before dusk and continue the search in the morning."

The four of them cantered down the track when one of them found the footpath that Henry and Anna had taken a several hours prior.

"There is a well-trodden track here Guy" called out one of the men.

"Right; two of you take that path and see if you can find any trace of their passage. You, Michael, come with me and we will check further down the road."

As the two of them moved off, Guy muttered to himself "Those damn monks".

9. The River

Brilliant rays of sunshine stabbing across the cave entrance greeted him when Henry woke and ventured to step outside the following morning. Anna had rolled over with her back to him so that he managed to get up without disturbing her. Automatically he lifted his arm to glance at his watch, then realized that he didn't have it on. *'Just as well'* he thought. *'It would have landed me in real trouble.'* He had to accept that the sun's movement would have to suffice for estimating the time of day, hoping that they didn't have too much cloud; not that knowing the time was important but more as a guide to their direction of travel. He stepped out of the cave and through the shrubbery to warm himself in the morning sun and, quickly checking that Anna was still asleep, wandered down the stream to throw some fresh, cold water on his face. Without really thinking he also swallowed a few mouthfuls from his cupped hands. It tasted so fresh and cool but at the back of his mind he hoped that it hadn't been polluted further upstream. He thought momentarily about stripping off to freshen up his whole body in the cold water but something made him freeze. He suddenly became alert, feeling exposed and crept away from the bank into the under-growth listening. There! A horse! It was the sound of a horse whinnying. He couldn't make out exactly where it was coming from but it was certainly high up above the valley floor. He hurried back towards the cave and heard more horses and men shouting. *'Must be Lord Montgomery's men'* he thought and for the first time felt threatened. Up until now it had all seemed unrealistic and a bit of a game; but now a feeling of uncertainty took hold of him as he imagined being run through by a sword and dying in a world a thousand years before his own. He quickly stepped back into the cave where Anna was stirring. She opened her eyes and slowly sat up.

"Henry? Where ..."

"Shush!" he whispered. "There are some men on horseback in the forest up above us." She clasped her hand to her mouth and gasped. Henry continued. "It must be Montgomery's men looking for us. I'm surprised that they have taken so long to search the area. They must have given up yesterday and started out again early this morning."

"The innkeeper's wife" Anna retorted. "She must have told them which way we went."

"Possibly" Henry replied. "But hopefully their statements will exonerate your father from any responsibility for your disappearance and will convince Lord Montgomery that you have most likely been abducted by a complete stranger."

She nodded. "I hope you're right." A smile spread across her face.

"What are you smiling for?"

"Well, so far my 'abduction' as you say has not been an unpleasant experience."

Shouting from somewhere above brought their attention back to their predicament. The shouting was accompanied by the sound of horses and a lot of commotion. Gradually the noise of the search party became fainter, which suggested that the party had probably moved on.

After what he considered a suitable delay Henry was about to venture out of the cave when he heard the cracking of twigs and the sound of someone coming down the bank. There were no voices but he still moved back close to Anna. "There's someone coming down to investigate" he whispered. "I can't hear any voices so let's hope that it's a solitary person and that the rest of the group has moved on to continue the search."

A thump in the undergrowth indicated that the investigator had just jumped down from the embankment. They could hear him moving about not far from their hiding place. Henry stepped over to where they had been sleeping to retrieve his sword, hoping that he wouldn't have to use it. He didn't relish the thought of maybe having to fight to the death and ending up possibly killing the man, unless of course he was the one who got killed. He returned his attention back to the cave entrance and thought he could hear the man moving towards the river. Henry and Anna ventured closer to the mouth of the cave and peered through the shrubs and undergrowth screening the cave entrance. The man was now standing at the edge of the river looking about. Slowly he turned round to look back to where he had just descended and was obviously scanning the embankment until he seemed to focus on the undergrowth screening the cave entrance. He now appeared to be staring straight at them. Raising his head to study the limestone promontory he was about to walk towards it but had second thoughts and turned to crouch down to quench his thirst from the river. He obviously found it as refreshing as Henry did. For a moment Henry felt relieved but then his heart sank again as the man got up, turned around once again and started walking towards the cave. He no doubt had the same thought that there might be a hiding place behind the greenery. The next action caught Henry completely by surprise and, on reflection, must have been a diversionary tactic on her part. Anna had put her cloak on and slid past Henry quickly making her way to the left away from the cave entrance.

The man, a soldier from his dress Henry thought, soon noticed her with long hair flowing over the cloak and shouted. "Hey. You. Stop."

She ignored him and moved quickly towards the river, the man immediately changing course to head her off. With his attention on her and the background sound of the river Henry took the opportunity to slip out to get behind him. With Anna ignoring her pursuer calling for her to stop, Henry moved as fast and as quietly as he could with sword in hand. The man also had a sword at his waist but obviously didn't consider it necessary to draw it to capture the woman. Anna was now nearly at the water's edge with the soldier very close behind her and Henry steadily closing the gap.

"Come here you wench" the soldier was saying "or I'll teach you a lesson when I get you". Perhaps he didn't realize that she was Anna Trellian. He had his arms out now and was on the verge of grabbing her on the bank when he must have heard or sensed something behind him because he swiveled round in time to see Henry

approaching him. He quickly drew his sword and immediately executed a lunge which Henry easily parried. The fight did not last long as the soldier was outmaneuvered by Henry's polished skills. Although his opponent would have had no hesitation in killing him, Henry could not bring himself to actually kill this man so he executed various feint attacks, ripostes and counter-parries because Henry couldn't help notice Anna searching for something in the river. The next moment she stood up with a sizeable rock in her hand and approached the soldier from behind waiting for the opportunity to whack him on the head, as fortunately he wasn't wearing his helmet. She soon had the opportunity and brought it down hard whereupon he fell face down into the river. Henry pulled him out before he drowned, assuming he wasn't already dead of course. Anna had a similar thought.

"Have I killed him?"

Henry bent down and found a pulse. "No, just out cold." He got up and started to pull him away from the river. "Let's get him into the cave and tie him up."

Anna helped carry the man back to the cave where they stripped him of his armour and top clothing so that he could dry out.

"Looks like we got a bit wet ourselves" Henry said looking at the lower part of their hoses and shoes. "We will have to dry them at the earliest opportunity but for now the sooner we get away from this area the better."

"Yes" Anna agreed, brushing her hair away from her face.

She tore some pieces of cloth from one of the bedcovers to bind him hand and foot and gag him. Henry suggested they blindfold him as well.

"What if no one ever finds him?" Anna postulated.

"If he's at all clever he should be able to escape from his bonds" Henry retorted. "Meanwhile I'll check to see if he has left his horse up on the ridge. Sooner or later the others will miss him and likely to come back to look for him."

Henry climbed up the bank and found the man's horse tethered to a tree but was in two minds whether to take it or release it, hoping that it might find its way back to join the others. He untied the animal and gave it a smack on the rump. It didn't move. Anna made up his mind for him when she called up from below the bank.

"Let's take the horse Henry, we might need it and we can always let it go later. If we leave it here the rest of the group will find it and likely to discover their colleague, who will tell them that we can't be far away. Also, if the man does manage to release his bonds he will immediately ride off to find them and bring them back."

Henry descended the bank again to rejoin Anna. "What if we cross the river and follow the bank on the other side for a bit?"

"No, that's my father's estate land and we can't be seen there as you well know. I think our best is to head for the Abbey of Montraie to the south east which Father Bernard included on his map. We should have a good chance of finding temporary sanctuary there."

Henry pondered the situation. "Then what?"

‘ “We head for Geoffrey de Champ’s estate as suggested. Hopefully Sir Geoffrey will be willing to hide us long enough for my father to find out how Lord Montmery won the contest.”

“What if he is unwilling to give us sanctuary or we can’t prove that Lord Montmery cheated?”

“Then I’m not really sure what we can do.”

Henry had a thought. “To give us more time we could always sail to France; unless ...?”

“Unless what?”

“There is somewhere else we can go in this country, far enough away until investigations have been thoroughly carried out.”

“No” she replied firmly. “That is not a good idea. We have to stay near to help clear this up and prove conclusively what I suspect; and I will do that with or without your help.”

Henry was taken aback with her strong will and determination. “I fully understand your concerns Anna, so we will continue with the current plan and gamble on Sir Geoffrey’s goodwill but we do need to anticipate which direction our pursuers might have taken. It depends on what the landlord of the inn told them. If he believed that I was a French opportunist just abducting you for my own pleasure, isn’t it likely that I would take you to the coast and across the channel?”

She thought about that. “Yes, I suppose you might be right.”

“In that case they will no doubt be ahead of us so it might be reasonably safe to make our way to the monastery as already suggested.”

They glanced at the map again.

“It looks like we have to follow the river until we reach a disused bridge then head south east, but that will mean cutting across two major roads that head south.”

“We’ll just have to be careful when we reach them; so let’s get all our kit onto the horse and be on our way.”

They gathered up all their belongings into Anna’s bag, checked on the still unconscious soldier and climbed back up the bank where the horse was still waiting.

“It does get fairly rocky further down so we may have to leave the horse at some point” Anna commented as Henry was tying the bag to the saddle.

“We’ll just use the horse for as long as we can then” he replied, as he helped her to mount the horse and started to lead them along the track.

“Aren’t you mounting up?” She said. “We won’t get far with you walking.”

Now he was in a quandary. He had never ridden horse before.

“I ... I am not very good with horses” he replied with embarrassment.

“Then you must have found travelling very difficult and, I suppose, explains why you didn’t arrive at the inn on horseback. So I have to assume that Father Bernard must have brought you sometime during the night. However, Henry Longford, you had better start getting on with them otherwise you are going to find life very difficult

around here.” She moved herself forward on the saddle. “You had better get up behind me.”

Henry they clambered up behind her and they moved off through the woods parallel to the river, following a gradual ascent of the land. As the terrain became more rocky and uneven it became steadily more difficult to guide the horse, as Anna predicted. They had been on the point of contemplating leaving the horse behind when Henry detected a faint roaring sound. “What’s that?”

“Ah, it must be the waterfall.”

“A waterfall?”

“Yes, quite an impressive one. It’s a beautiful and tranquil place to visit but can be rather hazardous especially following heavy rain.”

The roaring increased as they continued to follow the river until they eventually found a narrow track through the bushes sloping down towards the river. Fortunately it was wide and safe enough to take the horse where they finally came to a stop in a small clearing beneath a canopy of trees.

“Ah, this looks like a good place to leave the horse” Henry suggested, as he dismounted and helped Anna off the horse. “It shouldn’t be seen in here.” He tied it up near some bushes, which it began to nibble. “At least it has found some food, something we’ll have to do soon as well.” He untied the bag from the saddle and threw it over his shoulder. “Right, let’s make our way down there to freshen up in that water and finish off the food; there is still a little remaining.”

The descent to the river level was slow progress due to loose rocks and soil but they shortly found a rocky outcrop not far from the waterfall and which overlooked a large pool into which the water was cascading. Henry estimated that the waterfall itself was about six metres high with a curtain of water about six metres across. Always on the lookout for potential hiding places he wondered whether there might be a hidden cavern behind the water so, whilst Anna was unpacking the bag, he decided to investigate before they settled down. Edging his way around to the waterfall he managed to negotiate some slippery rocks before reaching the curtain of water which he found that he could just about squeeze behind without getting too wet. He was encouraged to find a deep alcove well hidden by the water, reasonably dry and what seemed a perfect place to hide, except from someone equally inquisitive as him. He rejoined Anna to tell her the good news, observing that the sun bathed the area around the pool in warm rays and that the tree canopy above also appeared to mask the outcrop. The next minute they were both standing staring at the pool longingly.

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” Henry said, staring at the water.

“Yes” Anna replied. “And what would I give for a bathe in there.”

For a moment they both stood there in silence with Henry now thinking that this was no time for modesty. “Um, are you ... up for it?”

“I’m dying to”.

“Do you want to go first? One of us must keep watch and listen out in case Montmery’s men turn up.”

Anna pulled one of the blankets from the bag. "Aren't you going to turn round?"

"Sure" Henry replied turning away from the water.

"You won't peek will you?" Anna stated.

Henry laughed. "Trust me." He heard her undressing and then slip into the water before turning round to see her swimming around the pool with glimpses of her naked body moving through the clear water which began to arouse feelings in his body. After a few minutes she swam to the edge and, still immersed in the water, asked Henry to pass her the blanket and turn around again, which he did.

Now it was his turn. He helped her out as she held the blanket wrapped around her body and then started to undress. She also turned around but that didn't bother him particularly. The cool water was so welcoming and he wasn't really aware of how long he was swimming around until she called out to him.

"Hadn't you better be coming out now Henry ... just in case?"

Henry swam to the edge where Anna was waiting with the other blanket. They sat there together wrapped in their blankets in the warm sun discussing the idyllic surroundings and the rest of their journey. After a period of silence Anna took Henry's hand.

"I must thank you for risking your life to help me even though we don't know how this is going to end and I will always be grateful for your efforts and selflessness"

"We could still yet come unstuck with Montmery's men scouring the countryside. Anyway, who's to say I won't strike up a bargain with him and trade you in for ..."

Anna gave him a sudden hard look, which quickly melted away. "You wouldn't do that because you have already done so much to help me. Besides, Lord Montmery would still execute you for what you have done. You have humiliated him." She looked away from Henry. "I also trust and believe you to be honourable and ... I like you."

"Thanks. I like you too and am glad I took the risk in taking up this assignment."

"Much can happen yet." She paused in thought. "Do you think we will be successful?"

"I hope so otherwise I'll die in the attempt."

She leaned against him. "Don't say that. I could never forgive myself if that happened and that all this would have been to no avail. Anyway, if you are killed I will probably kill myself."

They looked at each other. Through the blankets around their bodies Henry felt the warmth of hers against his own and thought back to the painting in the inn and his growing feelings for this lovely woman. This was getting too much. He got up and, with the blanket wrapped about him, walked towards the edge of the rock to stare at the tumbling water wondering how this was going to end.

"What's wrong?" She asked. "Have I said something to upset you? I know the church forbids one to take one's own life, but ..."

'
"No. You haven't said anything. It's just that ..." He couldn't think what to say and struggled for words. He didn't want to go as far as saying that he was falling in love with her, when it could be just infatuation with her image. After all he didn't really know her and, besides, the situation would be untenable. He garbled out a response that seemed a bit pointless on reflection. "Maybe I've been rather hasty in accepting this assignment in rescuing you and exposing us to a potentially perilous situation." He glanced absent mindedly at the waterfall, his eyes following the flow of the water downstream but with that nagging feeling that the days ahead were going to be particularly challenging. Lord Montgomery was no fool. He would be pulling out all stops to get his prize and revenge. Henry also knew that he would do the same if he were in Montgomery's shoes. Hearing Anna rise from her sitting position and coming up behind him, he started to turn around as she touched him on the shoulder.

"I think I know what ails you" she murmured in his ear.

He turned his head, noticing that she was holding the blanket around her neck with her free arm. "What?"

"I think you" She never got to finish as the faint sound of horses high above reached their ears. They both turned simultaneously and looked up into the trees.

"I'm confident that they can't to see us from up there but they are sure to find the horse and come to investigate." Henry said.

"What do we do now?" She looked about searching for a place to hide. "It appears we are trapped down here." She got up and rushed forward towards her pile of clothes. "Quickly we must get dressed."

"No time for that" Henry said as he also rose to his feet. He grabbed his own clothes, took hers, stuffed them into the bag and slung it over his shoulder. "Follow me, but be very careful. Some of the rocks are quite slippery."

Hastily they edged their way towards the waterfall holding the blankets around their necks. Henry took Anna's free hand to help her. A couple of times she nearly slipped but Henry managed to save her from falling. Once they reached the alcove they quickly moved to the back and listened.

"Lucky you found this" Anna whispered.

"A stroke of luck" he whispered back. "Let's hope they don't have the same thought that I had."

Anna grabbed his arm when they heard the sound of voices and men moving through the trees. They stood there with their backs to the recess watching the rushing water in front of them and hearing the voices getting closer. There was someone shouting which was now becoming quite clear. Two men at least did not seem that far away from the river. One had a deep harsh voice with an obvious air of authority.

"If the horse got that far down they must be around here somewhere. You can't tell me that the animal wandered down that path on its own just to get some food."

"Maybe they've moved on and left the horse" the reply was heard.

"Why do that? They could get further on a horse."

'
"Yes, but the terrain from here on is too rocky and uneven for a horse to traverse so I suggest that they probably continued on foot and just left it here to find its own way back. After all, it's not even tethered."

"I'm not asking for your opinion" came a barked reply. "And I had noticed that the horse was not tethered."

Henry looked at Anna, with his eyebrows raised, and mouthed the word 'him?'.

She understood what he meant and nodded in response, moving closer.

Montgomery's voice bellowed again. "When I catch them I'll torture that infidel until he begs for death. And as for the wench ... well, I have other plans for her that'll make her regret running from me." A rock was tossed into the water making a big splash.

"Ralph." Lord Montgomery shouted.

"Yes my Lord?"

"Get word to our spies in Trellian's estate to find out if they have returned to her father's castle. God help him if he has reneged on our deal."

"Yes my Lord. But ..."

"What!"

"If what the innkeeper says is true then the Frenchman has likely to have taken her somewhere other than her father's estate."

"If that is so, then we will be unable to accuse Trellian of going back on the agreement." Montgomery stabbed back. "But it there is also the possibility that he has taken her there and collected a ransom in the process, then I will be able to demand a lot more than just his daughter." An evil laugh was followed by another rock in the water and the sound of more boots.

Anna stared at Henry in horror. They moved back as far as they could into the cave, hoping even more that none of the party would decide to investigate the waterfall. Henry eyed his sword lying on the ground wondering if this was going to be the end of the adventure and their lives.

"There's no sign or evidence that they are or have been here" someone shouted. "They must have long gone."

The crunching of many boots trampling around searching for them continued for a while longer until, finally, the sound of retreating voices could now be heard. Henry and Anna looked at each other with a sense of relief that must have showed on both their faces. Anna's long blonde hair, which had got wet from the waterfall, hung about her as she looked into his eyes. Without really thinking, he put his free arm around her waist, pulled her towards him and kissed her, releasing some of the passion that had built up. She pulled away, glared at him and seemed about to say something.

"I .. I'm sorry," I stammered. "I couldn't help it. I ..."

"Don't say anymore" she interrupted sharply and looked past him at the water curtain. "Is it safe to go out? I'm getting a bit cold."

Henry moved forward to peer through the water but couldn't see anyone. "I think they've moved off but let's leave it a few more minutes."

They stood there holding their blankets around their bodies in silence with Henry feeling embarrassed at his impulsiveness. Anna was looking past him at the falling water. Henry now felt that he had deeply offended her or maybe worse.

"Look, Anna" he finally said. "I'm really sorry about what I did just now. It was unforgivable. I didn't mean to. It just happened. It .. I .."

She turned her head to face him. "It doesn't matter. I was just ... taken by surprise. I didn't expect"

Henry changed the subject. "They appear to have moved off, so let's get out of here and get dressed. We ought to be getting on our way before it gets dark."

As Anna was also fighting for the right words to say, he thought it best to make no more reference to the incident.

Picking up the bag Henry stepped closer to the waterfall to provide a better of the area. As he peeked out around the curtain of water, carefully looking about, some small birds flew down to the river's edge and, apart from the roar of the water and birdsong, it was quiet. He ventured further out until the waterfall was behind him and stood for a couple of minutes looking around again before returning to rejoin Anna, where he helped her back to the outcrop where they put on their clothes. Once again Henry respected Anna's privacy whilst she dressed. Their shoes and hoses had fortunately dried in the sun.

Henry started walking towards the river bank. "I'll just fill up the containers with water" he called back.

"A good idea" Anna replied, tying her hair back into a pony tail to keep it off her face.

Having filled the vessels with fresh water he returned to gather up their supplies and stuff them in the bag before they headed back up the path to where the horse had been tethered. The animal was gone, as expected. They rejoined the track and headed on down the river always alert for any sound or sight of movement.

"Are there any safe villages near the river where we might be able to procure some more food and drink?" Henry asked as they walked. "You said you were reasonably familiar with the area."

"Not far from an old wooden bridge over the river there is a village which is believed to be sympathetic to my father, but we still have to be careful. Once we reach the outskirts we are best then to turn south east and head for the abbey, but we will not reach it before nightfall and probably not even the day after, so we will have to seek a couple of places to rest."

"I just hope that the abbey will be welcoming to a couple of fugitives."

"I believe they will be. After all, the abbeys have reputations for welcoming travellers and, besides, neither the abbot nor the monks are well disposed towards Lord Montmery. I am sure they will be willing to hide us for as long as is safe."

"Well, we may have just about enough water and I just hope we can find something to eat, but I'm sure we can put up with a bit of hunger."

Henry stopped to pull out the map again. "Father Bernard's suggested route takes us north of Lord Montmery's castle and not far from another village which I guess it will be best to avoid. If we are seen by any of the inhabitants, and I am sure there will be a spy amongst them, our presence will be reported."

"Yes, I am sure."

Henry thought about hunting or fishing, but discounted both as they had no way of cooking anything he caught and he didn't fancy eating raw fish or meat; they certainly didn't want to try and exist on berries for the next two days. They carried on walking, mainly in silence so as to be constantly on the alert but finally succumbed to weariness and sort out a suitably secluded location away from the river to rest for the night. Finishing off what little food remained, they pulled out their blankets to lie on and hopefully grab some sleep. Henry awoke briefly during the night with Anna snuggled up to him for warmth, but feeling tired, and wary of making any further advances, drew her closer and let sleep take over again.

10. The Forest

Incredibly, the weather was still holding up, as another good day welcomed them with the early morning sunshine streaming through the branches of the trees. Henry lay there for a while with Anna's head still lying across his shoulder facing him, thinking how idyllic it all seemed laying out in the forest away from the stress and pace of the twenty first century and with a beautiful woman in his arms. He also thought how lucky they were that the warm weather had continued. Then, less optimistic thoughts began to cloud his mind as he pondered their predicament and whether he would manage to escort Anna to safety. Whenever he met with a problem in his previous professional life he just used to move it to stew at the back of his mind until the solution suddenly popped up. Unfortunately he didn't now have that luxury and needed to develop instant solutions to problems as they arose. The map provided by Father Bernard was fairly basic and he was partially reliant on Anna's knowledge of the area: not a good situation. He certainly felt uncomfortable knowing neither where they were nor the distance to the monastery and the estate of this guy de Champ. The same thought kept running through his mind *'Had he been too hasty in accepting this assignment which was threatening to put his own life in peril'*. Anna's soft voice interrupted his gloomy thoughts.

"What is the matter Henry? You look worried again."

He turned his head to look into her beautiful eyes. "Oh, I didn't know you were awake."

"I haven't long been awake but then noticed the strained look on your face. I think maybe you are concerned that we might not be successful."

"You are right there" he replied. "I am a complete stranger to this area and being compelled to live like a fugitive. It is not a position I like to find myself in. We seem to be feeling our way forward, if you know what I mean, whereas I normally have everything planned out."

She raised herself up on her elbow and stroked his arm with her free hand.

"I am sure everything will end well. God is looking after us and my father has many true friends who I am sure will do their best to guide us to safety. The monks in the abbey will, I am sure, get word to people who will help us to avoid Lord Montmery." She got up, brushed and straightened her clothes. "But now I think we had better move on and try to get to the abbey as quickly as possible."

Henry agreed. They packed the blankets back into the bag and made their way back to the river where they freshened up in the cool water and refilled the containers before continuing their journey shadowing the river. As Anna had warned, the terrain was not easy and as they scrambled over rocks and tree roots along the edge of the river they were only thankful that the weather was holding out. Several times they took

cover when sounds of cracking twigs were heard but soon realized that it was probably deer or wild boar, which they caught sight of on several occasions.

"I don't think I have ever seen wild boar" Henry said, watching a beast scurrying off.

"We often go hunting for them" Anna replied. "It's really exciting. You should try it sometime."

"Perhaps I will before I return to" He stopped before finishing what he was about to say and changed the subject quickly. "The place must be teeming with them."

Anna, however, picked up on it. "Return to where?"

"Back to more familiar surroundings" he replied hastily.

"And where might that be for you with all the travelling you have done?"

"Mainly cities and towns" he replied.

"I'm not sure whether I would like to live in a city; I love the countryside too much. You must tell me more about the many places you have visited and I am still anxious to know more about you and your life."

"It's a long story" Henry replied, thinking again about his underlying desire to return to his own time once the mission, however it ended up, was complete. That was one reason why he felt that he must suppress his creeping desire for her and try to keep his distance. Hopefully, once he had helped her out of this dilemma, she could be introduced to some wealthy landowner who might take her for his bride and allow him to return to his own time.

Anna was still intent on asking him about his past. "You could tell me more about yourself now. We have plenty of time."

"I will soon enough" he replied, "but not now, Anna."

Fortunately she let it drop.

Around about midday they came across an overgrown track that seemed to run east-west. Where it met the river at the western end there were the remains of an old wooden bridge that appeared to have been systematically demolished. They stopped to listen for the sound of horses or other human activity but heard only birds and other forest sounds. Anna looked a little puzzled.

"Problem?" Henry ventured to ask.

"Yes" she replied slowly. "The village cannot be far from here, yet I neither see nor hear any activity. It is so quiet. The village itself lies close to the highway that runs from the inn to Lord Montmery's castle but there is also this route from the village that used to cross the river here; but all I now see is a wrecked bridge and an overgrown track. Something is not right."

With Anna sensing that something was amiss, Henry was pondering their next course of action. "I know that Father Bernard suggested that this is where we move away from the river but dare we continue along this track? Our progress through the forest is very slow and hasn't been easy, but I guess if we keep alert we can be ready to dive into the undergrowth should we need to."

Anna was also looking along the track. "After we have passed the village and crossed the highway from the inn to Lord Montgomery's castle we need to continue south east to reach the highway from the inn to the abbey." She started off along the track. "I agree though that we should be safe enough if we keep close to the edge, so let's get going."

Henry joined her as she started walking in the direction of the village checking up and down the track but not really expecting to see anyone. After about an hour Henry noticed that it seemed brighter in the distance as though the forest canopy was getting thinner. He pointed this out to Anna who agreed that it was probably where the forest had been thinned out around the village to which they were now headed.

It was probably a good half hour later that they heard a faint rumbling sound that certainly wasn't thunder. With haste, they scrambled into trees and made their way as far as possible from the track where they could find cover. It was not a moment too soon. The rumble grew louder and they soon heard, more than saw, the sound of a group of horse riders galloping past their hiding place and headed in the direction of the village. This prompted Henry and Anna to revert to moving through the forest and away from the track in case the horsemen decided to come back.

"Where did they come from?" Henry asked, not expecting a reply.

"It's probably the search party looking for us" Anna replied. "They must have come through the forest. We really must be careful."

Their progress was slow but eventually, towards late afternoon, they saw the first signs of a human presence. However, the signs were not that encouraging. They could see sections of fencing that had been demolished along with abandoned fields, now overgrown with shrubs and tree saplings.

Anna began to get uneasy. "Something is definitely wrong" she murmured audibly. "I know this village from my childhood and at this time of the day there would normally be people out in the fields working. But now it seems as though they've all gone."

"It certainly looks deserted" Henry added.

As they neared what was obviously the outskirts of the village itself, the signs became grimmer. All they could see were the burnt out remains of various dwellings and communal places.

Anna was shaking her head. "This is awful. Something terrible must have happened. Perhaps they were attacked by a raiding party, but we haven't suffered from a raid for as long as I can remember."

When they finally entered the village complex itself the view was even more depressing. However, the evidence was that this catastrophe had happened some time ago. The blackened ruins were mostly covered in moss and fungi. Long grass and wild flowers grew everywhere and small shrubs had taken root in and amongst the buildings. They investigated a few of the dwellings and found remains of burnt and charred furniture and some personal effects.

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"It looks as though they left in a hurry" Henry suggested "but didn't have time to pack everything."

"What can have happened and where all the villagers have gone?" Anna looked downcast. "I was hoping that maybe we could find food and shelter here. I could certainly do with something to eat; I'm famished."

"Me too" Henry added, pointlessly. They had nearly finished their supply of river water and he was now wondering whether they would ever reach the monastery with no food or drink and Montgomery's men searching the countryside. The prospects looked grim and he was concerned that he had led poor Anna into a bigger mess than she might have otherwise been.

However, she seemed to read his thoughts. "Whatever happens, Henry, must be immensely better than being in the clutches of Lord Montgomery. I know how he would have treated me." She turned and moved close to him, taking hold of his hands in hers. "I still thank you from the bottom of my heart for rescuing me from that evil man."

"Rescue? Is that what you call it? Looks like I need to rescue you from hunger and starvation."

"Don't worry" she whispered, "God is on our side." She kissed him on the cheek.

Henry felt the urge to take hold of her in his arms again, but she let go his hands and walked on through the wreckage of the village. He followed her, thinking that he must stop his episodes of self-doubt and act more positive. Wasn't that the reason he was chosen? They conducted a half-hearted search amongst the ruins for the possibility of something to eat or drink, but there was nothing. Their only option now was to move on as quickly as possible and cross the main inn-to-castle road as soon as possible.

They carried on down the track with some trepidation but felt a little more relaxed once the village and castle road were far behind them. Moving through the forest was slow but on occasions they did find a few well-trodden footpaths which made for easier walking.

As the forest grew gloomier Henry paused looking around. "We will have to find somewhere to rest soon because we will never reach the abbey before nightfall."

They continued on with the forest suddenly becoming much darker. Henry looked up to glimpse patches of sky through the tree canopy and noticed dark grey clouds moving across.

"It looks like we are heading for rain as well. I hope we find somewhere soon otherwise we might end up getting very wet." He kept his eyes on the surrounding forest looking out for a suitable place to rest that wasn't too exposed. He had noticed on many occasions that Anna seemed to move fairly confidently through the forest with a good sense of direction. He eventually commented "It is fortunate, Anna, that you appear to know your way around Lord Montgomery's estate and not dependent on me to find our way."

“Like I said; from my childhood. My father and Lord Montmery used to be good friends and we would often visit each other’s estates for hunting. I also remember lodging in that ruined village back there when I was very young.”

Anna carried on relating memories of her childhood until it started to drizzle. Henry suddenly stopped peering hard into the trees. He thought he could just make out what appeared to be a shack at the far end of a clearing. It was mostly hidden amongst the trees, but with the lack of any activity and its remoteness here in the forest he was hopeful that it would not be occupied

“Anna!”

“What is it?”

“Look, over there. Isn’t that a hut or cabin?”

She perked up and stared in the direction he was pointing. “Yes, you are right. I think I remember it from our hunting days. I think it is the woodsman’s hut, but let us take care. It might be occupied by a patrol or someone we would rather not meet.”

“I hope not because it’s starting to rain now.”

As they approached the building it had the appearance of being reasonably well maintained. That became increasingly clearer as they neared the dwelling. It lay alongside a well-worn track wide enough for horse riders. They avoided approaching it too much in the open for fear that whoever might be inside might hear or see them. Creeping around and ducking below a window they reached the door, where they stood outside listening for sounds of occupancy; but all was quiet, apart from the various forest noises around them and the rainfall. The diminishing sound of chatter from the birds and darkening sky signified that dusk was approaching fast and that they must find shelter urgently, hopefully in this hut. Finally Henry plucked up courage to tap on the door and, receiving no answer, grasped the handle and slowly pushed it open, somewhat surprised that it wasn’t locked. The sight before them spoke of a place that was occupied on a regular basis and even overnight on occasions, by the presence of low wooden cot to the right behind the door. It was a made up bed with a straw mattress and quilted cover. Henry was relieved that it was not occupied. Straight ahead was a stove used for cooking and providing heat for cold days and nights. A pile of logs was neatly stacked to the right and, next to the log pile, a small trestle table laden with an assortment of cooking ware. To the left of the stove was another smaller table with two chairs positioned under the window. A lamp stood on the table. In the far right hand corner was a cupboard which, on inspection, revealed tableware for eating and drinking and on a high shelf various containers containing cooking materials. A covered urn by the table contained what appeared to be water. It was cool and odorless and, when Henry tasted a little, probably fresh enough to drink; and at that moment both Henry and Anna were sure that they could have drunk more or less anything. A wooden container on the trestle table revealed passably fresh whole meal bread and there was also fruit, salted bacon and cheese in other containers they opened.

By the patter on the window it was now starting to rain harder.

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"It looks like luck may be with us after all, Anna. A dry place to rest and something to eat and drink." Henry sighed in a display of relief. She, in turn, looked a bit guilty but only for a moment. "It does seem like stealing, for which the penalty around here can be very severe if not horrific; but, under the circumstances I can always repay the debt or even pay for it with the silver I have with me."

It was becoming difficult to see what they were doing but they didn't dare light the lamp in case anyone in the vicinity decided to investigate. They were so engrossed in laying out supper on the table that neither of them heard the approach of someone outside until the door suddenly flew open. Henry quickly turned to face the intruder and pulled out his sword, raising his arm ready to fight. He saw a slim but powerful man framed in the doorway grasping a long stave with two tightly clenched hands and rain dripping off his clothes. A quick glance showed that Anna had also turned around with a look of apprehension. The man seemed to hesitate, stared at Anna then lowered his arms slightly whilst still alert.

"Even though you are dressed like a man" he said in a soft voice "aren't you Lady Anna, Lord Trellian's daughter?" He released one hand from the stave.

Anna looked surprised but did not feel threatened. "Why do you ask?"

"And who might you be?" Henry interrupted, raising the sword again in a challenging manner.

The man glanced at Henry, ignored his challenge and turned to face Anna again. "If you are" he continued, "then you have nothing to fear from me." He now turned his attention back to Henry and grasped the stave again with both hands. "But who is this man? I heard that you had been abducted by some Frenchman but this man does not sound French and ..." he turned his attention back again to Anna "... you certainly don't appear to be with him against your will."

Anna's relaxed manner with her supposed 'abductor' seemed to unsettle him.

Henry now spoke to lessen the tension. "Lady Anna is under my protection but I don't see why we should trust you when you are in the employ of Lord Montgomery?"

The man now lowered his arms and relaxed his tight grip on the stave. He quickly glanced over his shoulder and turned back to face them again. "I think I had better come in. It will be safer for the three of us and it's raining hard."

Henry nodded and lowered his sword but still a little wary of the man's intentions. He who now returned his attention to Anna. "If you are indeed the Lady Anna then I am also concerned for your safety" he gestured towards Henry with a nod of his head, "and that you are not being taken against your will."

Anna quickly reassured him. "No, not at all. This gentleman, Henry Longford, has been very kind to me and his doing his best to place me beyond the reach of Lord Montgomery."

"And I am certainly not in the employ of Lord Montgomery and wish to avoid him at all costs" Henry added.

The man was now completely relaxed. "Strictly speaking, neither am I employed by that man. I ..."

"You are a spy?" Henry interrupted.

Surprisingly, that put him completely at ease. "You could say that." He placed the staff against the wall and walked over towards Anna to help her set out the supper. "Here, let me give you a hand as I know where everything is stored but first let's get some light so that we can see what we are doing."

He proceeded to pull a drape over the window, lit the oil lamp then fetched a cask of ale to fill up three mugs. Henry and Anna finished laying out the food then seated themselves on the chairs whilst Alfred, which is the name he called himself, sat on the bed. He began to talk, as soon as they had settled down to eat, introducing himself as Alfred Beaumont, supposedly in the employ of Lord Montgomery as a woodsman to keep watch over his lordship's hunting grounds.

"My father used to be in the employ of Lord Montgomery and, for a number of reasons which I would rather not to talk about, I became sympathetic with your father's aims" he said to Anna, taking a bite from a hunk of the bread and a draft of ale before continuing. "These are very troubled times. With Stephen on the throne and Matilda trying to usurp him there is absolute anarchy in the country. Most of the Norman barons are trying to expand their estates by whatever means at their disposal and by fair means or foul."

"Like Lord Montgomery" interjected Anna.

"Exactly; which brings me to dare ask a question of you Lady Anna."

Anna looked up from her plate. "Yes? Although I can guess what that question might be."

"Why did you agree to marry Montgomery? All the villagers in your father's estate know how evil Montgomery is and ask why you would sacrifice yourself to his lustful and treacherous ways."

Anna stopped eating and related to Alfred what she already told Henry: about the contest and Lord Montgomery's demand for prime land, include the tenants, in payment for the wager.

"Yes" Alfred said. "I heard about that, with the suspicion of treachery on Montgomery's part. He is no fool, very astute and very knowledgeable about the law, thanks to his scheming chancellor, Richard. Certainly the outcome would be most unpleasant for your villagers" he added. "In fact there used to be a village quite near here which suffered a terrible fate at the hands of Montgomery's men."

Anna and Henry both nodded in recognition.

"We have seen the derelict and burnt out remains of all of the village dwellings." Henry related sadly. "But what happened exactly?"

"My understanding is that Montgomery wanted to expand his park lands to be able to entertain the King on hunting parties and he was vicious in his methods of clearance. Once he had decided on the boundaries of his hunting park he sent his men out to evict

the villagers without notification. They just walked in and gave everybody minimal time to get out before setting light to their dwellings or making them uninhabitable."

"Why don't the villager's rise up?" Henry asked without thinking, and immediately recognizing the stupidity of his question.

A look of disbelief spread across Alfred's face. "I can't believe you are even suggesting that, Henry. It would result in wholesale slaughter of the peasants. There is no justice to speak of or even escape from the tyranny and his serfs do not have any rights. Effectively it borders on slavery except that barons like Lord Montmery are obliged to provide some sort of payment for their serfs' services. Tied peasantry is what it is."

"Of course" Henry replied quickly. "Rather stupid of me."

Alfred continued. "Still, what is important now is that you must both leave this estate as quickly as possible. You will not be safe anywhere and I will do my utmost to help you both." He now directed the conversation at Henry, eying him with some suspicion and thinking to himself that it seemed odd that this stranger didn't seem to be aware of the lord-serf relationship which existed in all countries as far as he knew. He decided that he must find out more about this Henry Longford.

"Well, Henry Longford, for Lady Anna to place herself under your protection you must be quite a fellow but bringing her to this hut on Lord Montmery's estate was, in my opinion, a huge and I would say foolish risk."

"I do realize that, Alfred, but my concern was for Lady Anna and with the weather turning wet and it being dark I thought it worth gambling that there wouldn't be a search party active at night."

"So, Henry, tell me about yourself: your background, where you come from, how you ended up helping Lady Anna."

Henry was thinking that with the likelihood of meeting yet more people who would be asking the same question he had better start firming up a profile of his life, otherwise he was going to have trouble making his way in this era and end up being exposed to many dangerous situations. Anna saved the day, or at least partially, when she noticed Henry's body language and hesitancy in his responses, which she attributed to embarrassment.

"Henry originally comes from France and, having been taught by Benedictine monks, took to the road at a youthful age and has travelled far in the world." She looked towards him. "Isn't that right Henry?"

Henry nodded in agreement. "That's correct. I lost my parents when I was very young and, although I brought up in a monastery, it was noted that I was not suitable to undertake the work of God and that I should use my knowledge to spread the word of peace and justice."

"A very noble, selfless undertaking to be sure" Alfred commented with admiration. "But what about your fighting, or more importantly your defensive, skills. Where did you acquire them? You appear to handle that sword with some degree of confidence."

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"I was trained by a Frenchman whose acquaintance I made during my travels. We struck up a very close friendship and, following a close encounter with a couple of robbers, he offered to teach me some useful sword skills."

Alfred actually seemed quite impressed. "Most generous of him. I apologize, sir, for any doubt I may have placed on your character; but in these times one has to be very suspicious of all strangers."

Henry nodded in agreement.

"You speak many languages then?" It was more of a question rather than a statement.

"No. In most places I have been fortunate to visit I managed to get by with French and English, both of which appear to be spoken widely throughout the world, but I have also learnt a little German." He glanced at Anna as he made the statement, her expression of pride indicative of admiration for him.

"For a Frenchman your English is very good" Alfred commented, "so much so that one could easily mistake you for an Englishman."

"I have certainly spent a large amount of time in the company of English speakers and therefore found it propitious to be English on certain occasions."

"Yes, being able to blend in with local people can have its benefits" he added glibly. Take me for instance"

"Yes" interrupted Anna. "If you are a spy you also must be in great danger. How do you manage to avoid suspicion?"

"I ensure that I maintain close and friendly relationships with both castle and village dwellers; oh, and also with the monks in the abbey. I also keep a low profile so am not seen as a threat to anyone."

"A wise approach" comment Henry.

Once they had all finished eating Anna rose from her seat and stepped over to open the door to throw scraps out. It was dark and Alfred jumped up nervously.

"Please, don't go outside." He said quickly. "You never know who might be lurking out there."

"Here? In the night?" Henry queried, gently pulling Anna back in and closing the door.

"As I said, times are dangerous and the country full of spies" Alfred added.

"Like you?" Henry added with bemusement.

They took their seats again whilst Alfred continued talking. He looked over towards Anna. "Your father, being a Saxon Earl, told me that he has to tread a very careful and diplomatic path since the Normans took over our country."

Anna nodded in agreement. "Yes, he is fortunate in having Arnold Barlow, a very clever man, as his chancellor."

"Yes, Lady Anna, I have met Arnold Barlow. He is a man I admire greatly."

"It would seem that you have a close relationship with my father" Anna said, in way of a question.

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“I do, in fact, work more closely with Arnold but that fact is known only to him, me, your father, Brother Hubert, Father Brown and now you two. You understand, therefore, the need for complete secrecy.”

“We understand” Henry replied, “And I am in a similar situation in that it is important that I am an unknown: a fortune seeker if you will who is untraceable.”

Alfred gave Henry a slap on the back. “We should get on well together Henry”

The three of them cleared up after their meal, following which Alfred suggested that perhaps Henry would appreciate an update on the current situation in England, having spent much of his time travelling around Europe.

“It would certainly help me to understand more about current politics” Henry said.

“As you are probably aware, Henry” Alfred began “most of England's lands have been transferred to Norman ownership but Lady Anna’s father was fortunate in being able to retain much of the land he inherited. As such he has been able to retain a significant but not sizeable estate. As Lady Anna well knows, by treating the villains in his service benevolently he has been able to retain their loyalty and support in both good times and bad. He recognizes that reward achieves more than punishment.

Needless to say, many of the Norman barons, particularly his neighbour Lord Montmery, are extremely envious of him and his productive and happy workers. To minimize potential problems and so as not to antagonize the more powerful barons Lord Trellian acts the good and cooperative neighbour, contributing to worthy causes in addition to his military obligations. He is known to join in hunts, fetes and all manner of social and sometimes not so social events. With regard to the current situation in the land, your father chose to back King Stephen, but somewhat surreptitiously. As things stand right now things could go either way. Stephen is aware of your father's loyalty but is diplomatic in his recognition of that loyalty. Montmery, on the other hand, professes loyalty but there are suspicions that he is providing Matilda with aid and support and stands ready for when she makes her final move, which comes to my situation.”

He paused, lowering his head between his hands and looking down as though in thought for moment, then looked back up at them. “I indicated to you earlier that there are certain events in my past that I would rather not talk about; that is still the case but there are a few things that I wish to say.”

“Whatever you wish” Henry said.

“I lost my parents when I was a young lad, which was a very traumatic experience due the circumstances of their deaths. We lived in the abandoned village that you passed through earlier today. I met Lord Trellian and Arnold Barlow when they occasionally visited Lord Montmery for hunting in the area and was assigned to assist them on the hunts. I struck up a friendship with Arnold who must have seen some potential in me, for he offered to teach me to read and write. One day, he happened to mention my parents and when I told him they were both dead he took me aside and told me what actually happened. That was when I changed my allegiance to your father,

’, Lady Anna; a vengeance of sorts. Arnold ensured that I received as good an education as possible. Of course, we had to meet discreetly by my crossing unseen into Lord Trellian’s estate via the old bridge with the excuse of managing the forest and checking on deer and boar numbers. We discussed many things, including the threat posed by Matilda and the chaos around us. I agreed that I also felt that Stephen was a better bet than Matilda and that if there was anything I could discover that would help Stephen’s cause, I would let him know. He told me that was more than anyone could expect from someone in my position and that the decision must be mine, but I was adamant and knew that I must try and help for the sake of not just your father and his people but for thousands of others.”

Anna reached out and touched his arm. "Alfred, we have the utmost admiration for what you are doing and, speaking for the both of us, you also have our complete trust”.

Henry nodded in agreement.

Alfred sat up straight, placing his hands on his knees. “So Henry, perhaps you can tell me about your own childhood and travels.”

As he hadn’t completed the story of his life in his mind, Henry had to deflect the conversation away from the topic. "Rest assured Alfred, it is also extremely dangerous for me to be in these parts, but I promised to help Anna avoid becoming Montmery’s wife, mistress or concubine. If I fail” he glanced across to Anna "I could never forgive myself as I hold her very dear to my heart.”

Anna’s eyes opened wide as she returned his look trying to understand the underlying meaning behind the statement. Was he getting too fond of her? She had her suspicions after he kissed her behind the waterfall and with all the time they were spending together. She even had to admit herself that she also found him attractive but at that particular moment she felt embarrassed and looked away to see the questioning look on Alfred’s face. He also noticed Anna’s response and wondered. She quickly deflected the embarrassment with her next question to him.

"So, er, do you intend to stay with us tonight, Alfred?”

He arose from the bed and fingered the drape across the window as if he wanted to check if anyone was out there watching, most unlikely though it was. He began to look a little uneasy then sat back down.

"Something wrong?" Henry questioned, glancing up at the window.

"I feel I have already taken a risk spending so much time talking with you, knowing that even at night there could be spies about. I mustn’t be seen here with you two, so I think it best that I leave you now." His voice had now dropped to a mumbled whisper.

"I understand, Alfred." Henry hastily agreed. "Do what you need to do, in order to protect yourself, but we are extremely grateful for your help and advice so, yes, it is best that you go now. Just be careful and don’t take any risks."

Alfred nodded. "I thank you for that." He got to his feet again and moved towards the door. "Please use this hut to rest but I suggest that you take your leave early at first dawn and hasten to your destination."

Henry was about to ask him about their planned destination but Alfred stopped him.

"At this stage I do not wish to know where you are headed nor will I advise you." He nodded as he spoke the next words. "It is safer that way."

Anna smiled in understanding. "We wish you luck and success in whatever you do."

Alfred paused before finally opening the door to leave. "I also wish you both a safe journey. If I am asked, I will of course deny as to ever having seen you ... you understand?"

"Of course." Henry and Anna replied together.

Alfred left quickly and they watched him walking along the track to then duck into the forest; fortunately the rain had ceased. Two or three slightly embarrassing minutes followed before Anna turned back into the room whilst Henry closed the door. She was looking towards the cot and started to make a suggestion.

"If you wish..."

"No" Henry said, getting up and grabbing the blankets they had brought with them. "I wouldn't dream of it. You take the cot. I'll make myself comfortable in the chair with these blankets."

Anna climbed onto the cot and lay down watching him trying his best to find a comfortable position using the two chairs. He doused the lamp and, in the darkness tried to sound positive following their conversation with Alfred.

"Do you still think we are doing the right thing Anna?"

"If I had any doubts Henry, you would know."

Her reply sounded a little abrupt and he interpreted it as a warning to keep his distance. He lay awake for what seemed a long time with an ache in his heart and a longing to be close to her. Was he falling in love with her? What were her feelings? Was her response a defense, fighting against what her heart was trying to tell her, or was he barking up the wrong tree. To Henry, from his enlightened times, all this seemed natural and, well inevitable he thought, but from her point of view? What would he do in her shoes? Here she was, with a stranger who had a completely different outlook on life who somehow didn't seem to fit in and she, the daughter of a Lord who would normally marry into another wealthy family. Let's face it, he was in the wrong time and place. But whatever he told himself the ache wouldn't go away and he concluded that he was too confused to know what to do.

Henry awoke with a start.

"Henry!"

"What?"

"Shush. Did you hear something?" It was Anna whispering as loudly as she dared.

He lowered his legs to the floor and pulled himself upright in the chair, limbs and neck aching from the awkward position he had adopted when finally succumbing to his

much needed sleep. It was still dark. He listened carefully in the tense silence and was about to tell Anna to go back to sleep when there was a soft crack as though someone had trod on a twig. His heart began to pound as he eased the blankets off and got up out of the chair. A clear night and a bright moon, producing enough light to filter through the drape, enabled him to make out Anna sitting up holding blankets around her neck. He moved slowly over to where his sword was propped up against the wall, pulled the weapon from its scabbard and with some hesitation moved towards the door. If there were men out there, staying in the hut was like being a sitting duck with no room to manoeuvre. Venturing outside was a risk but at least the semidarkness would help. In the dark no one has the advantage.

"Where are you going?" Anna whispered.

"To scare them off" he replied boldly with heart banging so loud he was convinced that if anyone was out there they would hear him leaving the hut.

"But ..."

"Get under the bedclothes or the cot and keep still and quiet until I get back."

He heard her whisper "Yes, I will" in reply before opening the door enough to slip out, pull it to and move off to the cover of the nearest trees. The silence made him think that perhaps he had imagined it after all and that it was probably an animal when he heard a soft movement behind him. He turned slowly and raised his sword wondering which way to go. Clouds scudding across the sky blotted the moon out at intervals making it difficult to see anything that might be out there. A picture of Tom and Jerry, the classic cat and mouse cartoon wafted across his mind in a seemingly surreal attempt to add a bit of humour whilst at the same time trying to tell him that this was an unreal situation for him to be in. Reality, and unfortunately not virtual reality, came back with a vengeance when a body to his right came rushing over towards him holding up a large stave. *The safest form of defense is to attack.* He thought, so charged to meet the attacker flailing out with the sword and hoping that his adversary wasn't an experienced fighter. He was surprised when it seemed to have the desired effect as the attacker stopped in its tracks and hesitated while Henry lashed out with the sword and made contact with the stave cutting it in half. It was such a shock to the assailant that he yelped and quickly ran off to disappear into the darkness. This seemed to be the cue for another man, also with a stave, lurking about to try rushing Henry. Henry turned using the same tactics with both hands gripping the sword. A short clashing of the sword with the stave and the second figure melted back into the forest but he did catch a glimpse of a third man stumbling through a particularly dense patch of undergrowth and decided to give chase. He was on the point of catching up with the running figure when it suddenly veered off to the left and disappeared. He stood still for a moment listening, but apart from a soft rustling of branches from the gentle breeze blowing all was suddenly quiet; but his heart suddenly sank as it dawned on him at what he had done. It was a diversion and Anna was alone in the hut. His worse fears were confirmed as he stumbled to find his way back to the hut. His heart sank when he heard shouting, horses and certainly a woman's voice - but not screaming; that wouldn't be like Anna. When

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he reached the hut, he found the door ajar and heard the sound of horses galloping off down the track accompanied by someone holding a flaming torch. His loud cursing could have wakened the dead. He had come all this way to fail in his mission and allow Anna to fall into the hands of Montgomery's men, who were now no doubt taking her to his castle. His immediate thought was Alfred and he stood there cursing himself for trusting the man. How gullible they had both been. Now what was he to do? His mind was in turmoil thinking what her fate was likely to be; how he felt about her; how useless he was; what he was going to do and even how he would ever get back to his own era. What a mess. His head and heart both felt as though they wanted to explode and he thrashed about angrily with the sword not caring any more who might hear him or what might happen to him. Finally he sat down by the door of the hut wondering what the hell he was going to do. He concluded that there was not much he could do right then in the dark, so entered the hut to collect the blankets and carry them into the forest to find a suitably hidden spot to get some sleep. Staying in the hut now would certainly be a foolish option. Hopefully, a fresh mind in the morning would give him some ideas about what to do, though at that moment he had no idea and he didn't have much time. He lay there for what seemed ages angry with himself and hoping against all odds that there might still be a way of saving her until he finally dozed off.

11. Lord Montgomery's Castle

The first light of dawn accompanied by the sound of loud voices woke Henry. He instantly became alert and carefully made his way back towards the hut. In the clearing he could see Alfred with a couple of peasants, both of whom were holding staves, standing in front of the hut discussing something. Anger boiled up inside him and he even felt reckless enough to have it out with him there and then, but held back knowing that it would be a foolish move. Alfred was facing the two men and began shouting, which Henry heard quite clearly.

"They were in my hut? Why wasn't I informed of this earlier?" He turned and strode inside whilst the two peasants stood outside muttering to each another. He shortly came out again. "They certainly took advantage of my belongings: eating my food, drinking my ale and using my bed." He stood for a moment contemplating, then started directing them. "If they only caught the woman then I suggest we quickly locate and apprehend the Frenchman before his lordship finds out, else there will be heads to roll." The two peasants turned to look at each other, muttering again. "Right" shouted Alfred "I suggest you each take the path that leads from here; one of you can go in that direction" Alfred pointed to his right "and the other in the opposite direction. The fugitive is a foreigner in this land so may well stick close to the track, so search the forest either side as thoroughly as you can. I will search the immediate area for any sign of the man."

"Right sir" they replied and started to walk off as Alfred called after them.

"You will return by dusk and not before, unless of course you find him. Then we can deliver him to Lord Montgomery for his pleasure."

The two men moved off gripping their staves. Alfred stood pensively looking about for a few minutes as though he were searching for something or someone before reentering the hut. His behaviour and the nature of the dialog struck a nagging cord in Henry's mind but he was too incensed with anger now to bother much about safety. For the first time in his life he felt as if he could really hurt Alfred. Checking that the two peasants were well clear of the hut, he crept as silently as he could towards the building and paused outside carefully peering through the open doorway. Alfred was crouched on the floor with his back to the opening examining something in his hands. Henry drew his sword and moved silently behind him to throw his left arm around Alfred's head, pulling it back and laying the sword across his throat.

"Bastard!" he muttered.

"Henry!" was Alfred's frantic reply.

"Tell me why I shouldn't cut your throat now, apart from the mess it would make!" He didn't know why he had to make the last somewhat humorous statement; twentieth century wit maybe.

"Henry, wait!" Alfred begged again.

"For what? More deceit and treachery?"

"No. Let me explain."

"I've never killed anyone ... until now." Henry's hand was getting twitchy. If he was going to do it he had to do it now before he lost his nerve; but he knew he couldn't go through with it and actually kill the man.

"I didn't know."

Something in Alfred's voice told Henry that there wasn't so much as fear in his voice but more a hint of sincerity. Henry wavered and moved the sword away from Alfred's throat but still held him around the neck, not relaxing his hold.

"Go on" he snapped; then noticed what Alfred was holding. It was a ring, made of some sort of silver alloy; small, too small for a man's finger. *'It must be Anna's'* he thought. "What's that?" Henry demanded, knowing the answer.

"It must be Lady Anna's. It probably fell off her finger when they took her away, unless she took it off on purpose."

"They? Oh come on Alfred. I want to hear the truth." He tightened his grip again and made Alfred wince.

"If you think the worst of me then kill me now." His statement was blunt with no further explanation. He wasn't going to plead for his life and grovel at Henry's feet. Henry thought back to their first encounter, his cautious behaviour in the hut and when he left hurriedly after his hesitation to relate how he ended up as a spy for Anna's father. Then there was him outside the hut looking around as though he was searching for something or someone before entering. Henry took a chance and released his grip but held the sword ready as Alfred slowly arose and turned to face him.

"Thank you Henry ... for trusting me again." He nodded towards the door, which had Henry worried for an instant imagining a band of men waiting outside ready to drag him to Montmery. "Let us go into the woods. It is not safe to stay in here."

Henry stood aside as Alfred moved over to the still open door and peered out.

"Come. Quickly."

Henry followed him out and across the clearing into the forest. Alfred led him cautiously but purposefully as though he were looking for something. After a several minutes they reached a particularly dense area where Alfred parted some bushes to reveal the ground dropping away to reveal a narrow culvert with a dried up stream bed at the bottom.

"Down here" Alfred said, scrambling down the bank. "We can talk quietly and won't be seen. The culvert is covered along most of its length with undergrowth."

He sat against the bank as Henry slithered down to join him, brushing twigs and soil off his clothes. A spark of hope lit up once again in his heart and he was now regretting his loss of faith in human loyalties, particularly with regard to this man.

Alfred placed a hand on Henry's shoulder. "I don't blame you Henry for doubting me. I would have done exactly the same in your position, but allow me to tell you what I have heard regarding your mission. If the Lady Anna has been taken to Lord

Montgomery's castle, which seems likely, then there remains a chance that we can help her."

Henry didn't feel as though he needed to apologize but felt relieved at the rekindling of hope. "Anything that might help me recover the situation is critical. I have really screwed things up."

"Not your fault" Alfred stated. "But let me tell you what I have gleaned. It wasn't long after I had returned to my village a couple of nights ago that I heard excited talk at the local inn - news travels fast around here. The villagers had already heard that a Frenchman had abducted Lady Anna Trellian from the inn, from where she was to be escorted by Lord Montgomery and that a party of knights and soldiers was searching the forest for her and her abductor. Some of the villagers had also agreed amongst themselves to conduct their own search, hoping that if they could find the fugitives they could apprehend them, take them to the castle and claim a reward."

"I can understand that" Henry replied.

Alfred continued. "I had heard various rumours about the archery contest and guessed that the 'abduction' was more likely to have been a rescue attempt. I took a gamble that you would take the route, south, so decided at least to check out my cabin on the assumption that you and Lady Anna might have stopped there to rest. I also anticipated that you would probably head for the monastery, which would be the safest place to seek temporary sanctuary and rest. I also presumed that you would then head for Geoffrey de Champ's estate to give yourselves time to consider your options."

Henry shifted his position. "That's certainly the plan that Anna and I are following on the recommendation of a Father Bernard."

"And no doubt Montgomery will also have his suspicions." Alfred suggested. "But to continue; after I left you, I met a group of four peasants on the road. '*Ah, Alfred, there you are.*' One of the men had called out. '*Are you just on your way home?*' I replied in the affirmative. '*You didn't you see anyone, did you? A young couple maybe?*' No, I replied, hoping that no one had actually seen me in your company. Fortunately, I don't think any of them suspected that I was lying. They proceeded to tell me about a villager who had been foraging in the forest and claimed to have seen you both and reported it on returning to the village."

"Oh dear" replied Henry "and I thought we had been so careful. We did try to avoid the road as much as possible."

"Well for one thing, the villager described you as two young men dressed in green but that he was convinced that one of you was a woman, which initially aroused his suspicion, and then he wondered why two young people would be wandering in the forest at dusk."

"Yes, well there's certainly a story behind that."

"I'm sure there is" Alfred replied, with a sideways glance at Henry. "Now, as it happens, Montgomery had passed through the village that day on his way to an urgent meeting in Arundel. He is reported to have told the villagers that a Frenchman had

, apparently abducted his betrothed and that anyone who apprehended them would receive a handsome reward."

"Huh, I bet" Henry commented.

"The instructions were that if you were captured then you should be delivered to his castle, to which he would be returning in a couple of days. Then I heard about the four villagers, apart from the two you may have seen me with outside the hut, who had headed into the forest to search for you and who also assumed that you might have decided to rest in my forest hut. That had me worried. The two peasants you saw with me were also searching for you but under the impression that only Lady Anna had been taken, but I just feigned ignorance. I actually took an indirect route back to the village last night so that no one would suspect that I had been with you, which is just as well otherwise I would have been under suspicion."

"So, what can we do now?" Henry asked. "Is there any hope of rescuing Anna?"

"Well, it is certainly true that Lady Anna has been taken to Lord Montgomery's castle and I am sure that he hasn't yet returned. He may even decide to make a detour to confront Lord Trellian and accuse him of arranging her disappearance, but I think that unlikely."

"It couldn't be further from the truth" Henry commented. Alfred's report now gave him a glimmer of hope.

"Fortunately, the reports of you being a soldier of fortune, who happened to come across a beautiful woman alone in an inn where you were lodging and subsequently abducting her, is actually believed by most people. It seems that the inn keeper's report was very convincing."

"So do you know what business Lord Montgomery is conducting in Arundel, although I can hazard a guess, and do you have any idea when he might be back?"

Alfred now grew more voluble as he related what might be considered treasonable activities. "As you may know, Matilda is trying for the throne of England and, having recently landed in England, is staying in Arundel Castle prior to launching her bid for the throne. Many Lords are loyal to Stephen but some believe that Matilda will succeed and are therefore backing her. Montgomery, being the cunning devil he is, is trying to play off dual loyalties. Whilst professing loyalty to Stephen he is also secretly aiding Matilda. When he believes the time is ripe he will switch sides and back whichever one is the likely winner."

Henry nodded understandingly. "Yes, it could be dangerous if one ends up backing the loser; to the extent that one could lose one's own life."

"As to when he plans to return I am not sure but my guess is that it won't be for a couple of days. If we act fast, we have the opportunity to try and get Lady Anna out of the castle, but it will be difficult and risky."

"Well I'm up for it" Henry said. "Let's go get her now."

"You do realize what will happen to us should we get caught."

"Sure. I have always had a propensity to take risks."

Alfred stood up. "In that case I think it's time we head for the castle. It is some distance away but I am very familiar with the forest paths, so if we move fast we should reach it by nightfall. Trust and honesty are rare qualities in these times, Henry, but I believe we are both fighting for the same ideals."

"Yes we are Alfred and, because we are on the moral high ground, I am convinced that we will succeed." Even as he made that statement Henry knew that the odds of succeeding were not high. Trying to smuggle a woman out of a castle under the noses of castle staff, guards and whoever else appeared, on the face of it, to be a doomed activity before they even gained entry to the building.

"You are certainly a brave man Henry and very committed. I wish I knew more about you and your philosophy of life. You must tell me some time. We could have interesting discussions I feel."

"Certainly, Alfred; I would enjoy that."

Henry was thinking that listening to and learning from someone 'on the spot' so to speak would certainly help him to 'blend in'. Being aware of all those little nuances would help him to avoid saying or doing the wrong thing. He had already started to build a profile of his life in his mind; all he needed to do now was to firm it up to make it believable.

Alfred climbed out of the culvert and glanced about before beckoning Henry to join him. They quickly retraced their steps back to the hut where Alfred tidied up and stuffed some supplies into a shoulder bag. He then hesitated and turned to look Henry up and down.

"I would suggest a change of clothing. As the innkeeper has seen you in that outfit you will be a marked man so I suggest we dress you in a typical peasant's clothes." He walked over to a cupboard and took out some clothing. "Here, change into these; you will be less conspicuous. We'll take your other clothes with us for you to change back into once, hopefully, we are out of danger."

Henry nodded and did as suggested, changing into the peasant clothes and packing his own into the bag. They set off for the castle at a brisk walk with Henry trailing Alfred as they purposely followed single track paths through the forest. He did ask how Alfred accounted for his movements but he replied that he was his own man and often paid visits to the castle to report to Montgomery's Captain of the Guard.

"So how do you propose to get me into the castle?" Henry asked.

"That could be a problem. I always work alone and your presence would be questioned. Still, I'm sure we can think of something on the way."

After several hours with little conversation or rest they finally reached the outskirts of the castle towards dusk. Alfred had not brought up the question of Henry's past for which he was thankful. The castle was set upon a mound and surrounded by ploughed fields and forest, typical of the era Henry thought. He commented that there were no dwellings of any type visible in the immediate area.

"Lord Montgomery wants it that way." Alfred said. "He insists of having a clear view so that no enemy could ever creep up on him."

"Who attends to the fields near the castle?"

"He keeps sufficient serfs in the castle to tend to the fields, but he still charges them rent and levies taxes on them."

"So the land belongs to the peasants?"

"No. The land belongs to Lord Montgomery but he allows his cottagers to keep and sell the crops they harvest. That way he doesn't have any responsibility for selling it and just makes a tidy income from taxes."

"What happens if the harvest is poor or, worse still, ruined by weather?"

"They go into debt and he dictates the terms of the 'loan' which can be quite onerous."

"That's a bit harsh isn't it?"

"Yes. Rumor has it that he has a room full of tallies, one for nearly everyone under his employ."

"Hm."

"However, I understand that Lord Trellian is more magnanimous in that most of his workers are villeins."

Alfred stopped as they reached the edge of the forest overlooking the castle's surrounding estate. Henry stared at the magnificence of the construction. It had six towers each mounted with a flag, which was impossible to make out at this distance or in the fading light. The walls looked formidably tall and strong not like ... and then it struck him: this was the same ruined castle that was managed by English Heritage and which he had visited on a couple of occasions before making this journey back in time. He recalled that the castle, in his own time, now consisted of one original tower and two half demolished ones. Most of the walls had gone but English Heritage had managed to mark out and reconstruct some of the inner rooms of the castle. He remembered seeing the kitchen and remains of old brick ovens and chimneys. The surrounding area had been raised over time and only part of the mound with the remains of the moat remained. It was difficult to visualize exactly which aspect of the castle he was seeing because the surrounding area had changed so much and also because of the amount of deterioration, but he still had a vague picture of the layout. Then it suddenly hit him to the extent that Alfred heard his sudden exclamation.

"What is it Henry? Do you see something?"

Henry remembered seeing the remains of a secret tunnel into the castle that had been discovered. He didn't know exactly where it emerged within the building but he knew it was somewhere close to the kitchen. The question was, how could broach the subject of a tunnel that he wasn't supposed to know about. He had to take a chance and hope that it wouldn't raise any suspicion on the part of Alfred.

"I have heard rumours from various sources that the castle contains a secret tunnel to the outside."

"That's a bit of a longshot isn't it; being only rumours?"

“Knowing how that Lord Montgomery has an instinct for survival and power he will always require an escape plan in case he backs the losing side, so I would place bets on there being a secret escape route from his castle. I would suggest that the first thing we should do is to work our way around the base of the castle walls to ascertain whether such a tunnel exists.”

“Well Henry, I have lived half my life in or around the castle and I am sure that there is no secret passage, but I will go along with it to satisfy your curiosity. It shouldn’t take us too long but we will have to be careful we are not heard or observed.”

“If we do in fact find a tunnel, I can enter the castle via that route and we can meet up inside. If I can get in unobserved then I am sure that we can also get out unobserved.”

“But we don’t know where the tunnel ends up in the castle.”

“I heard it might be near the kitchen or a room nearby.”

Alfred pondered on Henry’s plan. “I think I know the area where we might be able to locate the entrance. I know where the kitchen is located in the castle layout so we just need to search in that area.”

Henry began to feel more positive. “That’s fortunate. Once we are in the castle we can hopefully find out where Anna is being held and devise a way to smuggle her out.”

Alfred looked uncertain.

“What’s the matter?”

“This isn’t going to work. There will be guards everywhere and, of course, there is Anna’s lady in waiting. There are just too many obstacles and things to go wrong.”

“What choice do we have? We’ve come this far and this is our only chance. I know the odds are stacked against us but ... it’s why I am here and ... well, what else am I supposed to do?”

“I admire you Henry; but you know that we will be killed if we are caught.”

“Who’s talking about dying? I’m not ready yet. Let’s go find this tunnel entrance.”

Henry started out from the cover of the forest. It was dusk now and the chances of being seen from the battlements of the castle were probably quite slim. Already torch lights were appearing where soldiers were on duty.

Alfred caught up with Henry and led the way across the fields. “Allow me.”

As they made their way towards the impressive structure, Alfred again expressed surprise that Henry was aware of a secret escape route from the castle and, if it was supposed to be secret, how come Henry had found out about it. Henry sensed that Alfred did not wholly believe him.

It appeared a long way to the castle but soon they were directly beneath the towering walls of Montgomery’s home with Alfred glancing around and up the castle walls. If any of the sentries on the ramparts saw them they would more than likely raise the alarm so, just to be sure, they kept as close to the castle wall as possible. Much of the area around the walls had been cleared of undergrowth but in several places at castle’s foundations gorse and other thorny bushes had been left. As the two men

worked their way around the massive base Henry began to have doubts that the tunnel existed. What if the tunnel had been built much later than the twelfth century? The conflict of hope and doubt still nagged him along with feelings that this whole mission was turning into a fiasco. He was sure that it was only the recurring image of Anna's picture in the bedroom of the inn that kept him going. His thoughts were interrupted by Alfred's loud whisper.

"Henry, you are right; look here."

Henry's hopes rose again as he joined Alfred peering into a dense patch of thorny bushes. Following his companion's pointing finger, he could just see what appeared to be a small door.

"Lucky we got here before it got really dark" Henry whispered, "otherwise we might have missed it." He drew his sword, poked it into the bush and pushed a section of thorn bush to the side. They both caught their breaths at the sight of a door. Could this be the entrance to the tunnel? They managed to push aside enough of the thorn bushes to climb through and stand in front of the small rounded top wooden door about four feet in height with a small grill about a foot above it, presumably to provide ventilation and maybe some light. There was no sign of a handle on the outside as Henry remarked "What's the betting it's bolted on the inside."

"More than likely" agreed Alfred. "The purpose must be to enable escape out of the castle but also to hinder anyone trying to get in."

They both put their shoulders to the door but it didn't move.

"Well Henry, it was a good idea but we're not going to gain access by this route. It looks like we'll have to find another way to get in."

"I'm not going to give in that easily" Henry muttered.

Alfred had picked up his bag that he had dumped on the ground whilst Henry moved closer to examine the door. He scanned it all over, noting that it was set into the wall with a narrow gap between it and the brickwork which was just wide enough to insert his sword and slowly moved it around the frame starting at the bottom left of the door.

"What are you doing?" Alfred asked, watching him.

"To see if I can find a latch or something to open it. I can't believe that there is no way to gain entry from the outside for the same reason that one might want to exit."

About half way up his sword hit metal. He removed and inserted the sword above the mechanism and continued to trace around the door hitting two larger pieces on the right hand side. Removing the sword he turned to Alfred.

"The opening mechanism is here on the left with two hinges on the right."

"Good; now, how do we open it?"

"It's got to be a simple mechanism for rapid opening."

On closer examination he noticed a narrow horizontal slit where a handle might have been which was wide enough to insert a sword. This he did and sliding it to towards the wall it hit what sounded like metal.

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“I am hoping the door closure is a bolt and if I am right ...” he removed the sword and re-inserted it at the left hand end of the slot moving it to the right. It immediately made contact with metal again. “... I’m betting a bolt holds the door closed and this slot should allow me to push it to the right and ...” Seeing Henry trying to slide the sword along, Alfred put his bag down and helped him to move the sword. A metallic grating the sound of a bolt being moved hit their ears until it stopped and the door moved slightly inwards. “... release it.” Henry finished what he was saying.

“Talk about luck and a bit of ingenuity” Alfred commented.

Exchanging glances they both pushed the door open to reveal a passage burrowing into the castle. The smell of damp musty air drifted out along with other sounds like faint scampering.

"Rats." Alfred stated.

Henry returned the sword to the scabbard. “Maybe our luck has turned. Are you ready Alfred?”

“Yes.” Alfred replied. “I will enter the castle as normal, which you were about to suggest. That will allay any suspicions as I am a frequent visitor. I will then make my way to the kitchen to hopefully locate where the tunnel begins and help you enter without being seen. That will be preferable to us facing questions if I try to get you in past the gatehouse guards.”

Henry hid the bag amongst the thorn bushes and decided to take the sword. He crouched down to enter through the doorway into the tunnel. “Hopefully, I will see you later” he called back.

“Yes, hopefully” came the reply, as Henry heard Alfred moving away.

Fortunately, the tunnel opened up to about five feet in height enabling Henry to grope his way along without bending too much. He didn't much like the idea of walking blind through a rat infested tunnel so swung the sword in front of him hoping that it might act as a small deterrent and maybe alert him to any obstacles. His sword soon made contact with the first of a flight of stone steps and he found himself climbing up into the castle until he reached a door at the top. He felt over it until his hand made contact with a metal ring; and then put his ear to the door listening for sounds on the other side. All seemed quite but did he dare he take a chance and try to open it? First he tried pulling and then pushing the door, but with no movement he tried turning the handle as slowly as possible so as to minimize any noise. Something slid in the wall and the door moved.

He pulled on the ring and the door opened towards him. The room beyond was faintly lit from a light somewhere to the left but there was some sort of obstruction blocking his view. He couldn't quite make out what it was but when he felt with his hand he could make out a large curved wooden container. He surmised that it was a barrel sitting on some sort of racking. ‘*I must be in a wine storage room*’ he thought, as the characteristic odour now entered his nostrils. The barrel that was blocking the

doorway wasn't a particularly large one but it hid the door well and there wasn't quite enough room to squeeze past it. Henry decided to move back into the tunnel, partially closing the door to wait for Alfred to appear, which eventually he did after a nail-biting wait. The sound of a door opened somewhere, again to the left, followed by footsteps walking slowly down the room moving closer to the tunnel door. They hesitated frequently as though the person was searching for something then finally stopped outside the tunnel entrance. Henry started to back further into the darkness of the tunnel when he heard Albert's voice whispering

"Henry, are you here?"

With relief, Henry stepped forward and pulled the door open again. "What kept you?" he asked, with a bit of irony.

"Sorry" Alfred replied. "The guards at the gatehouse wanted to talk about the finding of Lady Anna so I took the opportunity of enquiring casually where she was being held."

"So where is Anna?" Henry asked excitedly.

"Let's get you out of there first" Alfred countered.

Together, they managed to move the barrel forward enough for Henry to squeeze past after, having left his sword just inside the tunnel. The barrel was obviously empty and merely acted as a dummy to hide the tunnel door, which Henry pulled closed behind him as he joined Alfred in the wine storage room.

"Excellent craftsmanship" Alfred said. "You would never know there was a door hidden behind that barrel."

Henry had brushed off cobwebs his clothes. "Did anyone question you about arriving at the castle so late?"

"No, I just mentioned to the guards that I was calling in on my way home and was hoping for a bite to eat after a hard day. I always make it a point to visit my friends in the kitchen when I come to the castle. They look after me, if you know what I mean."

"What about finding where the tunnel comes out?"

"Fortunately there was no one in the kitchen, so I thought that the wine storage room, which leads off the kitchen, was the obvious place. It's lucky that it starts here otherwise I could have been searching for hours."

Henry nodded as they walked back down the room towards a closed door at the end. When they reached it Alfred put his ear to it and listened. Faint voices could be heard talking. The two men stood there patiently, hoping that no one would decide to visit the wine storage room; but after a few minutes a voice was raised slightly and a door slammed followed by silence. They still hesitated to enter, sensing that someone else was still in the kitchen. Shortly, a chair scraped across the floor, followed by footsteps and the slamming of the door again. There were no further sounds so, rather than leave it too long in case someone came back, Alfred gingerly turned the handle of the door and opened it enough to see an empty kitchen bathed in light from some hanging lamps. Alfred pulled it open further and poked his head out.

"All clear" he said, throwing the door open. "Come on in Henry."

Henry entered the kitchen and stood there flabbergasted. He couldn't believe that he was actually standing in the same room that he had visited over nine hundred years in the future - a room that had a grass floor and no walls to speak of. Here, now, it was fully furnished and equipped. A long wooden table stood in the center of the room with the remains of supper, for the servants he guessed. The knife marks and other stains suggested that this table was also used for preparing the meals for the castle's residents; the noble ones at least. A few chairs were scattered about and it looked as though something had interrupted someone's meal - probably why the two occupants had left, which meant they could be back shortly. Against the opposite wall were three ovens with iron doors. Two were closed and one open as though someone was in the process of cleaning it out. A range had a fire underneath a medium sized iron pot with something steaming inside. Various kitchen utensils and an assortment of knives hung above the table and over to the right was a huge sink.

Alfred noticed the look on Henry's face. "Have you never seen a kitchen before Henry?"

"Not like this" he replied. "Only in mu ..." He managed to stop himself just in time.

"Well, we haven't got time to stand around here let's get going before someone retur ..."

But it was too late. They both stood apprehensively as the kitchen door opened and in rolled a short, plump, rosy faced woman in her forties.

"What the ..." The surprised look on her face changed to a beaming smile. "Alfred. What you doing 'ere? I didn't know you were in the castle. When did you arrive? And .." looking straight at Henry "'oo is this fine looking lad with you? I've never seen 'im before. 'e your assistant? I didn't know you were that busy from what you said to me last. Where's 'e from? Where are you from lad?" Looking back at Alfred she winked at him and said. "Claire will be glad to see you." She winked. "You know I mean. And .."

The woman was an incessant talker and Alfred had to speak loud to cut her off. "There's been some trouble in the forest, Betty. Someone broke into my hut and .." he didn't get very far.

"Ooh yeah, we've heard about some goings on in the forest. Still, as you've come 'ere I expect you want some supper and your friend."

Henry was about to question her about the 'events' in the forest but Alfred nudged him and put his finger to his lips as the woman made her way to a cupboard to get some food out for them. She continued to natter while she laid out bread, cheese and meats.

"Yes, it was only last night or more like the early hours of this morning, that there was some commotion. I was woken up by the guards shouting and some noisy villagers outside the gate. It seems that a Lady Anna whom 'is Lordship is to take for his wife, was kidnapped by some Frenchman."

Alfred and Henry glanced at each other with a smirk on their faces.

"Anyways, he apparently had her in that hut of yours Alfred."

"What!" Alfred exclaimed feigning surprise. "I heard that someone had been staying in it but didn't realize it was the Lady Anna and her kidnapper. They even ate my food, drank my ale and slept in my bed."

"Ooh, what a liberty" Betty replied, turning about and placing two bowls in front of them into which she had ladled whatever it was from the pot over the fire. She also pulled over a wooden box, grabbed a couple of spoons and plonked them down by the plates with two hunks of bread. "elp yourselves" she continued as the two men started eating. To Henry, the food didn't look particularly appetizing but tasted good. This woman was obviously a very good cook. She saw that Henry seemed to be enjoying it.

"Norman recipe" she said. "'is Lordship insists in having his meals cooked the way they were before he came over here."

"Excellent" Henry added.

The cook continued. "Where was I? Oh, yeah. Well, a villager saw the couple moving through the forest from the direction of the old village and went back to tell his friends. They decided that maybe if they could rescue her and return her to 'is Lordship then they might get some reward or relief from his taxes, 'cause earlier that day he had ridden through the village and ordered everyone to search for them and deliver them to his castle before he returned. 'Corse, theys were in a bit of a panic and were wondering what to do when along came John, that be the one who saw them, an' told 'em what 'e saw. Well, they decided that the couple would probably stay in the hut so decided to launch an attack during the night."

"And how do you know all this?" Henry couldn't help asking.

"Ah, that be Harold." She winked at Alfred. "He be another regular visitor to my kitchen. He stayed a while after the others had left and told me the whole story."

"Harold." Henry repeated, thinking of a Harold with an arrow sticking out of his eye on a long tapestry.

"Harold delivers the wood for the kitchen fires ... and the others in the castle."

"Oh."

"Well, when the villagers surprised the couple they managed to kill the Frenchman."

Once again Henry and Alfred exchanged glances both with looks of surprise on their faces. Fortunately, she read their expressions wrongly.

"I knows what you're thinking. Yes, he was a fierce warrior, as all Frenchmen are, but he was no match for our brave village lads. They chased him, badly wounded and with one arm hanging off so I'm told, into the swamp and he sank into it without a trace." She nodded her head at us vigorously. "That's why they couldn't deliver him to the castle to suffer for his sins."

"And the Lady Anna?" Henry couldn't help asking, even though Alfred shot him a warning glance not to be too inquisitive

"I was coming to that, my dear. They say the Lady was very grateful for being rescued. Although ..." She hesitated a few seconds and bit her lip. Her voice changed more to a whisper as they both leaned forward so that she didn't have to talk too loud.

"I heard some say that she struggled and denied that she had been kidnapped and was in the forest waiting for his Lordship in the hut. Most of the villagers didn't believe her and insisted that they must take her to the castle else they would all suffer. But the story I heard says that the maiden was extremely distressed, but didn't scream." The cook turned to refill their mugs whilst impatience got the better of Henry.

"And where"

Alfred coughed loudly with a choking sound, which stopped Henry abruptly.

The cook spun round. "That doesn't sound good, lad? 'Ere, better have a drink of this."

She plonked the mug down in front of him and then set Henry's down. Alfred drank pretending to find relief in the fluid.

"I thought that would do it." Betty said, and then continued.

Henry was trying to relax and let her complete her tale, but found it difficult knowing that Anna was in this castle and he badly wanted to know where she was before dawn when it might be too late. He could see the two of them sitting in this kitchen listening to her rabbiting on all night.

"Well, they brought the maiden here and put her in the ..." She was thinking, trying to remember where, whilst Henry was on tender hooks anxious to go and find her.

"...North Tower; or was it the West Tower." Henry relaxed somewhat, thinking that she probably meant the North West tower as he knew from his knowledge of the castle that it had four towers roughly at NW, NE, SE and SW points of the compass, apart from the two supporting the portcullis entrance.

"So she's safe and sound?" Alfred said, trying to anticipate any questions Henry might ask.

"Yes, quite safe. She has ladies in waiting watching over her, a guard outside her room and a guard at the tower entrance."

Henry's heart sank as he wondered how, or indeed if, they were going to get her out. Fortunately the incessant talker was providing them unwittingly with useful information. Her invaluable knowledge of the castle and its occupants, not surprising considering her responsibilities, was proving beneficial.

"Her room is directly above his Lordship's and below his resides the castle seneschal, Robert. He controls the habitation and maintenance of all the castle's rooms you know."

Henry nodded, lapping up the information with an idea now forming his mind.

She glanced at him. "He's about the same build as you and even looks a bit like you to look at." She nodded. "Like a gentleman."

"Him, a gentleman?" Alfred laughed loudly. "He couldn't be a gentleman if he tried."

"Oh, go on with you. You're only jealous, Alfred."

Henry chuckled to himself, thinking *And? More?*

'
"Oops, that reminds me" she suddenly said getting up. "It must be time for Robert's supper. He loves his bedtime gruel and always takes it in his room." She got up and made her way over to the steaming iron pot. She picked up a cloth from the table, removed the lid and reached down to pick up a bowl standing by the fire. Taking a ladle hanging to the right of the fire she proceeded to load up the bowl with contents from the pot. "He also likes to eat alone."

Henry saw an opportunity. "I'll take it up to him if you like."

A glance at Alfred showed a knowing smile on his face.

"W..e..l..l" she replied slowly. I suppose you could and it would save my weary legs, but the guards ..."

"Don't worry Beth" Alfred chipped in. "I'll accompany him."

"Oh, thank you" she said with look of relief on her face. "You really are a gentleman ..."

"Walter" he said.

"Walter" she repeated. "Oh, and I have also been instructed to take some to the Lady. She probably needs it after ... her traumatic day."

"Well that's settled" Alfred responded quickly. "As I have to go to make a report to the Lord Chamberlain it makes sense for us to deliver the suppers on our way. Save your weary legs as you say, Beth" he added giving the cook a peck on her cheek.

"Ooh Alfred, what a lad you are. If you are sure you don't mind, but ..."

"Don't worry, they all know me around here and quite enjoy a bit of conversation when I turn up."

"Yes, I've heard you are quite educated; more than the other villagers. Most Lords and guards speak well of you."

Alfred wandered around to find a couple of trays and placed them on the table for cook to set the bowls upon them with a couple of hunks of bread and goblets of wine. Henry began to feel concerned for Alfred. He was now putting himself at risk by exposing himself to those responsible for Anna's 'protection'. Henry would have to try and think of something to make him seem blameless.

"There we are then" the cook said. "Off you two go."

Alfred passed Anna's tray to Henry, picked up the seneschal's and nodded to Henry for him to follow, moving towards the door.

"Oh, Just a minute my dears." The cook rummaged through a drawer. "They'll be needing a couple of spoons for the gruel." She brought the spoons over and placed them on the trays and watched whilst Henry opened the door and followed Alfred out into a wide stone passageway with oil lamps hanging on the walls. Alfred turned left.

"This way to the North West tower."

Henry followed. As they made their way along the passage they passed a number of doors.

"Where do they lead to?" Henry asked.

"That one on the left leads to an outside passageway for disposing of rubbish" Alfred replied, pointing back to a door they had just passed. About half way along the

right hand wall stood two huge ornate double doors. "That's the main dining hall" Alfred said as they walked past.

They passed other doors leading to the courtyard and other rooms until they reached the end of the passage where it turned to the right. There was a door in the corner of the bend on the left. Following it round they saw a guard at the end of the next section standing outside another door at the next bend.

"Is that the door to the tower?" Henry asked, feeling a bit tense.

"Yes" confirmed Alfred.

As they approached the North West tower Henry noted that the guard was holding a long spear in his right hand with a sword hanging from his belt.

"I presume Anna is in there somewhere" Henry muttered quietly.

"Yes" was the simple reply.

"Have we got to get her past that guy?" Henry eyed the long spear and sword.

"Yes."

"How?"

"I don't know. Now stop talking."

The guard straightened up when saw the two of them approaching carrying the trays of food. He recognized Alfred but didn't smile. "One of those for me, Alfred?"

"I regret not James" Alfred replied, smiling.

They stopped in front of him, mainly because he was standing directly in front of the door.

"Haven't seen you for a while Alfred. What brings you here? His Lordship is away for a few days." He glanced down at the trays containing the bowls of gruel. "And these are for Robert and the Lady I presume." He looked up and stared at Henry. "So what be you bringing their suppers tonight? Where is Beth?"

"We just offered to bring them as I need to see the Lord Chamberlain and ..."

"Who's this then?" the guard asked, interrupting Alfred.

"This is an old cousin of mine whom I haven't seen for years" Alfred said. "He's just come to stay a few days and to help me out.

"What's your name then?" The guard asked.

"Walter" Henry replied.

"Where you from Walter?" He asked.

"I've been travelling; for many years now."

"You married?"

"No, never met the right woman." Henry thought that all these old English folk do is talk. Still, not much else to do he thought. No video games.

"So you're helping Alfred here ... deliver supper?"

"Beth was feeling a bit tired so I volunteered to carry the Lady's supper to her. Alfred's taking Robert's on his way to see the Lord Chamberlain to consult with him."

"He's not here. He accompanied Lord Montmery to wherever they have gone, but I believe his assistant is in his room. He won't be pleased to see you at this late hour, must be something very important."

'
"It is" Alfred replied "but I won't keep him long. I just need to pass on an important message."

The guard hesitated for a moment. "Ah, something to do with the maiden, no doubt. Now there's some excitement."

Henry was becoming impatient again, although still wondering how they were going to get Anna out.

Alfred nodded towards the tray. "So who is the lucky man on duty outside the Lady Anna's room?" Alfred asked with a chuckle.

"Oops, I'm sorry." He guard said. It must be getting cold and neither Robert nor the lady will like that and I'll be getting you into trouble. Oh, and Egbert left about an hour ago."

He grasped a large iron ring, pushed open the door and stepped aside. Alfred and Henry stepped into the base of the tower, which contained a small table to the left of the door upon which sat another tray containing half eaten food. Alfred turned round. The guard nodded and pulled the door closed. Spiral steps to their left ascended clockwise with the passage lit by torches fixed at intervals to the wall on the left. Another set of steps to the right descended into darkness, causing shivers up Henry's spine as he visualized them leading down to cold, damp dungeons. Alfred started thinking aloud.

"Let's see. First we have the seneschal's quarters, then Lord Montgomery's and above his is where the Lady Anna is held. Now we have to act fast and ... I don't know, talk about being unprepared."

"Surprise is the best form of attack." Henry said.

"I hope so ... in this instance especially." It is fortunate that this Egbert fellow isn't still on duty."

"So, you deliver the supper to the seneschal and I will go check up on Anna."

"And then?"

"We'll think of something."

They commenced climbing the winding staircase and soon stood outside the seneschals' door to glance at each another. Alfred nodded to signify 'go' for Henry to continue the climb whilst he knocked on the door.

"Entrée." Henry heard faintly, followed by a door opening, the sound of two voices and the door closing. He passed Lord Montgomery's door with a shiver down his spine. Although he had never seen the baron, his voice that he had heard near the waterfall conveyed to him a powerful man who could probably easily cut him to pieces if he so wished - which is what he probably would do if he turned up now. Henry continued up until he was outside what he now assumed was Anna's room. He knocked gently on the door. Silence. He knocked harder, hoping the sound didn't carry too far. '*Come on, come on*' he muttered to himself. He was about to knock again when he heard a movement and the door handle turn. He was just about to push the door open and start babbling about getting her out when it was opened fully to reveal a young woman in a plain white dress standing before him. She gasped and put her hand to her mouth.

"Mistress" she called softly.

Anna's voice came from somewhere behind the door. "Yes Isabelle? Who is it?"

"It ... it's a ... peasant my Lady." She looked down at the tray Henry was carrying. "With your supper."

"Just take it and bring it here please" came the reply.

She tried to take the tray but Henry held on to it slowly shaking his head, so she stepped aside to let Henry enter the room.

"Isabelle?" Anna called.

Henry carried the tray in and saw Anna sitting with her back to the door working with some embroidery. She was now dressed in a long maroon gown with a white belt around her slim waist. She turned around and let out a gasp of surprise when she saw him. This made the lady-in-waiting glance at Anna but, being behind Henry, she didn't see him put a finger to his lips and shook his head slowly.

Anna understood what he meant and shot out a question. "Yes? What do you want? Why didn't you let Isabelle take the tray from you?"

Henry bowed and spoke in a submissive manner. "If it pleases your ladyship I have been asked to escort your ladyship immediately to the Lord Chamberlain's office. He has a question regarding your capture by the Frenchman."

"At this time of night? Surely it can wait until morning?" She looked at the meal on the tray. "My supper will get cold."

"He is very insistent before your ladyship retires for the night and said it will only take a minute. The guard downstairs is waiting to escort you immediately."

"I shall accompany you my Lady" Isabelle offered.

"No. I will not be very long, Isabelle. Please wait for me here."

"But my"

Anna shot the girl a stern glance at which point she curtsied and backed away.

"I shall just get my shawl" Anna said, collecting the shawl laying on the bed. She soon reappeared and followed Henry out. He pulled the door closed and again indicated for her not to talk, as she seemed about to bombard him with questions. He heard a door close below and froze, hoping it wasn't the guard coming to check up. There was a pause followed by footsteps stealthily climbing the steps. They both glanced at each other and Henry turned, thinking about bolting further up the staircase or diving back into her room. The footsteps stopped as the other person sensed that someone else was on the staircase.

"Henry? Is that you?" Alfred's whispering voice brought instant relief to Henry's wildly beating heart. They started to descend and met him outside Lord Montmery's room. "What now?" Alfred asked, as softly as possible.

"I have an idea." Henry led them both down to the ground floor, indicated for them to duck into the darkness leading to the dungeons then spoke to the two of them. "Right; Anna, if we are seen or stopped by anyone, feign sickness and hang on to me as though you are really unwell. Alfred, you just do your best to back me up when necessary." Without giving it any further thought Henry turned the handle of the tower

door and pulled it part open as the guard quickly turned to see who it was. "Quickly man. Fetch the apothecary. Her Ladyship has taken sick and needs attention immediately."

The man hesitated and peered through the gap in the door.

Henry placed his foot behind the door in case the guard tried to push it open. "She is in her room ... lying on her bed. Quickly. She requires urgent attention."

The guard appeared undecided. "But ... I have my orders not to ..."

Henry didn't let him finish. "Orders? What orders? If you don't fetch help now the only orders will be to lop off your head."

"But the captain of the guard said under no ..."

Henry had to think fast. "Just go outside and call to one of the others to fetch the apothecary, but be quick before her Ladyship loses consciousness."

This seemed to unsettle him as he first hesitated then, constantly looking back, rapidly made his way towards the main doors leading to the outside courtyard. Henry beckoned for Anna and Alfred to join him by the tower door. "Ready?" he said, as they joined him."

The guard had reached the doors leading to the courtyard and pulled open one of them. He disappeared outside as Henry heard him calling out. He grabbed Anna's arm and started running with her and Alfred back towards the kitchen. As they drew level with the courtyard doors he glimpsed the guard outside with a couple of others approaching him to find out what he was shouting about. Henry paused briefly, then indicated for them to follow before the guard turned around and saw them. As they reached level with the doors to the dining room they heard footsteps coming along the passageway in the opposite direction. "Quickly, in the dining room" he said.

Alfred pulled open one of the doors and they darted inside closing the door gently behind them. Only just in time it seemed as they heard the footsteps pass by the door in the direction of the North West tower. Henry turned to look at the room and was momentarily stunned by the magnificence of the dining hall before Alfred pulled at his sleeve. Alfred opened the door and peered out. "He's gone. Quick, we must make haste."

They left the dining room and carried on towards the kitchen.

"Where are we going?" Anna said hurriedly. "There is no way out. There are guards everywhere and they will soon be searching for us."

Henry and Alfred ignored her and finally paused at the kitchen door. They looked at each other with the same thought: will Beth or anyone else be in there? They couldn't hang about, so shrugged their shoulders and burst in ready for a hurried explanation. She wasn't there. Sighing with relief, they immediately made for the storage room as Alfred quickly grabbed some items of food, which included some recently baked oaten cakes and containers of ale, and stuffed them into a bag hanging over a chair, catching up with the other two.

"Where are we going?" Anna asked again.

' "We'll explain later." Henry said. "Just follow."

Henry put his arm around her shoulders, guided her past the casks of wine towards the tunnel then released her as the two men helped her to navigate around the barrel hiding the tunnel door. Although they were in a hurry they managed to move the barrel back closer to the door, where Henry retrieved his sword, before ducking through it into the darkness. Descending the stone steps as quickly as they were able they made their way through the tunnel with linked hands past scuttling rats towards the outer door. On leaving the tunnel Alfred pulled the small outer door closed as Henry retrieved his hidden clothes. It was dark now and quiet except for the noise of nocturnal creatures. In the dim light of a partially moonlit sky Henry noticed the expression of surprise on Anna's face as he quickly changed back into his own clothes and buckled the sword to his waist. He was sure that an alarm must have been raised by now but there was no sound of any activity on the battlements. Henry began to imagine a stream of knights on horseback emerging from a lowered drawbridge, but to those inside there was no way the fugitives could have got out, since the only known exit was through the main gate. To the best of their knowledge, the secret passage was only known to Lord Montmery himself.

Anna moved close to Henry and put her arms around his neck. "You have saved me once again, Henry. I thought all was lost and that you had been killed, but here you are: my saviour, my chivalrous knight." With that, she took his face in her hands and kissed him on the lips. Although taken aback, Henry pulled her towards him and their lips met with passion. Alfred had turned around to speak with Henry and noted what he saw with concern. He was now worried about Henry and the obvious romantic relationship developing between them.

12. Lord Trellian's Estate

The knights, Edgar and Godfrey, were involved in a friendly practice duel when one of their pages came up to them.

"Yes Robert. What can I do for you?" Asked Edgar.

"There is a peasant by the name of Jean at the gate to see you."

Edgar glanced over at Godfrey. "Aha. Maybe our friend with the ears listened after all and has some news for us."

"For his sake he'd better."

They both laughed.

"Bring him to us" Edgar commanded the page.

"Yes my lord."

The man scurried off and soon returned with the sheepish looking Jean.

"Well? Do you have news for us friend Jean?"

Jean bowed nervously. "Yes my lord. I have arranged to meet my contact this evening at dusk down by the river. I said that it was vital that we meet urgently to pass him important information."

"Good." Edgar turned to his compatriot. "We are anxious to meet this fellow aren't we Godfrey?"

"Most eagerly Edgar." Godfrey turned to Jean. "What time did you arrange?"

"At the hour of seven."

"Good. We will position ourselves at about six, to be safe. A long wait maybe but better in case he suspects something and checks the area out beforehand."

"Agreed" replied Edgar, and turned to address Jean again. "We will meet you in your village and make our way to the rendez-vous point from there."

Jean nodded and backed away.

"For your sake this meeting had better take place."

With a hasty "My lord" Jean turned and disappeared back through the gate.

Edgar turned to Godfrey. "We had best report this to Lord Trellian. He is most anxious about his daughter." He paused for a moment. "Which reminds me; we have had no word of her safe delivery to Montmery. I think we should demand an audience with Montmery."

"I'll send a messenger" volunteered Godfrey "to arrange it right away."

They finished off with a quick spar before handing their weapons to their pages and making their way to Lord Trellian's quarters. Lord Trellian had agreed that something wasn't right and vowed that if anything happened to his daughter he would march against Montmery whatever the consequences.

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that" Godfrey said as they made their way to the village. "Not that I wouldn't mind the chance of having a go at some of that lot. After all, I hear Montmery may well be sympathetic to Matilda."

“I have heard the same” echoed Edgar.

They met Jean as agreed and followed him to the agreed meeting place. Once there, a quick scouting around revealed a couple of suitable hiding places flanking the area.

“Now we wait” Edgar said “while you” he said to Jean, “should go back to your village and return at the appointed time.”

Jean agreed and departed whilst Edgar and Godfrey settled in for a long wait.

It wasn’t long before their suspicions were confirmed. The faint sound of a horse and movement close by the river indicated that someone was checking the area out. The two knights peered through the bushes from their respective positions but neither could see anything. The sounds died away and all was quiet until the birds’ evening song started with the sun sinking slowly in the sky. The air grew cooler. It didn’t seem that long before some disturbance in the bushes not far from their hiding places frightened the birds. Then all went quiet again until Jean arrived. He sat down on an old fallen tree trunk waiting.

After a suitable period, when his contact felt it was safe, a slim man appeared from the side of the path and stood in front of Jean. “Well, what is this news you have?” The man asked. “You know what will happen if we get found out.”

Jean looked up at him. “They know about the arrows and how Harold was deceived.”

“How? How could they know? Unless ...”

“I didn’t say anything and they don’t even suspect me” Jean lied. “I overheard them talking and that they were going to start investigations.”

“If they don’t know of your or my involvement then we have nothing to fear. They can’t possibly link us to what happened.”

“But ...”

“You’re wasting my time Jean, you fool. You are just panicking and you know how risky it is for us meeting like this.”

“That it is” agreed Edgar, stepping out of his hiding place.

The man looked up in surprise. “A trap! Curse you Jean. You’ll pay for this.” The man turned to run off but Godfrey had worked his way around the man and blocked his way. He made an effort to avoid them but was quickly grabbed by both of them.

“That was an interesting conversation” said Godfrey.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Oh yes you do and we would like to hear more.”

“Then you will wait a long time. Now let me go or I’ll ...”

“Or you will what?” Joined in Edgar.

“I will report to Lord Montmery that ...”

“No you won’t. You will come with us to answer a few questions.”

The man struggled to release their grips but they held him too tightly and pushed him along in front of them.

“Let’s go back to our castle to have a little chat.”

He didn’t reply. Jean had got up from where he was sitting and was moving over to join them when a faint swishing sound and a thud followed by the man crying out and falling to the ground quickly revealed that he had just been shot in the back with an arrow. The two knights swiveled round drawing their swords and rushed to the side of the path under cover of the trees.

“He’s been shot with an arrow” yelled Jean, stating the obvious.

A second swish was followed by a yell from Jean as he collapsed on the ground with an arrow in his upper arm.

The two knights were moving quickly in the direction from which the arrows came. Suddenly, Edgar yelled out “There he is.”

As Jean lay groaning on the ground looking at his contact’s motionless body he heard the commotion amongst the trees behind him followed by the sound of a horse and someone riding off. Shortly, the two knights came back sheathing their swords.

“Damn fellow got away” Godfrey said walking up to the man lying on the ground.

“Are you injured?” Edgar asked Jean.

“Yes, and it hurts.”

Godfrey bent down to inspect the wound. “You will survive.” He looked down at the body on the ground. “Looks like he’s had it though. That’s ruined everything. Now we only have your word.”

Edgar was bending down over the prostrate form. “No, he’s still alive. We must hurry and get him back to the village and hope we can get something out of him before he expires.”

They carried him back to where their horses were hidden and laid him over one of them in front of Godfrey and made their way back to the village as quickly as possible.

Once they reached the village they took him to the priest’s house and managed to find someone who could attend to Jean’s wound whilst they made Montmery’s man as comfortable as possible on his back after cutting the shaft off the arrow still embedded in his back. He groaned as he regained consciousness and coughed up blood. The two knights standing over him looked at each other and shook their heads.

“Why? Why did they do it?” His voice was faint and raspy.

“You were a threat to them” Edgar replied.

“Am I going to die?”

“Yes, I believe you are and we are sorry. We hadn’t intended things to happen this way.”

“What about my wife and children? What will happen to them?”

Godfrey stepped forward. “As knights of this realm we swear to do what we can to help your family if you can help us to get your revenge for what they have done to you.”

The man's eyes were flickering and the coughing was getting worse. "How can I help you? Curse them. Curse them."

Edgar produced a parchment. "I had prepared a document stating what happened. It is a confession that just requires your signature or mark. I shall read it out to you." He raised the parchment in front of him and read.

'I, Cedric of Hambden, "We obtained you name from your friend Jean" swear on the Holy Bible that I did partake in a scheme to influence the outcome of a tournament between my lord and master Lord Montgomery and his neighbour Lord Trellian. I agreed to act as a liaison between Lord Montgomery's henchman and Jean Field, serf of Lord Trellian, and provide Jean Field with sub-standard arrows with which he would replace those belonging to Harold of Gwent. The tournament was conducted as a contest between our lords' two most skilled archers in settlement of s debt to Lord Montgomery. and it was agreed that in the contest Lord Trellian would have committed a substantial wager which he could not possibly settle in gold or silver. Being aware of Lord Trellian's weakness for gambling and his concern for his own people Lord Montgomery contrived to emerge from the contest in a position to demand his own form of payment. This being to acquire the daughter of Lord Trellian, the Lady Anna Trellian.

Against this confession I duly put my mark and may the Lord have mercy on my soul for the sin I have committed.

Cedric of Hambden

Edgar lowered the document. "Do you agree to sign this document?"

"Yes" came the weak reply.

"Are you able to append your name or mark?"

"Yes."

"That's fortunate" Godfrey muttered to Edgar.

They managed to raise the dying man to a half sitting position and had him scrawl a shaky signature on the parchment.

"Thank you" Edgar said quietly. "Now, are you able to tell us a little about your family so that we can help them as promised?"

He nodded and coughed more blood up. He was fading fast now so they lay him back down and Godfrey took some notes, straining to hear what the man was saying. Edgar was talking with Jean, who had been observing the scene with his arm bandaged up. "I will need a signed confession from you too Jean."

"Will I be executed for what I have done?"

“Not for me to decide. You may escape death for helping us and if this ends with Lady Anna being returned to us. If not ...” he didn’t finish.

Jean nodded his agreement. A gasp over by Godfrey accompanied by a shake of his head indicated that Cedric had just expired.

“Did you get anything?” Asked Edgar.

“Enough. We will see what we can do to help this poor wretch’s family.”

Covering the man up, they left the house and Godfrey asked a couple of villagers to arrange preservation of the body as best they could and started towards their horses. As Edgar helped Jean up, Godfrey turned back to the villagers.

“No word of this to anyone. It may be to our advantage to leave Lord Montgomery in some doubt as to whether the poor soul died or survived the arrow in his back.” He then joined his colleague and Jean. “Now let’s go present this along with our friend Jean’s confession to Lord Trellian. I believe we have enough evidence to discredit Montgomery now.”

They departed, leaving the villagers to deal with Cedric’s body.

In his rooms, Lord Trellian was spacing up and down, still angry with himself at being so weak in letting Anna go. He should have been more firm. She was a strong willed woman but could he really have stopped her? He tried to think positively when she might return to him, if she ever returned safely, with no word from her and now rumours that she had disappeared. Was she even alive? What was going on? He even considered riding to Montgomery’s and facing him but he knew Montgomery’s strength. Even though he had many brave and skilled knights and soldiers Montgomery had the strength in numbers. That’s what came of being a Norman lord as opposed to a Saxon thegn. His pacing was interrupted by a knock on the door.

“Enter.”

Edgar and Godfrey entered, with Edgar holding a couple of parchments in his hand. “My Lord. We have good news and bad.”

“Yes?” Lord Trellian responded eagerly, stopping in his tracks and looking at the documents Edgar was holding. “You have something?”

“That we have.” Edgar held the documents up. “Two confessions to the treachery that has been committed against you.”

“From whom?”

“One of Montgomery’s men and one of our own.”

“Our own? We have one of our own who has conspired against us? Where is he? What have you done with him?”

“At present he is in a cell until his trial for treasonable offences against you my lord, but more about him later. We must act fast to present this to Lord Montgomery and secure the release of your daughter.”

’
“The other confession: do you have the traitor who provided you with it and where is he?”

“He was one Lord Montgomery’s men and unfortunately he was murdered by one of his own, but not before we managed to obtain his signature on this confession.”

Edgar and Godfrey explained all that had happened whilst Lord Trellian scanned over both documents.

“If all goes well” said Godfrey “we promised to see that the scoundrel’s family wouldn’t suffer too much in spite of the man’s treacherous behaviour.”

Lord Trellian handed the documents back to Edgar. “See that Brother Hubert makes copies of these confessions then send a message to Lord Montgomery that I wish to see my daughter on the morrow to ensure that she is safe and sound. We will then present him with this evidence. If you wish to help the man’s family that is your prerogative. We will deal with this man Jean later.”

Edgar handed the documents to Godfrey, who left to find Brother Hubert and to arrange for the message to be sent to Lord Montgomery.

“We will leave in the morning.”

“Yes my Lord.”

Edgar left Lord Trellian, who sat down to ponder how he was going to handle the situation with Lord Montgomery. He slammed his fist on the desk in front of him. “What a fool I’ve been. Certainly a lesson there to be learnt.” He left the room to discuss the situation with Arnold Barlow.

13. The Abbey of Montraie

In the semi-darkness Henry, Anna and Alfred made their way back through the fields to the woods. Once there they felt free to talk without the need to constantly look back to see if anyone was following. Anna couldn't stop herself.

"Henry, Alfred, I will be forever in your debt for the risks you are both taking on my account. I am most honoured and do not deserve such loyalty."

"Let me ... us be the judge of that" Henry responded. "Such a courageous and ... lovely woman such as you deserves no less."

It may have been the way Henry responded that brought a certain look in Anna's expression and a glance from Alfred. There was a slightly embarrassed pause before Alfred interrupted.

"Now, quickly you two. Get to the abbey as fast and carefully as you can. You will find friends there. Ask for Father Brian. He will do his best to keep you safe and hidden for as long as possible."

"Sounds like we should be forever in gratitude to you Alfred for what you have done and are doing to help us, with the only reward being at great risk to yourself. It seems I owe you apologies for doubting you at our first meeting but"

"Enough, Henry" he interrupted. "The past is the past with good reason. Let us look to the future and do our best to save this lady from Montmery's evil clutches and hopefully, he will get his just desserts for his disloyalty to King Stephen."

He handed Henry the bag. "Here is some food for the journey which I grabbed from the kitchen." He then put a hand into his pocket and handed Henry some silver pieces. "Here, take this; you may need it. Now go. I will hopefully see you again to help you on the next leg of your journey."

"But ..."

"Don't worry about me Henry. I am a survivor. Please, make post haste but do not follow the road to the abbey as it passes through a village, which is best to avoid as there are sure to be spies lurking there."

Henry nodded and, with Anna, waved farewell as Alfred stood and watched them move quickly through the forest towards the main track between the castle and the abbey. In the darkness of the night they felt reasonably confident that they wouldn't meet any other travelers but Henry was still worried for Alfred's safety in having put himself at risk in helping Anna to escape.

Anna noticed that Henry was very quiet as they walked. "You are concerned about Alfred's wellbeing?"

"I certainly am but confident that he will know what to do and not take any more risks on our behalf."

“He has taken too many already. It may be to his advantage to make his way to my father’s estate. If Lord Montgomery has any suspicions he will torture and execute him.”

“That’s what I am afraid of.”

They continued to hasten as fast as they could, but it was far from easy in the darkness. Most of the time, they kept to the road, assured that they were unlikely to encounter any riders during the night. Occasionally they talked, albeit quietly, to break the silence and pass the time, but at the same time being alert to any unusual sounds that their ears might pick up. From past experience they never knew who might be lurking in the forest. Picturing Father Bernard’s map in his mind, Henry tried to visualize their progress to the abbey and, once they had departed there, the next leg of their journey. He knew that they couldn’t stay there indefinitely but it made him feel more comfortable knowing that Alfred would be there to help them again. Then, somehow their conversation drifted back to their relationship.

“Henry?”

“Yes Anna?”

“You know, I never expected to see you again after I was taken by those peasants to the castle.”

“What else could I do? I came here to rescue you and that is my mission ... whatever happens.”

“But once I was in there I didn’t think there would be anyway to get out and I thought you ... were dead.”

“It didn’t even enter my mind. I was so angry that I had let them take you and ... I couldn’t bear the thought of you in his clutches.”

“Henry, I feel that maybe I have not been appreciative enough for your caring and kindness. I didn’t realize how much”

“I cared for you?”

“Yes.”

“You haven’t treated me badly, Anna. Sometimes I feel am being too familiar. After all, you are a Lord’s daughter and I am a man ... searching for a future.”

There was a long pause before she suddenly stopped. He was about to ask her why but she approached him, stood before him looking up into his eyes and stretched up to kiss him on the lips again. He pulled her towards him and kissed her hard, his right hand wandering over her body through her clothes. She murmured softly responding to his actions then gently pulled herself away.

“I’m sorry Henry. I shouldn’t have done that.”

“You have no need to apologize. It should be me apologizing.”

“No Henry, no.”

“Anna, I think I’m falling in love with you.”

“But ...”

"No" he said quickly. "Don't say anything. I would give my life for you Anna and ... should I look like failing in my mission would rather ... take your life and my own, than let him have you."

"I am glad you said that Henry. You see, I was prepared to kill myself before submitting to him. In fact Father Bernard gave me a potion to take in that event which I have hidden on myself ... but no, we mustn't think of those things. We must look out for each other now."

Henry couldn't help but grasp her again to him running his hands down her back and around her small buttocks as their mouths met once again. "A pity you are wearing a rather conspicuous dress" he said, as they broke free.

"Yes. They took the clothes I was wearing and gave me the dress as being 'more suitable' for a Lord's future wife" she replied somewhat sarcastically.

They continued on their journey using the road before dawn arrived, when it would be safer to track through the forest.

The rest of the journey was uneventful and they were fortunate to find a suitable area of dense undergrowth where they managed to get some rest, consume the supplies Alfred had obtained for them and grab a few hours of sleep huddled together. They tried to avoid using the road as much as possible but there were times when the density of forest undergrowth forced them to risk it. Soon the land began to slope gently up to their left so they decided at this point to move away from the road before they got too close to the village. The sword came in handy on many occasions to help clear the way for them and, as dawn approached after a long trek, they at last seemed to be nearing the brow of the hill. It turned out to be more like an escarpment with a fairly steep drop the other side, but what pleased them most was to discover a magnificent vista of corn fields and forested woodland with the Abbey of Montraie set amongst grassland. Sheep grazed inside a low wall built several hundred yards around the abbey, which was in itself most impressive. Once again Henry stood there in amazement visualizing what the abbey looked like in the twentieth century. It was all very well looking at artists' impressions based on a few ruins but seeing it as it was originally built had him awestruck. Anna obviously noticed Henry staring into distance and expressed some concern.

"Henry, what is it? Can you see something?"

Henry shook his head and gave her hand a squeeze. "No my darling. The view just looks so idyllic and impressive."

From where they were standing they could just make out small figures emerging from within the high abbey walls and heading into the fields..

"They must be coming out to work in the fields." Henry commented. "We'd best be careful not to be seen if possible. One never knows who one can trust."

The descent was a lot more difficult than Henry had anticipated and the sun was rising high in the sky by the time they reached the bottom of the escarpment. It didn't

help with Anna wearing the long dress, which wasn't looking its best following their descent. They moved as fast as they could towards the low wall and eventually found a gate to pass through, unobserved as far they could tell by any of the monks. By the time they reached the huge doors to the abbey compound it was becoming quite warm and Anna was obviously very weary, as Henry was himself.

"Let's hope we'll be welcome here and that Alfred is right." Henry said.

"I could certainly do with a rest and to freshen up" Anna added.

They stood before the doors looking around until Anna pointed to the right of the door. "Look, is that a bell rope?"

Henry reached over, grabbed the rope and gave it a gentle pull. He guessed that matin was over and hoped that most, if not all, of the monks were out toiling in the fields; that would decrease the chance of someone seeing them and possibly reporting them to Lord Montmery. After a lengthy pause, when no one came to let them in, Henry gave the rope it a harder pull. Still nothing. The third time, he gave it a sharp tug. A clanging sound surprised him a little and its volume, he thought, was enough to waken the dead. He didn't dare pull it again and it seemed ages before a soft creaking sound prompted them to search the door for signs of an opening. Anna pointed at the centre of the left hand door. There was a small observation window and Henry sensed that someone was the other side waiting for them to show their faces. All he could see was a pair of eyes and the bridge of a nose.

"Yes. What business would you have at the abbey at this time of the morning?"

The voice was sharp and croaky like an old man's. They stood so that he could see them.

"We have come to seek refuge . . ." Henry started, but didn't have time to finish.

"We don't offer refuge to"

This time, he interrupted. "We were told to ask for Father Brian." There was no response. "By Alfred."

"I am the Lady Anna Trellian" Anna said.

Henry wondered whether it was wise for her to identify herself, but it seemed to be the key. The small observation door was slammed shut followed by the sound of a heavy bolt being slid back. Two more bolts came into play and soon the right hand door was opened just enough to allow them to squeeze through into the courtyard. Again, Henry stood there gaping at the buildings around him not really aware that the door had been closed.

The monk shuffled past them and croaked. "Follow me." He looked as old as his voice sounded. He was slightly stooped and his habit, which looked several sizes too big, dragged along the ground.

They were led across a pebbled courtyard to a large building on the right with two large doors on which large silver crosses were nailed. The abbey building itself was straight in front of them. Henry noticed some small gardens and vegetable plots between the courtyard and the walls of the surrounding buildings. Passing through the

set of doors they found themselves in ornately built cloisters surrounding a grassed area, in the centre of which they assumed was a well which was approached by a pebbled path. Ribbed stone arches supporting the floor above the cloisters were decorated with sculptured figures. They turned left along the first passage and then right into the next one. Half way along, a flight of steps led up to a small landing with doors to the left, right and in front of them. The monk beckoned them forward and tapped on the centre door.

A deep smooth voice answered slowly. "Enter."

The monk opened the door and disappeared inside for a few moments before emerging and indicating with a sweep of his hand for Henry and Anna to enter. As soon as they stepped inside, Henry's eyes found an elderly monk of about sixty seated at a sizeable desk busily writing in a large book with a stack of them to his left. A quick glance around the sparsely furnished cell revealed a stand containing a basin, presumably for washing, a cot with a blanket neatly folded on it and a wooden cupboard, which he presumed was a wardrobe of some sorts. As the door clicked shut the abbot looked up and surveyed them both for a few moments before saying

"Please sit, my children" followed by a short nod to their left.

They turned and saw a couple of stools which they moved over to, taking their seats.

"Welcome to the Abbey of Montraie. I am Father Brian" the abbot said and, slowly nodding his head towards Anna, "and you, I understand are Lady Anna Trellian."

"Yes Father" she replied

He turned towards Henry, looking rather quizzical. "And you my son. Who might you be?"

Henry didn't quite know how to respond so said the first thing that came into his head.

"My name is Henry Longford and I am, what you might call, the knight in shining armour who has rescued this maiden from the clutches of an evil lord."

The abbot gave him a stern and slightly angry look and slowly rose from the chair. He clasped his hands behind his back and commenced to move slowly around the room. "I do not take kindly to your impertinence, sir." He turned away from them followed by a long pause that made Henry regret his flippant statement.

"And who is this evil lord, Henry Longford?" The abbot eventually asked.

Henry had the feeling that he knew the answer and was probably testing him. "Lord Montgomery" he responded quickly.

"And why do you say this lord is evil? Did he seize this fair maiden and, if so, where and how?"

Henry started to relate the events beginning at the inn. "Well, I happened to be staying at this inn ..."

Anna nudged him and took over. "My Lord Abbot, as the daughter of Lord Trellian I was fated to become the unfortunate victim of my father's foibles."

The abbot nodded and turned to face them.

Anna continued. "Unfortunately my father has one great weakness of the flesh in that he gambles; recklessly. Lord Montgomery is very aware of this weakness and has until now been surprisingly benevolent when my father has run into hard times. I know now only too well what he was building up to. During his most recent gamble my father pledged a significant portion of his lands and, due to underhand treachery and cheating on the part of Lord Montgomery, lost. His remorse was great as he knew of Lord Montgomery's ruthlessness and the suffering that his people would have to endure under Montgomery's rule. However, Lord Montgomery offered one alternative." Anna looked down as she spoke. "He agreed to take me, in place of my father's lands. My father of course refused but I said that I was willing to make the sacrifice in order to protect my father's people." She went on to describe efforts by her father in seeking evidence to expose Lord Montgomery and outlined that they were seeking refuge to allow time for the investigations to be completed, mentioning Father Bernard's help and advice.

After she had finished, the abbot nodded and looked at Anna with an expression of benevolence. "That was very noble of you my dear." He then proceeded to sit back down at the desk resting his elbows on the surface and steeping his fingers. "However, as I understand it the tally was agreed and the debt paid. So, why are you here with this, er stranger ...", he gave Henry a disapproving look "... seeking refuge? Is this man an agent of your father come to take you back against the agreement?" Before either Henry or Anna could answer, he continued. "Mind you, I do not sanction gambling in any form. I consider it one of the greatest sins of man; but unfortunately God does not make all the laws."

There was a long pause, so Henry thought it timely to outline what had happened since their departure from the inn.

"I apologize for my rude behavior earlier, Lord Abbot, but if I may explain my part in this."

Anna nodded for Henry to continue, so he decided to commence by providing the abbot with a brief personal profile.

"I was returning from abroad following a period of study .."

"Study?" The abbot repeated with a sudden interest on his face. "What and where were you studying my son?"

Henry had to rack his brains to pick an appropriate subject rather than launch into 'information technology' or 'management accounting'.

"Er, French language and history mainly, but I am also studying German *Mittelhochdeutsch*."

"Hm, that is a very interesting choice of subjects. You must be well-travelled."

"Yes. You could say that I am a peripatetic sort of person."

"But your recent actions seem rather atypical for a scholar."

Before Henry could continue he then asked what Henry was dreading.

"Where did you study?"

He was about to say with Cistercian Monks but that would have been too vague, so hit upon Languedoc, which he had visited on holiday the year before embarking on this challenge. Henry only hoped that the abbot had not visited the region himself.

"Have you ever visited the south of France, Father?"

The abbot shook his head slowly. "No, I have not had the pleasure; why?"

"Because I actually studied at the Abbey of Valmagne in Languedoc."

The abbot's eyebrows lifted in anticipation of more enlightenment. "Languedoc. Interesting. But why so far to study? Why not here in England? I know of many who would be glad to tutor you and learn of your opinions."

"Well ..."

"No matter" the abbot finally said waving his hand from side to side. "Pray continue."

Henry outlined the most salient points of what had happened since they had left the inn culminating in Alfred's help in spiriting Anna out of the castle and the advice from Alfred to seek temporary sanctuary at the abbey. He paused hoping that his explanation would suffice but the monk merely nodded his head with raised eyebrows.

"Please continue."

"My actions were admittedly a little impulsive and I had no real plans as to where I would take Lady Anna other than to a place of safety until the evidence, which Lady Anna spoke of, materialized. Fortunately, Father Bernard suggested we head for Lord de Champ's estate, which is where we are now headed.

There was a long pause with Henry and Anna looking at each other waiting for the abbot to respond, but he continued to sit, now staring at his desk and taking hold of a crucifix hanging around his neck. Finally, he stood up again and turned away with his hands clasped behind his back. "I think that will be all for today. I have many things which demand my attention. Brother Geoffrey will escort you to rooms where you may rest and we will talk more of this tomorrow. Until then, please feel free to familiarize yourselves with the abbey's activities, without disturbing the monks at their work. Rest assured, you will be safe from ... any intrusions on your liberty as long as you remain within the confines of the abbey buildings. The lay brothers are very trustworthy and will look after your needs. He then proceeded to reach for a small bell on his desk and in response to the light tinkling sound the door opened and Brother Geoffrey, the one who had escorted them earlier, beckoned them to follow him.

"Brother Geoffrey."

"Yes, Lord Abbot?"

"Please escort these two people to the guest rooms and see to their needs."

"Yes Lord Abbot" the monk replied, and indicated for Henry and Anna to follow him as he exited the room.

Henry turned around as they reached the door. "We thank you Lord Abbot for your help and understanding. It is most appreciated."

The abbot did not reply and Henry noticed that had he sat back down at his desk as he closed the door behind him.

The couple followed the monk back down the steps and along more corridors until they reached one with a row of wooden doors. He stopped at one of them and opened it. "This is for the Lady Anna."

Henry indicated for Anna to enter. "Get some rest and I will see you shortly."

She grasped his hand squeezing it tightly before letting go and disappearing inside, pushing the door closed. Henry turned to enter the next room, the door of which the monk had opened for him.

"This one is for you, my son. I will ask one of the brothers to bring you and the Lady water and refreshments."

"Most kind of you" Henry replied.

Brother Geoffrey shuffled off and Henry entered the room. It was simply and sparsely furnished, as expected. There was a bed with its head against the wall with a large wooden cross above it. A pile of blankets lay at the bottom of the bed. A small table on one side of the bed had a candle and a large book which he presumed must be a bible. There was a cupboard with two doors and drawers beneath and another larger table with bowl and large jug. A desk and chair stood under a small window. Henry walked over to the bed and flopped down suddenly realizing how weary he was. He just about dozing off when there was a knock at the door.

"Please enter" he called out.

The door opened and two monks entered; one carrying a tray of food and mug of water, ale or wine, he assumed, and the other a large jug of hot water with a flannel and towel. The monk set them on the table and took the empty jug.

"Thank you" Henry said, as they both turned and left, closing the door behind them. Although he was tired he stripped off for a complete wash down. There was a nightshirt laid on the bed which he put on. Having consumed the food and drink he flopped back down on the bed and immediately fell asleep.

It was a disturbed sleep with a weird dream about attending an exhibition of medieval weapons and Anna, dressed in a bright red dress and red high heel shoes, asking if she could be of any assistance. Somehow, he knew her name was Alice. He declined the offer and watched her walk away but she was then grabbed by a roughly dressed man who told her that she was going with him. Henry lunged forward to tell the man to leave her alone but he dragged her out of the room and slammed the door. Henry rushed forward to follow but the door was locked so he started banging on it.

He was awoken by knocking his door. It took him a minute or two to wake and realize where he was. The knocking was repeated.

"Come in" he called out.

Brother Geoffrey entered again. "The abbot would like a word in private."

Henry had an inkling of what was coming and started thinking about what he was going to say in response to the expected questions. "I'll just get dressed" he replied, wondering what time it was.

“I will wait outside” the monk said, and left the room.

As Brother Geoffrey escorted Henry back to see the abbot he told him that if they were staying that night he could arrange for their clothes to be cleaned. Henry thanked him and followed him silently to the abbot’s room.

The door was slightly ajar as they paused outside but the abbot obviously sensed their presence and called out “Please enter Henry Longford.”

He was standing, facing away again as Henry entered but turned slowly and, with a grim expression on his face spoke with a much firmer voice than earlier. “I don’t know who you are or where you are from. You speak with a strange accent, admittedly English but with an accent I find hard to place. Your manners and actions are also a little unusual. I have that feeling that you are out of place here.”

What he meant by that Henry couldn’t hope to guess but it was also exactly what Alfred had said to him. It was a worry for him and, he knew, would remain so unless he could learn to blend in better.

“However, saying that” the abbot continued “I don’t know what your intentions are towards the Lady Anna, but I believe them to be honorable and, although I would never admit to being the best judge of character I feel that the Lord has sent you here for a purpose such that I am willing to offer you both limited sanctuary.”

“I thank you deeply Father. If ...”

“However, Lady Anna’s and particularly your presence here does pose many risks to our community. You understand that the Abbey of Montraie is within the estate of Lord Montmery and we are therefore beholden to him ... after God of course.”

“We will depart as soon as ...”

“I can offer sanctuary for just three days and then you must continue with your journey, wherever that might take you.”

“I ...”

“But if I receive any hint of Lord Montmery’s suspicions you will have to depart in haste. My brothers are very loyal to me and I pray that there is not a spy amongst them otherwise we will all be doomed.”

“Father. May ...”

“You may go now and rest. I trust that my brothers are attending to your needs?”

“More than we deserve” Henry replied.

He turned away again, as a sign of dismissal. “We will speak again.”

‘Talk about a one-sided conversation’ Henry thought, as he departed from the abbot’s presence. He felt like a school boy being reprimanded by the headmaster but for the first time since he had set foot in this time-warped he was beginning to feel a little more relaxed and keen to use the opportunity to plan their next move. As he wandered back down the corridor, which was now deserted and silent, he thought about the locality and how it differed so much from as he knew it in the 21st century. Geographically, of course, he knew where he was but the layout of the land was so different that he couldn’t quite get his bearings.

He had reached Anna's room and noticed that the door was slightly open. He paused outside and was about to knock, when he heard her whisper.

"Henry? Is that you?"

He pushed the door open and stepped inside to see Anna sitting on the bed looking at him. He felt himself staring at her thinking how lovely she looked. He started towards her noticing that she had also consumed the food from her tray and that her wash bowl had water in it. He presumed that she might also have had a strip wash and told her that the monks had offered to wash their clothes if they left them outside their rooms that night.

She nodded. "That is kind of them, but please come in a moment Henry and close the door."

His heart started racing at the thought of being alone with her alone in the room without the fear of being disturbed. It raced even more when he pushed the door closed and she came up to him throwing her arms around his neck.

"Henry. I am frightened. Please stay close to me. I have this constant fear that I will be snatched away from you again and taken to that ... castle."

"I will stay by you constantly" he replied, holding her closely. He released her and took her hands. "The abbot informed me that we may remain here for no more than three days, so we need to plan how we intend to reach Lord Geoffrey's estate."

"It is not too far from here now; in a south easterly direction. Father Bernard's map shows two villages before we reach his estate but we have been advised to avoid them as usual. Anyway, Alfred said he would join us."

"Of course; but come, for now let us visit some of the buildings within the monastery grounds. I'm anxious to see at first hand the various tasks the monks have to perform."

"Yes, that will help me to better understand what they do here and at other monasteries but also help pass the time."

They left her room and wandered around the monastery visiting the kitchen, where they sampled some excellent bread, the brew house, the infirmary and kitchen, amongst other places. They were also shown the garderobes, which weren't quite appropriate for Anna, being a woman, but she waved the problem aside with the comment. "I've been in a lot less suitable places but appreciate the privacy they can offer."

They found the monks very helpful and joined in some of their activities, which was appreciated. They enjoyed lunch at midday but declined to attend mass. Following supper at 6pm they sat in Anna's room and discussed various options once they had finally reached Geoffrey de Champ's estate and the need to contact Anna's father to ascertain progress on uncovering Montmery's cheating. Just after 8pm, with most of the monks having retired for the night, they decided to comply with monastery rules and retire for the night. Following a lengthy embrace, Henry left Anna and returned to his own room. As suggested by Brother Geoffrey, they left their clothing for laundering outside their rooms on stools, which had been placed there by the monks. Henry

, flopped once more on the bed, doused the candle and lay there thinking about all that had happened and how fortunate they had been so far; but would their luck continue, and how would it all end? It was a question that gnawed at his mind as he began to drift into much needed and welcome sleep.

Henry woke to darkness and the sound of a light tapping on his door, wondering why a monk, whom he presumed it was, would be waking him in the middle of the night. For a moment he began to panic. Perhaps Montmery had been alerted that he and Anna were here and that they needed to make a hasty departure. He leapt out of bed as the tapping continued and opened the door. Anna was standing there in her nightshirt, her long blonde hair falling around her shoulders. There were oil lamps burning in the corridor and even in the dim light he just stood looking at her and thinking how ravishing she looked. “Anna” he finally said. “What is the matter?”

“Henry” she replied hesitantly, “please can I stay with you tonight? I don’t feel safe even though the abbot has assured us that it is most unlikely that we will be discovered. I would feel much safer being with you.”

He didn’t quite know how to respond, thinking what the abbot might say if the monks became aware that they were in the same room for the night. However, he justified to himself his decision to let her stay with him not only in response to her pleading request but with the confidence that no one saw her enter his room.

“Have you already closed your door?”

“Yes” she replied, relaxing noticeably as he stepped back to let her enter his room.

“You take the bed and I will sleep in the chair” he suggested.

“Thank you Henry. I feel so much safer already,”

She stepped over to the bed, climbed in and lay on her side watching Henry as he plonked himself in the chair trying to adopt a sleeping position; but it was like trying to get to sleep in economy class on a long haul flight.

“You look most uncomfortable” she said after a few minutes.

“I will sort myself out in a minute” he replied, not very confidently.

“Why don’t you come over here with me?”

His heart started racing again.

“There isn’t room on that small bed.”

“If we lay sideways to each other there will be.”

It didn’t take him long to decide and, after a slight hesitation, he gladly left the hard chair and lay close against her due to the lack of width. She immediately snuggled closer to him as he put his free arm around her. The warmth of her body and her long soft hair close to his face unfortunately produced the normal human reaction in him and he eased his groin away from her to hide his ‘discomfort’.

“Do you wish to make love to me?”

It was an unexpected bombshell which provoked a simple answer.

“Yes.”

Awkwardly, she managed to turn to face him and they silently explored one another's bodies removing their nightshirts in the process. Any thoughts of him, a man from the 21st century, making love to a medieval Lord's daughter never entered Henry's mind as their love making culminated in the ecstasy that they both experienced. During those moments he knew he had to remain with her and protect her wherever it led him. Their sharing of a so natural act gave him strength and determination and he no longer felt so much alone and vulnerable in the alien world into which he had committed himself.

They must have dropped off to sleep as Henry awoke to the first light of dawn. Anna was still sleeping peacefully with his arm across her naked body. She remained sound asleep as he lifted the arm and eased himself off the bed. He crept over to the door, opened it carefully and peeked down the corridor. Fortunately, all was quiet and he guessed that monks had already gathered for matins. As he closed the door, Anna woke up.

"Where are you going Henry?"

"Nowhere my dear" he replied. "I was just checking that no one was around. I think it might be advisable for you to return to your room." He watched as her naked body emerged from beneath the bedclothes, then realized that he too was naked. He felt the urge coming on again but quickly donned the night shirt as she did her own.

"A pity we can't do that all over again" she said as she walked towards him.

"I wish" he replied. "But we don't really have time."

"No?"

"No."

Henry watched her leave and wished that they could remain together all the time. He watched her enter her own room then returned to pour cold water from the jug into the small basin that had been left in their rooms to freshen up his face and hands. He stroked the stubble on his face from the last few days' growth wishing that he could have a shave and looked over his body, amazed that it had been transported back in time nearly nine hundred years. Shortly he heard muffled voices moving along the corridor pausing briefly outside his room. He opened the door, trying to look as though he had just got up, and saw a couple of monks walking down the corridor away from him. He glanced down at the stool and noticed that their clothes had been returned neatly folded on the stools. He had just picked them up when the Abbot came down the corridor with a group of monks flowing around him as though he was being carried along like a leaf in a stream.

He stopped when he reached Henry. "You slept well my son?"

"Yes thank you Your Grace."

"Good. I don't hold with individuals engaged in supine activities,"

What did he mean by that? Did he know that he had spent the night with Anna or did he mean after their one-to-one chat. How could he have known that Anna was in his room, unless he had peeked in during the night.

‘ “I slept very well and feel much refreshed thank you.”

He glanced at the door to Anna’s room.

“I was about to see if Lady Anna was awake.”

“By all means, and then you must join us for breakfast. The Brothers will be gathering in the Chapter House for a while but I will send Brother Geoffrey to show you the way to the refectory when we have finished.” He paused. “But now I will leave you to get dressed.”

“Thank you” Henry replied as he watched the abbot glide away, before knocking gently on Anna’s door.

“Is that you Henry?” He heard her say softly through the door.

“Yes my love. It is I.” He was about to re-enter his own room. “Oh, your clothes are out here.”

“Thank you” she replied. “I will come and get them.” She opened her door and picked up her garments. “With whom were you talking?”

“The monks were just returning from matins and the abbot invited us to breakfast.

“He didn’t know we were together then” she replied rhetorically.

“Well, I am not so sure about that. He is very astute. I don’t think much happens around here that he doesn’t know or find out about.”

“Oh Henry, what will he think of me ... of you?”

“I expect he will think we are human beings full of sinful thoughts.”

“Henry, don’t mock” she giggled.

“Have you freshened up Anna?”

“Yes, although the water was cold.”

“Beggars can’t be choosers.”

“What do you mean by that?” she asked, with a questioning look on her face.

“I’ll explain later.” Again he had used an expression that, it was believed, had first made its appearance in the sixteenth century. “I must go and get dressed now before Brother Geoffrey comes to collect us.” He returned to his room and closed the door.

Having washed and dressed in his clean clothes, Henry left his room and tapped on Anna’s door. She emerged looking radiant as usual.

“Are you ready?” Henry asked. “I’m famished”

“So am I” she replied and hooked her arm in his. “Let’s go.”

She closed the door behind her just as Brother Geoffrey came shuffling down the corridor. He stopped when he saw them and beckoned for them to follow him. Anna released Henry’s arm and slipped her hand into his as they walked. Henry gave it a gentle squeeze as he turned to look at her. She looked so lovely with her long blonde hair now tied back in a more presentable ponytail, rather than falling about her shoulders, that Henry began to get twinges of fear that their happiness would not last and that this period of sanctuary was going to turn out to be brief interlude before the next set of challenges ahead of them. He knew that he was really out of his depth here in this era surrounded by tough battle-hardened knights who would make short work of

him. Although he could handle a sword he had not yet encountered any tough situations where he could really gauge or test his skills which led to him thinking again whether he would ever get back to his own time ... alive! Would he ever get back at all!

After threading their way along more corridors they finally reached a large ornate door that Brother Geoffrey opened, beckoning them to enter once again. It opened into the refectory with two long tables down its length. Either side of the tables sat the monks on benches each with a bowl of something steaming, a chunk of bread and a beaker of, presumably, water, ale or wine. A few glanced up as Henry and Anna entered, with many casting leering glances at her. The abbot sat at a smaller bench across the far end of the hall with a monk on his left. He beckoned the couple forward and indicated for them to sit either side of him. Henry sat to his left between him and the monk and Anna sat to his right, to be joined by Brother Geoffrey.

"You know Brother Geoffrey of course."

They both acknowledged him with a silent nod.

"This is Brother Julian, our Prior" he said, indicating the other monk with opened hand.

Henry and Anna acknowledged the presence of the two monks. Now two other monks came forward bringing bowls of the steaming soup with more whole-meal bread placing the food in front of them. They were also offered a choice of wine, ale or cider. Henry selected the cider and Anna the wine.

"Vegetable broth" said the abbot. "Sometimes we have poached egg or steamed vegetables."

"Thank you Your Grace" Anna replied. "It is most kind of you. It smells delicious."

At the abbot's signal, all the monks, Henry and Anna bowed their heads as the he mumbled grace in Latin: *'Enim quid sumus accipere, ut dominus faciat nobis grati'*. The monks then tucked in murmuring quietly amongst themselves. Following the abbot's lead Henry and Anna also started on the meal and ate in silence.

When they had finished the soup and bread, the abbot spoke to Henry without turning his head. "Have you thought any more about your plans my son?"

"Yes Your Grace. We are still of the opinion that we should seek temporary sanctuary with Geoffrey de Champ, should he be amenable, or attempt to reach the channel and seek sanctuary in France."

"To the safety of Languedoc maybe?"

"Yes. I believe it is far enough away to allow time for any investigations to be completed and the Lady Anna should be safe there."

"Does the Lady Anna agree with this er plan? Does she wish to take the risk of travelling through regions that may hide unknown dangers? What does her father feel about all this if he even knows, which somehow I doubt? Perhaps she would be better off remaining here with Lord Montmery in perhaps relative luxury. My opinion is that

such a beautiful woman will be much honoured at his court but then again Lord Montgomery is not the most ... accommodating person."

At one time Henry might have thought that maybe Lord Montgomery would have treated her well, but that impression was quickly dispelled after what they had overheard at the waterfall; besides, his feelings for Anna had now grown so deep that the mere thought of her in another man's arms engendered jealous feelings in him. He was very much aware that she did not want to be with Montgomery and actually feared for her own future. He looked over at Anna who returned his gaze and, he felt, knew what he was thinking from the knowing way she nodded at him.

"You may correct, Your Grace, but Lord Montgomery gained custody of Lady Anna by subterfuge and in the short term, yes, she would be looked after; but we believe that he will tire of her and has ulterior motives for wanting her in his grasp."

The abbot returned to finishing his breakfast in silence and rose to leave just as Henry was about to question him about his opinions of Lord Montgomery.

"May I ask ...?" Henry started.

"We need to talk again. Soon."

He didn't look at Henry when he spoke but glided off back down towards the exit. Henry glanced over at Anna who returned his look whilst the two brothers also departed.

"Your plans Henry? Would you really take me to France? How would we get there? What about my father? You understand that I cannot leave him."

"As the abbot said, Anna, we must talk." He dropped his voice and leaned over to her. "At this moment I have no alternative plan other than what we have so far agreed but we have to convey the impression that everything is under control whilst emphasizing the seriousness of the situation."

"Let's go outside a moment."

Anna nodded in agreement, so he took her hand and they retraced their steps back to the corridor and made their way to the cloisters. As they walked out into the quadrangle the morning sunshine was already warm and bathed a number of the fruit trees planted evenly around the perimeter. Henry looked over to the well occupying the centre and noticed four stone benches positioned symmetrically around it. A couple of them were already occupied by monks with heads down reading books, presumably religious scripts Henry thought. He guided Anna to one of them and they sat holding hands. Although they had made love during the night, he still felt the need to express his feelings for her but didn't quite know how to start.

"I love you Anna."

"And I love you Henry."

"I know we haven't known each other long but ever since I met you and as a result of what has happened since that day I feel that ..."

"Yes?"

“You are part of me, that my life would be empty without you. I ...”

“Yes?”

“Oh I don’t know. I guess I just want to be with you for the rest of my life.”

She turned to face him and gripped both his hands tightly. “I feel the same way Henry. If we are ever parted, if we cannot always be together, I feel my life would now be empty. Wherever you wish to go, I will go with you. All I ask is that we see my father before we leave England, if that is our only option. We must, though, be sure that Lord Montgomery believes I have been kidnapped until the situation has been resolved, then he cannot blame my father and the debt will be cleared.”

Henry nodded in agreement.

“So what do you really think we should do now?” Anna asked.

“As we agreed; head for Geoffrey de Champ’s estate as quickly as we can before Lord Montgomery catches up with us. Other than that I offer no other suggestion. I wish I felt more optimistic about the future, but at the moment I don’t.”

Henry started tossing negative thoughts in his mind once again. *What if they are caught before they reach safety? He’d be dead meat. And what should they do when or if they reach Geoffrey de Champ’s estate? They had to have some sort of plan. Fleeing to France, he had to admit to himself, was not really a viable option. There were too many unknowns. Was he foolish in believing that he could actually save Anna? He didn’t envisage that he would actually fall in love with her. What a mess. On reflection he should have declined and he would never have become involved in this dispute and its outcome, whatever that might have been.* His thoughts were interrupted by Anna.

“Henry?”

“Yes Anna?”

“You appear very worried again. I can see that you are not happy with this situation.”

“No Anna, I am not. I feel helpless and that I have made a mess of this whole enterprise. I’ve failed to deliver you from this Montgomery guy and just exposed us to uncertainty and danger. Even the abbot believes here is nothing wrong with the wager and wants us out.”

“No Henry, you are wrong. Nothing that has interrupted our plan or objective was your fault. I am just honoured that good people, like you and Father Bernard, considered me worthy of helping but I still wonder how you came to be involved. There are so many things that I don’t know about you, but my feelings for you now override those concerns and I know that in time you will tell me all about yourself.”

“Story of my life” he replied. “Rush into things and then try to find a way out.”

“Whatever happens, Henry, will not change the fact that we have fallen in love. You have done your best against all odds and if things do not work out I will have no regrets and I will love you to the end of my days.”

Henry felt a pang of guilt. He had to be more positive for both their sakes. “We will get through this, Anna, whatever it takes. I will not lose you.” He pulled her closer

, and wanted to kiss her but had to restrain himself so as not to offend the monastery's inhabitants, should any be watching them.

"I guess failure is not an option then" she said.

"No my darling, it isn't."

"Lucky I am to have you."

"And I am lucky that I have you."

They sat there in silence for a few moments watching monks on other benches reading.

"By the way Anna."

"Yes?"

"Lord Geoffrey de Champ, do you know him well? Is he trustworthy? What's to say that he won't just hand you or us over to Lord Montmery?"

"He and my father have been friends for many years. In fact he married one of my father's cousins, so there is a family connection."

"Well, that's certainly encouraging. I feel a bit more hopeful now."

"I am sure everything will work out well." She snuggled up close to him. "You are so kind, Henry, and I do feel safe with you." She moved away again when she noticed a monk glancing over in their direction. Henry got up from the seat taking her by the hand.

"Whilst we think about what we need for the next part of our journey maybe we should offer our services to the monastery for taking us in and providing us with food and lodgings."

"Yes. That is the least we can do."

They walked hand in hand through the cloisters and eventually found their way to the monastic garden where monks were busy tending various crops for consumption and medicinal purposes. They noticed a selection of garden tools by a small wooden door, which Henry presumed must be to a storeroom of some sort, and made their way over to them. Finding a couple of suitable implements they stepped over to the vegetable patch where the monks were growing cabbage, onions, leeks, parsley and other crops and started weeding. The monks tending the garden glanced over and nodded as a token of thanks. Henry noticed a bed of poppies and wondered whether they extracted opium. He approached one of the monks.

"Excuse me, Brother, but what do you use the poppy for?"

The monk looked up at him. "One of the most common uses is to treat open wounds. When the peel of the poppy stalk is ground and mixed with honey, it can be used as a plaster for such wounds."

"Thank you" Henry replied, returning to his weeding.

After about an hour Brother Geoffrey made an appearance and, seeing Henry and Anna busy weeding, came over and beckoned them to follow him.

"Looks like we are being summoned" Henry said quietly to Anna.

They brushed off their hands as best they could and followed the brother over to a small bench where he proceeded to offer them a bowl of water to wash their hands.

"Thank you brother" Henry said, nodding.

"Yes. Thank you" Anna added.

He then offered them a small cloth to dry their hands and then turned back towards the door to the cloisters. They followed in silence as he led them back up to the Abbot's quarters, pausing to knock at the door.

"Enter" commanded the familiar voice.

Brother Geoffrey pushed the door open for them and, once they had entered the room, closed it behind them.

"Please be seated my children."

They sat on the same stools as before placed in front of his desk. He was standing by the window through which rays of sunshine stabbed across the room bathing the two of them in the warmth.

"First, I wish to thank you for helping in the garden this morning. You are both guests here so please don't feel obliged to repay us."

"It's the least we can do under the circumstances. You have given us refuge, fed us and given us a bed for the night. It is but a small token of our appreciation."

He didn't reply but continued with another question. "I noticed you spent some time in the quadrangle this morning."

They glanced at each other and then back to the abbot nodding agreement.

"Have you developed a plan of what you intend to do when you reach Lord de Champ's estate?"

"Yes" Anna quickly replied. "The first thing we need to do is to ..."

She was interrupted by a loud and rapid knock at the door. The abbot glanced up.

"Enter."

The door opened and different monk entered.

"Ah, Brother Jon. Come in."

Brother Jon was a short monk with a young round face whom Henry guessed was in his twenties. He walked over to the abbot and whispered something in his ear. The abbot nodded.

"Thank you Brother."

The monk started to leave.

"No, wait a moment Brother."

He turned his attention back to Henry and Anna.

"We have a problem. It seems a group of soldiers and knights are heading this way."

Henry and Anna glanced fearfully at each other.

"I fear they may be looking for you. If they find you here it will be bad for all of us." He turned back to Brother Jon. "Brother, please take our guests to the library where they may immerse themselves amongst our books."

Henry could have sworn there was a smirk on his face when he made that statement. "But won't they search the library?" He questioned.

The Abbot held up a finger to stop him. "Brother Jon will guide you to the best area where you will not be disturbed. Now, please go quickly before Lord Montmery's men arrive."

Just as they were about to leave, the abbot spoke to Brother Jon again. "Oh, and please attend to the guest rooms."

Henry knew what he meant.

They hurried after Brother Jon who took them back through the cloisters to another door, which opened onto a flight of stone steps to the next level. The top opened onto a corridor which looked down on the quadrangle with its shrubs and benches. They observed a few monks below, reading. About half way round they entered another door which opened into a common room where a few monks were having a quiet conversation. Just inside this room a second door to the right led into a sizeable library. Bookshelves lined the walls on either side of a wide central aisle containing a number of writing desks with lamps perched on them. At the end of the room was a multi-arched window, which looked out over the abbey grounds. A couple of monks were perched on stools busily writing with quill pens in large books opened on their desks. Henry pictured them carefully writing the script on parchment with decorative coloured borders and illustrations. They took no notice as the three of them made their way down the aisle.

Brother Jon led them across the room to a set of ordinary looking bookshelves and stopped in front of one section. He removed a few books at the end of one of the middle shelves and put his hand into the space. With a sudden click he began to pull the shelving slowly as it rotated on a central axis. Imagining the weight, Henry stepped across to help him until it was open enough to reveal a small recess.

"Quickly. You should be safe in here."

They stepped into the recess behind the shelving and noticed a stone staircase leading down into the darkness. The monk put his hand on Henry's shoulder.

"If they get suspicious and suspect the shelving hides this secret passage, not that it is very likely, go down the steps. They lead to the outside of the monastery. From there you will be on your own. But pray God they do not find it."

"But it's dark" Henry countered.

The monk's response was to grab one of the desk lamps, which had a burning candle inside. "This should give you enough light. Now, hurry."

Henry took the lamp and watched the monk push the shelving back until near darkness enveloped them. The flickering light from the candle cast their shadows onto the stone walls. Anna moved close to Henry putting an arm around his waist.

"Well Anna, we may as well make ourselves at home." He whispered. "We could be here for quite a while."

She sat down with him a few steps down from the top of the staircase. Henry sat angled against the wall putting his arm around Anna as she sat snuggled up close to him. Even in this situation he felt his heart racing again in excitement at her being so close.

They sat silent for short while before she turned her face towards him. "Henry, I can hear your heart pounding. Are you afraid?"

"I suppose I should be; but no, it's just ... this." He kissed her and they were soon in one another's arms again.

"I wish this could last forever Henry."

"So do I."

After what seemed a long time they eventually pulled themselves apart.

"What is this Geoffrey de Champ fellow like then?"

"Well, I have already told you that he is a Norman and loyal to Stephen but very astute and very much aware of the politics of the conflicts taking place around us. He has a strong and very loyal army and knights with high morals. He is firm but very fair in his dealings with people."

"Someone not to be crossed then."

"That is true. Also, he doesn't really like or trust Lord Montgomery. However, he does believe in chivalry and abides by all agreements. I must also admit that if he felt that Montgomery had won me by fair means he would be the first to insist that I go to him."

"Well then, let's hope enough evidence will be uncovered to change his mind."

Their conversation continued on the subject until they heard the sound of movement and voices in the library. Clasp ing each other's hands tightly they sat there quietly, listening to men searching the room. There were a few crashing sounds and voices of complaint but after some shouting the sounds receded and it was soon quiet once again. For what seemed a long time they sat in silence, apart from a few comments about books and reading. The stone step was getting uncomfortably hard and Henry was on the verge of suggesting that maybe it was safe to venture out. He raised himself up and carefully pushed at the back of the shelving; to no avail. There was obviously some catch that needed to be released, which is what happened the next instant when they heard a 'click' as the shelving was swung open and Brother John stood there once more.

"You can come out now. They have left and are now far away. The abbot was right. They were looking for you and were threatening his holiness with severe punishment if they found that he had been hiding 'the two fugitives'"

"It seems that we have a lot to thank the abbot for."

"Yes, he is a good man. I have been instructed to take you to him now."

"Lead the way Brother John."

He led them back down the stairs, through the cloisters and to the abbot's quarters, with which they were getting quite familiar. Following the usual knock on the door and

the familiar command they entered and sat on the two stools that were drawn up in front of his desk once again. He was quite blunt in his next comment.

"Needless to say, you two are becoming a risk to the abbey."

"We understand that your holiness and do not wish any trouble upon you. We will leave first thing in the morning."

He held up his hand. "No, no. No need of that. You can stay a while longer if you wish; let us say five days. I am sure you will be safe for that length of time." He turned to face the window. "I still have much I wish to discuss with you. Your travels and knowledge of the world beyond these shores are of interest to me." He swiveled around. "But we can start tomorrow. We have had enough excitement for today and I don't believe we will be receiving any more unwelcome visitors for a while."

After he dismissed them, they returned to helping out around the abbey until supper time. Following the meal they spent a warm evening wandering around the abbey grounds deciding when to leave whilst silently enjoying the delicate aromas of the herbs and plants. It was certainly what one might call a romantic evening and they eventually found themselves seated again on one of the stone benches in the quadrangle. Anna snuggled up to Henry and somehow he sensed what was coming.

"Henry?"

"Yes my love."

"When you were fighting those men in the forest ..."

"I know what you are going to say Anna."

"What?"

"Will you marry me, Anna?" He was only half surprised that she didn't respond immediately, surprising himself more in fact. *How absurd. What was he thinking? Asking a woman over a thousand years younger than him to be his wife.* He nearly felt like laughing but there was too much turmoil inside him. They sat there for a while in silence listening to evening bird song.

Eventually, she turned and clasped his hands in hers. "Do you really want that Henry? I know we have shared some wonderful moments together but please do not feel obliged to have to wed me."

In some respects he felt disappointed and taken aback. "Do you wish to become my wife, Anna?"

She gripped his hands tighter. "Yes, of course. I would love to be your wife, but unfortunately it is not that simple."

"Why not? What's the problem?" He felt a pang of disappointment. After all, marrying her would, in effect, dictate his future; meaning that he would be obliged to remain here, in the past. Could he really accept that?

Anna was staring into his eyes; hers showing sorrow and disappointment. "I am the daughter of a lord and as such I would be expected to marry someone of equal rank." She shook her head back and forth. "We know nothing about you or where you come from; your wealth or your standing. Whilst I can cast aside those superficial

characteristics I don't think my father would. He would not sanction my marriage to you."

Of course. Henry thought to himself. *This is the middle ages when alliances were arranged through marriages.*

"Oh Henry, if only there was a way ..."

His response was to stand up and pull her close to him. "I won't give up that easily Anna. I will find a way. I have to because I want you so much."

She pressed herself against him. "Oh Henry."

Regardless who might be watching, they kissed passionately before walking back to the guest rooms. That night, he slipped into her room.

Over the following days before their departure they helped around the monastery as best they could when not involved in discussions with the abbot. They concluded that the longer their whereabouts was not known the longer her father's knights would have to uncover Lord Montgomery's cheating. Two days before they agreed to leave abbey the Abbot summoned them for the last time. This time they were supplied with fruit and goblets of wine, which made Henry think that they might be in for the long haul. On this occasion, however, Brother Jon was sitting at a small desk in a corner with a quill and parchment. He presumed that the monk was going to make notes of their conversation. The abbot confirmed this when he stated that knowledge brings power and influence.

"The pen is mightier than the sword" Henry couldn't help but reply, then regretted the nineteenth century version of the 7th century phrase 'The word is mightier than the sword'.

The abbot gave him a searching look. "An interesting statement" he said "and in some situations very true."

The monk was writing furiously. The next set of questions now presented challenges to Henry.

"Tell me, Henry Longford, how much have you travelled the world?"

He was now obliged to provide measured but meaningful answers and had to gamble that the abbot had not himself travelled a great deal and that he had sparse knowledge of the world. He knew that he had to be very careful with his replies.

"I have travelled to many foreign lands, seen many wonders and met many strange peoples."

"I do hear of lands in the east and a people with strange eyes and dark hair."

Henry had to rack his brains to try and remember what he had learnt from history books. "Ah, that would be a land called China which is ruled by a dynasty known as the Sung. There have been many wars in that land and many dynasties."

"Much like our own land one might say."

"That is partially true. In fact there is much conflict in the world today with near constant battles between various groups fighting each other."

He looked at Henry with a knowing expression. "But that's the way it has always been so, isn't it? And most likely always will be." He fell silent for some moments staring into Henry's eyes as though he expected them to verify the answers. "What is your opinion Henry? Do you think men will ever put aside their greed and lust for power; learn to share the fruits of this earth and live in peace?"

"Yes Father. I believe a time will come when we will all work for the common good of this world and nations will unite to conquer evil and hate."

"That is very prescient of you and a very bold statement to make but I am afraid that I think you are under an illusion." He turned his attention to Anna. "And what of you my dear? Do you share this man's vision of the world?"

"If there are others who share Henry's ideals and faith in mankind my Lord Abbot, then I do believe that there is hope for this world." She looked at Henry intently with eyes which seemed to shine with feelings for him. "This man is not only chivalrous and honest but a person in whom I would put my complete trust" she continued.

The abbot leant back in his chair. "Very loyal." He flicked his eyes between them. "I am aware that this man has strong feelings for you, Lady Anna, and I can see why. I am also very much aware that the feelings are mutual." He rose from the chair and began to walk about the room. "But tell me more about your travels, Henry. You have much to teach me."

Henry related as best he could his knowledge of relevant historical facts of the period for as many countries that he dared. It was sufficient to impress the abbot without him sounding too knowledgeable.

Finally the abbot held up a hand for Henry to stop; the chronologist also stopped writing. "You are a very unusual fellow Henry and I must admit to never having met a person like you before. Your knowledge of things is very extensive but can be dangerous I fear. You will have to be very careful. There are many who might consider you a threat. If you really love this woman and plan to wed her you have to be doubly careful. She is a very beautiful woman and, I hear, much desired."

Anna looked embarrassed.

"I am very much aware of that and certainly appreciate the advice you have given me. It reinforces my own perception of my predicament" Henry responded.

The abbot was now facing away from them looking up at the window. After a long silence he turned and looked at Anna. "Will you please excuse us my dear. I wish to talk with Henry about more other matters."

"Of course Lord Abbot." Anna turned to Henry. "I will see you later Henry?"

"Of course." Henry suspected that 'other matters' was an excuse for a more intensive interrogation, which came quickly.

The abbot picked up a piece of parchment and took the quill from Brother Jon, dismissing him in the process. "Show me where this land China is and other places you have visited on your travels."

Brother Jon left the room.

Now Henry was stumped. He could hardly draw a map of the world as he knew it; it would be too exact. He had no firm idea of what maps showed during the twelfth century.

“You hesitate, Henry.”

Henry started drawing, trying not to make coastlines and continents too exact. He sketched out the land masses as far as China, but excluding Africa south of the Sahara and, of course, the Americas. When he had finished, the abbot picked it up and studied it for a moment before opening a drawer in his desk. He put his hand in and fumbled until there was a faint click. He then took out a similar parchment, which he spread out on the desk, and a small box.

“What the ...” Henry started to say. He was looking at a map similar map to the one that he had just drawn.

The abbot opened the box and took something out. “Another traveller passed this way many years ago and left this behind.”

He placed a Spanish doubloon from around the 17th century on top of the map. Henry stared at it in amazement.

“Interesting, don’t you think?”

“Certainly” Henry replied, trying not to display any sign of recognition. “Where does it come from?”

“I thought you might tell me that, what with all your travels.”

Henry picked it up and gave the pretense of studying it hard; although inwardly he was puzzled but quite thrilled to have it in his hand. “Well, at a guess ...”

“It doesn’t matter” the abbot interrupted, taking it from him and returning it to the box. He made a note on the map Henry had drawn, rolled the two up and placed them both with the box in the drawer, followed by the click. He then closed the drawer and sat down.

“Many strange things happen from time to time.” The abbot continued.

“That is true” Henry agreed.

“Things that cannot always be explained very easily” he continued. “Sometimes, it is best not to know; for one’s own good I might add.”

He seemed to struggle a bit for words and Henry sensed that he knew a lot more than he was saying. “There are rumours that ...”

A knock at the door stopped him dead.

“Enter.”

The door opened and Brother John poked his head inside. “Supper is ready your Grace. They are waiting for you.”

“Thank you Brother Jon, we will be with you shortly.”

He turned his attention back to Henry. “I think perhaps that you are now aware that I may know more about you than you think. You will be careful.”

“I will.”

“You will forget this conversation.”

“What conversation?” Henry replied with eyebrows raised.

He smiled and accompanied Henry out of the room towards the refectory. “Go seek out your Lady Anna and join us for supper.”

Henry nodded. “I will.”

“You must visit Old Sarum some time. A charming city and splendid cathedral.”

“I will and look forward to it.” Henry’s last thoughts before setting eyes on Anna, who was busy talking with a group of monks were: *He knows. He knows how I got here. There must be a way back. Is there a connection with Old Sarum?* From then on, these thoughts remained on his mind.

He felt encouraged after the talk with the abbot, more hopeful and no longer a lone alien in this era. In fact he felt so good that even Anna was surprised at the attention he devoted to her that evening and especially during the night.

14. The First Village

They were summoned one last time to the abbot on the morning of their departure. Henry stepped forward and took the Abbot's hand. "We thank you from the bottom of our hearts, Your Grace, firstly for believing in us and secondly for all the help you have given us putting yourself and the monastery at risk."

"You are but two young people who I believe can bring some goodness in these troubled times, but I must admit" he added as an aside "that I still have many unanswered questions about you, Henry, and your origins."

They exchanged light laughter before the abbot stepped forward and briefly embraced each of them both before handing them over to Brother Geoffrey, who was standing in the doorway. As they walked through the monastery to the exit, those monks, who were out attending to their various duties, looked up and waved to them. After a last farewell and thanks to Brother Geoffrey they were finally on the open road with monk's habits over their own clothes, which in Anna's case was a shortened chemise. The gown she had been issued with at Lord Montmery's castle was much too long, bulky and of course very noticeable, so she had left it at the monastery for their disposal. The abbot instructed Brother Geoffrey to burn it.

With Henry carrying a leather carrier containing mead, a supply of bread, cheese and some salted meat for their journey they were very soon out of sight of the monastery. In spite of the inspiration and encouragement Henry had received in the abbey he still had some feelings of trepidation now that they were away from the safety and security of that environment. At least he was thankful that he had a sword and knew how to handle it to some degree, which he now knew was another reason why he was selected for this mission.

They walked hand in hand with their cowls down, thankful that the weather continued to be clement. Much of their conversation revolved around their environment and Anna seemed to find Henry's interest in nature quite absorbing. She was surprised when he excitedly pointed out deer as they crossed their path or glimpsed in the forest around them.

"But there are so many around us!" she had exclaimed. "We see them all the time."

Time and again Henry wished that he could tell her the truth about himself but felt that it would be too much of a shock to her, not that she would believe him, and might well impact their relationship. However, deep inside he knew that a time must come when he might be forced to reveal all to her. They had already expressed their love for each other and, even though he had proposed to her, he had many doubts as to whether marriage was a possible option; but there again in medieval times if a couple had sex then they were expected to wed. He had certainly allowed his heart and not his head to

lead the development of this relationship, but isn't that what human nature is all about? She was certainly aware of his periods of deep thought.

"Henry" she said, following a long period of silence.

"Yes Anna?"

"Something is troubling you again, isn't it."

"Oh, it's nothing."

"Yes there is. I recognize the signs now." She took hold of his arm. "Please do not worry about me. Henry. You have risked a great deal to help me already and although I know that our love for each other is deep you must give thought to your own safety. Your sudden appearance and, should I say, unusual accent and way of speaking, which may be result of your travels, makes you stand out. You will always come under suspicion and be at risk. Whatever happens to me, God will be my protector and guide."

She was speaking the truth of course. He had twenty first century mannerisms in an era a thousand years prior. He had to be continually on his guard as to what he said and the phraseologies he used. He was thinking that maybe he should have tried more strongly to distance himself from her, but he knew he could not have resisted the strong desire that had steadily taken him over since the first time he set eyes upon her beauty. The silence obviously worried her, so he tried starting up a new line of conversation.

"Do you think your father's men will manage to uncover Lord Montmery's cheating?"

"Yes" she responded eagerly. "Before I left, some of our knights were about to set off to seek out a villager who was suspected of being involved." She grew a little pensive. "I keep wondering how they are getting on. If they can prove our suspicions I can return to my father and then maybe we could" She gripped his hand tightly and looked into his face. Even dressed in the monk's habit she looked so beautiful. They stopped and embraced each other tightly. He was about to utter more words of love when she quickly pulled herself away. He was momentarily hurt thinking that he had done something to upset her until she spoke quickly and stopped, listening.

"Someone's coming" she warned.

Anna was looking ahead in the direction they were travelling. Henry also peered hard and could just make out some figures in the distance. It was soon obvious that they were on horseback and approaching them at a fair pace. As it was likely that they had been seen, they decided it best not to duck into the surrounding forest and take the risk. Henry felt for his sword beneath his habit as they continued walking, with Anna holding her head down so that her face was hidden by her cowl which she had pulled up over her head. As the horsemen approached, Henry could see that it was a group of soldiers or knights, presumably searching for them. He was now feeling nervous, bearing in mind what Anna had implied about him being 'out of place' here. As the horsemen neared them they slowed down to a trot. At the same time, Henry and Anna moved over to the side of the road to let them pass. They didn't of course, but pulled up

their horses to a stop. There were half a dozen of them and consisted of two knights and four soldiers. One of the knights, a handsome well-built man, called out to them.

“Good day Brothers, and how are you this bright and cheerful day?”

“Good day my lord.” Henry replied. “We are well and ...” sweeping his arm as though he was presenting someone to him “... thankful for the beauty of these lands that the Lord has provided.” *‘And me, an atheist’* he thought to himself.

“I presume you two servants of the Lord are from the monastery.”

“That we are my lord.”

“So where might you be off to so far from the monastery and on foot?”

“St Nicholas’s priory in Arundel my lord.”

“Arundel? That is certainly a long way by foot. But tell me, on what mission are you?”

“‘Tis a journey of penance my lord. My ...”

He didn’t give Henry a chance to finish what he was going to say which, as it turned out, was just as well as his response might have invited more questions. However, the situation was about to become more tense.

“Your fellow brother doesn’t talk much does he” the knight interrupted.

“No, she ... he is under a vow of silence my Lord.”

Fortunately, the knight didn’t notice Henry’s near faux par.

“Then unlike you, Brother, he is also not very appreciative of ’the wonders of our Lord then?” The knight added somewhat sarcastically. “Hiding his face beneath that cowl and staring at the ground. He needs to look where he is going ... might bump into something.” He moved his horse directly in front of Anna as they all guffawed with laughter.

Henry tensed for a moment feeling again for the sword under his robe. He knew, however, that he would be helpless against this bunch. The knight looked directly at Anna.

“Looking for your feet brother?” Even more loud laughter. “Perhaps you don’t have any under that habit.”

Henry and Anna both remained silent. Henry was on tenterhooks and imagined how Anna must be feeling.

“Hm, the question is obviously too difficult for you.” The laughter was beginning to irritate Henry.

“Right then, let’s try another. Have you seen two fugitives during your journey or even before you left the monastery? One will have been a good-looking woman and the other some foreign looking scoundrel, a Frenchman by all accounts.”

“We have not my lord” Henry responded quickly.

“I am speaking to your Brother here. Can’t he answer for himself?”

“As I stated my lord, he is under a vow of silence.”

“For what?”

“For sinning my lord.”

‘
“Hm. I didn’t know monks were capable of sin. My guess is that it was over a woman; why else would man sin.” He pulled out his sword and Henry felt the tension building up. Unless he could extricate them from this situation it would be a failed mission and his certain death.

“Let’s have a look at this sinner to enable us to determine what sins he might have committed.” He hooked the tip of the sword under Anna’s cowl and was about to lift it up and destroy Henry’s and Anna’s hopes. Henry sensed Anna’s tension beneath her habit.

He had to think of something quickly. “Please my lord. My brother has undertaken not only a vow of silence but to avoid face-to-face contact with the rest of humanity until he has absolved himself in the eyes of God. Please respect his search for penance.”

The knight hesitated. “Then why is he on the road whereby he will be meeting many people?”

“That is why I am accompanying him on the pilgrimage to Arundel where the prior has agreed to oversee various depredations and self-humiliation.”

“It must indeed have been some sin for such punishment. What might this sin be?” Surprisingly, Henry’s reply came quicker than he expected. “Sins of the flesh my lord.”

There was a momentary silence followed by guffaws of laughter again.

“Ha! I guessed as much. Then we really do have another man amongst us” he bellowed. “I certainly know not of any other man who would deign to punish himself after such a rewarding experience.”

Even with the laughter and jollity amongst the group Henry felt that the situation was still not over. He continued to grip his sword under his habit.

“Now I must certainly see this new man amongst us.”

“Please my lord, have some respect for the Lord’s servant. If you expose him to gaze upon us it will only compound his shame and multiply the punishment he will have to inflict upon himself.”

“So what? Maybe I’ll come and watch.”

Henry felt his hand gripping the sword even tighter and cast his eyes about for some futile attempt to escape but was saved by the knight’s colleague.

“Enough Guy. You have had your fun. Leave the poor wretch alone and let us continue our search. Time is passing and we must report to our lordship when we return.”

The knight called Guy hesitated and to Henry’s great relief lowered his sword and returned it to the scabbard. “Well, I bid you good day brothers.” Addressing himself directly at Anna, who still stood motionless, he added “Enjoy your penance brother.” As they started to ride off, Guy turned once more. “If you feel like sinning again, look me up and I will introduce you to some really sinful activities.”

The laughter was even more uproarious until they were out of earshot and riding off in the distance.

Shortly, Anna lifted her head and looked up and down the road before throwing back her cowl and pummeling her fists against Henry's chest.

"What do you mean 'sins of the flesh'?" She demanded.

"Only that ..." Henry began.

"I would say that you are the bigger sinner. Seducing me when I was vulnerable."

"Seducing you? Huh, I think we were both very willing participants." He began to chuckle.

"What are you laughing at?"

"Well, although at the time I must admit to being very tense and fearful, I might add, I can see the humour in the situation and wish I could have laughed with them."

"What? At my humiliation?"

"No, no. Not at you personally Anna. You know how much I care and respect you."

They drew together again, hugging each other tightly.

"I know Henry. Every hour and every day I long for this ordeal to come to an end so that we can live a normal life." She seemed to brighten up as they separated to continue their journey.

"Still, you must admit that it has been a rather exciting, even though things could have turned out a lot worse."

"Yes, but we are still in much danger until we have left Montgomery's estate and the whole situation has been resolved."

Shortly before dusk, they reached a small village. Although they had rested several times on their journey they now felt that they couldn't walk any further. They knew they were taking a risk but there were very few people about and the one or two souls whom they did encounter, Henry just nodded to them or bid them well as they headed for the local inn that a villager had told them was at the end of the street. Henry noticed the many rectangular timber framed houses with their thatched roofs and walls of wattle, turf and mud. Finally they found the inn, which appeared to be the only building with two floors and where the owner was pleased to offer them a meal and a room for the night. Fortunately there were no other customers in the inn so Henry felt relaxed in their disguises. As before, he had to make excuses for Anna whilst they sat and ate. He pitied Anna having to eat and drink with head bowed down and hooded, taking care not to show her face. Once they had been shown to their room and the door had been closed she threw back the cowl once again, letting her long hair fall about her shoulders.

"At last." She sighed. "Freedom from this cowl."

They both stood a moment looking about the room. It was clean and tidy with a couple of cots opposite either side of the room and a small window opposite the door and high up so that Henry had to stand on one of the chairs in the room to look out. It was now quite dark. A small chest of drawers was situated below the window between the cots. To the left of the door was a small table with a wash basin and a couple of

towels and to the right another table with the other chair. On the wall, close to the table and wash basin was a row of hooks for hanging up clothes. Above the bed on the right hung a tapestry of the Virgin Mary looking out into the room. Henry was fascinated how colourful and fresh it looked, compared to the old faded ones he came across in the manor houses in the 21st century.

Anna followed Henry's gaze.

"That's an interesting tapestry" she said.

He looked at Anna, who was giving him rather a strange, or more like a seductive, look.

"Yes it is" he replied slowly, casting his eyes back over it but thinking that the image of Mary was not particularly flattering. "Why do you say that?"

"I think it is now time to ... indulge in 'sins of the flesh'."

That got Henry going as he felt stirrings and excitement surging through his body. "And I really feel like sinning" he responded as they began to remove their habits.

They were interrupted by a knock at the door; at which they hurriedly pulled their habits back on as Henry called out. "A moment my son, we are just in prayer." He glanced at Anna, who was just pulling the cowl back over her head whilst proceeding to kneel by one of the beds. He opened the door to the inn keeper, who holding a jug of water.

"I apologize for interrupting your prayers, but I thought you would probably need to freshen up after your arduous journey." He handed Henry the jug and bid them goodnight, glancing at Anna kneeling in 'prayer'. "He seems such a small delicate lad to have sort God so early in life."

"Appearances can be deceiving" Henry responded, bowing his head slightly.

The innkeeper responded with a nod and backed away, still staring at Anna. "I will leave you both to rest now before your journey continues tomorrow."

'There's only one journey I'm about to take.' Henry thought to himself. *'And it will begin in a few moments.'*

The man closed the door behind them. Henry looked down at the lock and was glad to see the key inserted, which he turned with a feeling of relief. When he turned around Anna was already disrobing. They didn't even bother to hang their clothes up before pushing the two cots together and commencing 'sinful' activities. He looked down at her beautiful face and whispered.

"I think someone is watching us."

"What!" she exclaimed with embarrassment, and looked about. "Where?"

Henry raised his eyes. "Over there on your left."

She twisted her head to follow his eye-line and then saw the tapestry. "Oh Henry, stop teasing me."

"She looks a bit disapproving. Perhaps we had better cover her eyes so that she can't see what we are doing."

Anna thought for a minute. "No" she replied, pushing him off and rolling on top of him. "Let her enjoy the spectacle. It might make her envious."

’ “That doesn’t sound like a God fearing person” Henry suggested.
She giggled then, and lot more later.

15. Lord Montgomery's Dining Hall

Lord Montgomery sat at the head of a long wooden table chewing on a leg of meat. Several knights sat around him eating and drinking between snatches of conversation and laughter as they related tales to one another.

"As I was saying" he barked. "When these two are finally caught ..." The emphasis was on the last word, which was spat out, "... and I want them caught; I want the Lady Anna brought to me." He pointedly raised his head up and looked down each side of the table to stare each knight directly in the eyes. "The Frenchman, who dared snatch away my prize, you can do what you like with." They all nodded and glanced at one another knowingly. "As long as you keep him alive."

"How much?" shouted one of the knights.

Montgomery ignored the comment. "Sufficient that will allow us the following day to enjoy his public execution with maximum suffering."

Chuckles and nods about the table greeted this comment as they all dreamt up ideas of how to prolong an agonizing death.

Slapping down the half stripped bone and taking a gulp of mead he barked out. "Now, where were we with your reports." He flicked his head to gaze at Guy, who was lounging back in his chair grinning broadly. "You Guy. What have you learnt? You if anyone, I would have expected to have found them by now."

Guy glanced at his colleagues as he spoke, still grinning. "We searched woods and villages ... and villagers" he added pointedly; at which point the colleagues in his party sniggered openly.

"You are despicable Guy" interrupted Montgomery. "I'm sure you are worse than me."

"Let's just say we kindly asked the villagers for information and tried to *persuade* their women folk to give us the information we wanted."

"And?"

"Our romantic ..."

"Lecherous more like."

"... approach unfortunately didn't work."

"What did work then?"

"They didn't know anything my lord. The fugitives have obviously not been near the villages we investigated."

"And did you not see anyone, any travellers who might have seen them?"

Guy glanced at his compatriots. "We only came across two monks travelling to St Nicholas' priory in Arundel."

“Two monks going to Arundel?” Montgomery spat out, slamming the mug down. “I presume these two monks were from the monastery?”

Guy’s smirk disappeared as he glanced at his colleagues. “I believe so my Lord. They were coming from that direction.”

“You believe so.” Montgomery’s repeating of Guy’s responses was a measure of his displeasure and Guy was beginning to feel uncomfortable. “Did you search the monastery?”

“We did my Lord.”

Lord Montgomery had stood up and shouted. “And?”

“We searched it thoroughly my Lord. There was no place that they could have hidden.”

“Hm; or *been* hidden perhaps. What did these *monks* look like?”

Guy’s response was preceded by glances at his fellow knights. “Er, monks.”

“Really? They looked like monks. Now that is a surprise.” He was now looking daggers at Guy as he barked out the next question. “And what did they look like, fool? How did they respond when you questioned them?” Before Guy could reply, Montgomery fired the question that Guy was dreading.

“I presume you had a good look at them both and questioned them before wishing them a good day and a safe journey.” He reverted back to the aggressive stance.

“Well ... yes ... one of them anyway.” Guy responded, anticipating the next accusation.

“One of them.” There was a stunned silence amongst the gathering. “One of them.” He repeated.

“Yes my Lord.”

Lord Montgomery had sat back down but now leapt to his feet again and yelled out. “So why didn’t you question the other one?”

No one laughed, and Guy realized he had made himself look foolish. “I questioned the first monk, whose face was uncovered, but he had no particularly distinguishing features and he definitely wasn’t French from his accent. The second monk was of smaller build and had his head completely hooded and lowered all the time.”

“Go on.”

“When I questioned the monks, only the first one replied. When I tried to interrogate the second one I was informed that he had undertaken a vow of silence.”

“A vow of silence?”

“I was informed that he was in penance for sinning and was undertaking a pilgrimage to Arundel where he would undergo self-humiliation and a period of solitary confinement from the rest of humanity.”

“It didn’t occur to you that this hooded monk could have been a woman in disguise?”

“I did try to get a look at the monk but ...” he briefly glanced at his compatriots, who had urged him to desist “... the first monk pleaded respect for the sinner.”

Although Guy was tough and sometimes vicious in his treatment of peasants he was chivalrous and loyal to his fellow knights and would not try to blame others for his mistakes or shortcomings.

“This must have been a very serious sin to have deserved such self-denial.”

“He said it was ...,” glancing around the company, “sins of the flesh.”

There were lots of knowing glances around the room and sniggers of laughter. Even Lord Montgomery seemed to relax as his anger subsided.

“Lord!” He suddenly shouted out. “If these ‘sins of the flesh’ deserve such punishment then I think many of us around this table should be cast into the wilderness for the rest of our lives.”

That provoked uproarious laughter and Guy felt a huge sense of relief ... for a moment as Montgomery returned to the subject.

“It seems to me, Guy of Kent, that you have been somewhat negligent in the execution of the task I set you. I understand respect for the church but to use such an institution to throw off suspicion is not an option. Did it not occur to you that your *monks* could well have been our fugitives in disguise? As such I am relieving you of your position as my security adviser.”

Shocked expressions went around the table as Guy uttered “But ...” He got no further.

“... until such time as you redeem yourself. You are a loyal man Guy but I will not tolerate such mistakes when even I can sense something suspicious. Now, I will hear no more.” He turned his attention to a knight seated to his right. “John, bring me a map of the region and we shall see what these two monks might be up to and the route they appear to be taking.”

The knight John hurried off and returned shortly with the map which he spread over the table after the remains of the meal had been brushed aside. The group of knights gathered around whilst Montgomery began to trace his finger over the map and suddenly stabbed it with his forefinger.

“Here. Lady Anna was supposed to have been collected here at the inn on this road. We know they followed the river for some distance, from the fact that one of our men was found bound and gagged.”

“Strange.” One of the knights commented. “Why didn’t they head back towards her father’s lands?”

Montgomery looked up at him. “Because that would have flouted the terms of the agreement, imbecile.”

“Then what are they up to?” Queried another.

“I think that is now only too apparent” replied Montgomery, moving his finger across the map. “They were intercepted here, which is where the Lady Anna was picked up and escorted to my castle here.” He looked up at the faces of the knights gathered around him. “And I still don’t know who helped her escape” he barked. “Someone must have seen something. Question everyone again and find out.”

The group nodded in unison as he returned his attention back to the map. "From the sighting of the *monks* ..." he glanced up at Guy, who now looked rather humble, "... and their stated intention of reaching Arundel, or so they say, they must have stayed at the monastery for several days." He looked up at the group. "Question everyone in the monastery again, especially the abbot" he said vehemently." Returning to the map, he traced his finger down the map. "It seems that they are now heading for or have already reached this village here, so questions the villagers and the inn keeper. They must know something and I am sure can be persuaded to cooperate." He paused for a moment. "If I didn't know any better, I would say that they are heading for my friend Geoffrey de Champ's estate, which means that they will be taking refuge in his castle." He straightened up somewhat satisfied. "Geoffrey is a good friend. He will, I am sure, hand them both over to me when he learns ... the truth." He uttered the last two words rather cautiously and almost immediately looked around the group until he saw the man he wanted.

"Robert."

"My Lord."

"What of these rumours you have heard about our little escapade?"

"My contact reports that the man Cedric has agreed to meet with Trellian's man to find out what they know."

Lord Montgomery's eyes narrowed. "I trust you to find out if indeed they suspect something and ... remove the evidence if necessary."

Robert nodded. "Understood my lord."

Lord Montgomery was pensive for a moment as he stroked his beard. "If Geoffrey does not do as I would hope, I think we will have to take matters into our own hands." He looked back to Guy, who straightened up in response. "Guy."

"My Lord."

"Do you think you could arrange that if necessary?"

"Yes my lord."

"That way you may redeem yourself. Don't fail me a second time."

"No, my Lord."

Lord Montgomery stood up and brushed down his tunic. "Good. We all know what we have to do. Don't fail me; any of you. Power does not come through being weak." He strode out of the room leaving the knights to discuss strategy amongst themselves. Once he reached his own quarters he sat at his desk with anger and frustration welling up inside him. "I *shall* have that woman and teach that Frenchman a lesson for humiliating me." He paused a moment before uttering. "God, but she is beautiful and I *will* have her." He then got up and left the room slamming the door behind him.

16. The Second Village

Henry and Anna slept well cuddled up together in one of the small beds. Although it had been rather squashed with little room to move they couldn't bear being apart after a day of restraint. Henry was also relieved that no one came knocking on the door, otherwise they would have been in panic mode trying to dress whilst making excuses. The wash water was cold, of course, but they still felt refreshed after the previous day's journey and the overnight activities. A glance out of the window revealed an overcast day and Henry only hoped it wouldn't rain, seeing as they were anxious to continue their journey as soon as possible.

They had risen early so that they could leave the village before many people were about; as such there was no one else around when they entered the dining area. The landlord soon appeared and came up to them.

"Good morning brothers; please be seated. I have prepared a small meal for you and my wife will replenish your supplies for your journey."

Henry was about to pull out a chair for Anna, then remembered that she was supposed to be a monk.

"I thank you for your kindness. The Lord will look kindly on your generosity and hospitality."

They ate in silence, as on the previous day, and quickly; anxious to get on their way. Henry picked up the bag of supplies the landlord's wife had placed on their table and bid farewell to the couple, thanking them once again for their kindness. Thanks to the money Anna had given him, he handed a few pieces of silver to the innkeeper, who accepted it reluctantly.

The next stage of their journey was a mix of quiet conversation, periods of fun and laughter and also of thoughtful moments. As before, they had to be continually on their guard; anyone seeing them would have thought it a strange way for monks to behave. The more pensive moments were when Anna was describing her dreams for the future and Henry's part in them. When they were not in conversation Henry's thoughts returned to the dilemma still facing him: remaining in this era and marrying Anna, in spite of warnings of potential threats to his safety, or forsaking Anna and returning to the 21st century and maybe regretting it for the rest of his life. He couldn't stop his heart driving his relationship with Anna. Events again pushed this inner conflict out of his mind when they were once again alerted that something was coming up behind them on the road. Once again they judged it was too late to dive into the forest, so they had no choice but to adopt the previous stance with Anna walking with head hooded and bowed and he alongside her.

‘
“We need to be much more alert, Anna, and pay more attention to our surroundings” Henry said, “otherwise we are going to get caught out.”

This time it was a cart, for which Henry felt somewhat relieved. He was dreading the same or another bunch of guffawing knights enjoying themselves at their expense. He was also relieved when a voice called out from the cart.

“Good day brothers. It looks to me that you have travelled far and in need of a ride.”

The cart stopped and Henry turned to see a couple of peasants seated at the front, the one on the right holding the reins of the horse. As he relaxed, he glanced at the driver’s companion. They both recognized each other immediately.

“Henry!” The man exclaimed, as he jumped down from the cart and stepped over to him where they embraced.

“Alfred. So good to see you again.”

This prompted Anna to turn and look up, the cowl still about her head. Alfred glanced over at her.

“And who is your compa ... no, it can’t be the Lady Anna.”

“It certainly is” Henry responded joyfully.

Alfred released him and walked over to her. “My, you look very alluring in that outfit.”

Their laughter reflected Henry’s and Anna’s sense of relief as she threw back her cowl and embraced him. He stood between them glancing at them alternately.

“Oh, I am so glad you two are still safe, especially with this manhunt going on. I apologize for not making contact before you left the abbey. I had the feeling that I was being watched so considered any unusual movements too risky.”

“No matter” replied Henry. “The abbot was very helpful and we did manage to spend the night at the inn in the village back there without arousing any suspicion.”

Alfred’s expression took on a serious countenance. “That was rather risky, Henry, but still, we have much to talk about and you both look weary. We are on our way to the next village to deliver some goods and collect produce so jump on to the cart. It’s not the most comfortable but at least it will save you a walk.”

“That would be most appreciated Alfred my friend. We also have much to report with another close encounter.”

“You must tell me all that has happened” Alfred said, as they climbed into the back of the cart where Alfred joined them whilst his colleague, Brian, drove on.

The rest of the journey was spent, mainly with Henry and Anna recounting what had happened since they left the castle and particularly their encounter with the knight Guy and his friends.

Alfred’s expression changed at the mention of Guy. “He is a very dangerous man, Henry, devious and untrustworthy. Take great care when he is around.”

Henry nodded. “The abbot seemed very sympathetic to our situation” He recounted.

‘
“There is certainly much unrest in Montgomery’s estate. If it wasn’t for his Norman connections and powerful army I am sure that he would be overthrown. What’s happening right now though is that with patrols scouring the forest and spies everywhere he is determined to find you both and is offering a substantial reward for your apprehension. His anger is such that he has already threatened any village with waste if they are found guilty of harbouring you.”

Henry began to feel guilt and concern over the village they had left that morning but Alfred tried to reassure the two of them that word of their flight was only just filtering out to the more remote villages, but emphasized that the situation was becoming increasingly dangerous for them.

“My guess” Alfred added “is that you would be apprehended if you enter any village that is aware of your flight, and I have recently heard that the fugitives are travelling together dressed as monks.”

“What about the abbot and the monks of the abbey?” Anna asked. “Are they in good health?”

“I haven’t heard anything. Fortunately, the brothers are a very closed community and hopefully Montgomery is still unaware that you spent some time there; but somehow I doubt it. He has a lot to lose.”

“Thanks to Henry here” Anna joined in “we became friends of the abbot and, it seemed, many of the monks.”

“Well done” responded Alfred. “How was that achieved?”

“Henry insisted on payment for the refuge and kindness they provided us.”

“Payment?”

“Yes, in the form of labour to help with their daily tasks.”

“And what about you Lady Anna. Did our Henry offer your services too?”

“No need” Anna responded abruptly. “I am my own woman who does as she pleases ... up to a point” she added, glancing at Henry.

Alfred noted the exchanged glances. “I am sure something is going on between you two?” Then he looked away. “Sorry, it’s none of my business.” He switched his attention back to Henry. “But do take care, Henry. Lady Anna here is a very beautiful woman and, rumour has it, is much sought after as a spouse.”

Anna dropped her eyes in embarrassment.

“And what about you Lady Anna? With our gallant Henry here rescuing you from the clutches of Montgomery, what are your plans when you reach Lord Geoffrey’s estate?”

“Our first objective is to place our fate in the hands of Geoffrey de Champ but if that proves difficult Henry suggests that we make our way to France; but I not really in agreement with that plan for various reasons. However” she added with some excitement, “I believe there may well be evidence of some treachery on the part of Montgomery.” Anna then related the suspicion that her father’s court had regarding the contest and the efforts his men were expending to find some sort of proof. At this, Alfred grew very interested

‘
“Ah, that explains some strange goings on at some of the outlying villages and Montgomery’s increased ranting and raving.”

“Oh” Henry and Anna both responded with interest.

“What is happening exactly?” Henry asked.

“Lord Montgomery has now ordered all of his knights to intensify the search for you two at the utmost haste. It is certainly a man-hunt or woman-hunt more like. Many have said that he has an obsession for you Lady Anna.”

Anna seemed visibly distressed. “To think that I am the cause of so much disruption to people’s lives; but why I cannot say.”

“I can” Henry chirped in.

“Me too” added Alfred.

Anna glanced at Henry and Alfred in turn. “No one can be that desirable. Anyway, he cannot know what I am like as a person.”

“But I do” Henry responded.

She glanced at him with a delicate smile.

They continued to talk about their tentative plans and also had the opportunity to learn about Alfred’s background, which he now elaborated. His father had been a hunter for Lord Montgomery such he and Alfred had free access to most of the castle and, of course, knew nearly every inch of forest.

“As I grew older, I gradually realized that Lord Montgomery was basically an evil man and how capable he is of chicanery. My mother was a very beautiful woman and Montgomery had designs on her. One day my father disappeared and was never seen again. Not long after, my mother committed suicide and I later heard talk that she had been pursued by Lord Montgomery and possibly been even raped by him. No one admitted to have any knowledge of the reasons for both my parents’ deaths but I had my suspicions. Of course, it was impossible for me to investigate the causes of their deaths so I had to seek some other form of revenge. I had heard from Arnold Barlow that Lord Trellian was admired for his honesty and integrity” he said, looking at Anna, “so rather than flee to him, I offered him my services to monitor and report on Montgomery’s activities regarding the conflict between King Stephen and Matilda.”

“That’s very brave of you” Anna said “considering that if you were caught, you would have suffered a dreadful fate.”

“Still” Alfred continued “now we have to keep you hidden until you reach Geoffrey de Champ’s estate. I have friends in the next village who will be willing to help, but you will be on your own for the remainder of your journey. However, with Montgomery’s men combing the forest I will give you details of some forest paths so as to avoid the main tracks where you will be exposed. I will draw a map of these tonight.”

“That’s very kind of you Alfred” Henry said.

“You have already done enough for us Alfred” added Anna. “And it seems that every day you are putting yourself at great risk. Please, please do be careful.”

“Don’t worry about me” he replied confidently. “I can look after myself.”

Shortly before dusk the trees thinned out and opened onto some pasture land. A cluster of dwellings and some larger buildings could be seen some distance away. The cart was brought to a stop as Alfred climbed over to his companion to confer before coming back to rejoin them.

"Under the circumstances, and with spies about, we think it best that we do not enter the village yet." He pointed across to the large buildings. "We will hide you in one of those small outlying barns where you should be safe until dark. Brian here knows the farmers, who have now returned to their homes for the night. We will come and fetch you and lodge you somewhere more comfortable later. You will then need to make a very early start in the morning before most of the village has woken."

"And believe me some do arise very early" Brian called out from the front of the cart.

"Yes" Henry joined in. "I am somewhat familiar with the routine of farmers."

At that, Alfred asked his companion to continue to the edge of the village where Alfred, Henry and Anna climbed down from the cart. Alfred led the way to one of the buildings.

It was a moderate sized barn with two large doors that were kept closed with a bar that rested across them both in a brackets. Alfred lifted the bar, pulled opened one of the doors and entered, followed by Henry and Anna. The inside was spacious with a collection of farming equipment and a hayloft to the right accessed by a fixed ladder. A small window high in the loft threw just about sufficient light to be able to see. Once their eyes got used to the gloom Henry was again astounded to see various implements and tools that he was used to seeing as rusty or restored relics in rural museums. To the left of the doors there was a table, with a few old mugs, and a couple of chairs. A more thorough perusal revealed a couple of large barrels, presumably containing water, mead or wine, a mound of hay in one corner and a pile of grain sacks. Henry looked up at the hayloft to see more bales of hay stored there for horse fodder.

"Sorry the accommodation is a bit basic" apologized Alfred "but at least you should be safe here until the morning, if you have to stay here all night."

"That's fine" Henry replied "as long as the tariff takes that into account."

Alfred laughed and came across to embrace them both. "Really good to see you both again." He then left, pushed the barn door closed and lowered the bar.

It now seemed somewhat gloomier as Henry glanced around the barn again and finally up at the hayloft. "I guess we will be safer up there, if you don't mind climbing the ladder."

"Fine by me" Anna responded, and walked over to the ladder.

"No; let me." He hastened over to offer his help but she held up a hand as she grabbed the ladder with the other.

"I'm not helpless you know. You'll be surprised how quickly I can adapt to my surroundings."

“After you my lady.” Henry bowed as he spoke.

“Why, thank you kind sir” she replied and started to shin up the ladder.

Henry climbed up close behind her, giving her bottom an affectionate slap.

“Enough of that or I might slip and put my foot in your face.”

Once they reached the top they looked about and noticed a good pile of hay to one side. Glancing at each other, and giving each other a knowing look, they made a dash for the pile of hay, throwing their bodies onto it. Laughing, or more like giggling so as not to make too much noise, as they fell into each other’s arms.

“Not quite the luxury you are used to” Henry joked.

“No; neither a woodman’s hut, a monastery cell or a room at an inn, but basic and comfortable enough.”

“There’s an expression I came across on my travels” Henry said “which says ‘Make hay while the sun shines’.” He knew that it originated sometime in the 16th Century.

“I cannot say I have ever heard it.” Anna replied, with a questioning look on her face. “What does it mean? Harvest time?”

“Wrong line of thought.” Henry said. “It’s an expression which means ‘enjoy yourself when the opportunity arises’.”

Anna looked at him with a frowned smirk across her face. “Does that mean what I think it means?”

Henry nodded slowly.

“Then let’s make hay” she said.

The abbot was in his quarters conversing with one of his monks when a knight and a group of soldiers burst in. He glanced up. “What is the meaning of this?”

A flustered Brother Geoffrey at the door was trying to apologize but being ignored by all present. “I am sorry my Lord Abbot. I tried to stop them but they just barged their way past.”

The knight now took over. “Lord Abbot, you are under arrest for harbouring fugitives.”

The abbot stood up quickly and excused the monk, who quickly left the room to join the others in the corridor outside trying to peer in at what was going on.

“Under arrest? Harboursing fugitives?” The abbot repeated questioningly. “What in God’s name are you talking about?”

“Do you deny having taken in two fugitives, a man and a woman, giving them sanctuary and aiding their escape?” The knight demanded.

“I admit to providing two travellers, a man and a woman yes, with food and lodging before they continued on their journey.”

“Do you always give such travellers free accommodation and food?”

‘
“We often provide rest and help for weary travellers, but in this case they paid for the services we provided.”

“How?”

“With their labour. They gave us help around the monastery.”

“Knowing they were fugitives?”

“I had no idea that they were fugitives. I never enquire into travellers’ backgrounds. They both showed respect to the abbey’s institutions and gave us much assistance.”

“You deny hiding them when our men came to search your abbey?”

The abbot had to tell a half-truth here. “I deny hiding them, as you say. As to their whereabouts when your men called I cannot say. I did not personally follow their every movement. Why don’t you ask my brothers?”

“Waste of time” was the reply. “They would all back you up.”

“So your accusations are built on supposition?”

The knight ignored this question. “Do you also deny that you sent them on their way dressed as monks so as to disguise the fact that one of them was a woman and that they were fugitives from justice?”

“As far as I am aware they left in the same clothes they arrived in.”

“Where were they headed? You must have learnt something about them.”

“I believe they were headed north, or so they told me.” The abbot replied, hoping to send them off in the wrong direction.

“You deny providing them with habits?”

“As I have already said. Now, if you have nothing more to say other than making these preposterous accusations please leave so that I may continue God’s work.”

The knight grew annoyed. “God’s work can wait. I’m not finished yet. You will accompany us to the castle where you shall be judged by God’s appointed.”

Some of the soldiers stepped forward.

The abbot raised himself up. “I shall do no such thing. You have no grounds for taking this action and I shall remain here.”

“Arrest him.”

There were gasps from the corridor outside as two soldiers moved to each side of the abbot and grabbed him by the arms.

“Unhand me immediately. I shall report this to the bishop. Let’s see what he has to say about this.”

“We shall consult with him in due course. Meanwhile you will come with us.”

They virtually dragged him out as the monks watched in confusion and concern. His assistant, Brother Geoffrey, followed behind.

“When is it likely you will return abbot?” The question was more aimed at the knight than the abbot himself.

“Soon” replied the abbot confidently. “They will soon realize how ridiculous this all is.”

They never saw him again.

The troop rode into the village with Guy at the head. Some of the villagers ignored the riders whilst others looked apprehensively at the threatening countenance of the men. They slowed down near a group of villagers talking amongst themselves.

"You, over there" Guy called out.

The group turned their heads.

"Two monks entered this village last night. Where did they stay?" Guy spat it out as a statement rather than asking the question. The villagers understood the threatening nature of the enquiry. They all shook their heads in unison.

"We 'aven't seen no monks 'ere my lord" came the reply from one of them.

Guy turned to speak with his men saying loudly. "These loyal subjects aren't being very co-operative today." He looked up and down the street and saw a young woman walking past them carrying a basket of goods. "Sounds like they need some persuasion to jog their memories" he chuckled loudly.

By this time a few more villagers had gathered about. The woman had also stopped and edged back when she saw Guy eyeing her.

He jumped down from his horse and walked slowly towards her, noting the congregating villagers. "I am sure some of you must have seen the two monks, who we know were here. Maybe there is something that can remind some of you." He had sidled up to the young woman, who looked terrified, and turned to grasp her by both arms. "You my pretty wench. You must remember seeing the monks."

She dropped the basket in fear and replied nervously. "No, no sir. I didn't see anything I swear. I was at home in the yard."

"Hm, and I was sure that asking you would result in the answer I was seeking."

Guy relaxed his grip slightly with which the woman also relaxed a little.

"I am sorry sir but I cannot help."

He then resumed his grip. "Ah, so maybe you can help in other ways." He released his grip and grasped her skirts pulling them up over her. She screamed as he threw her to the ground and removed his sword belt. There were gasps and mutterings from the gathering crowd as she struggled to edge herself away but he just pinned her down removing and discarding items of her clothing until he was ready to remove his hose. He then forced a boot between her legs and forced them apart with his two legs. As he stooped down to violate her, a shout came from the back of the crowd.

"Wait. I saw them" came a shout from a man in the crowd.

The crowd went silent and Guy stopped what he was doing. "When?" He bellowed.

"As you said: last night." The man replied, stepping forward.

Guy was staring into the woman's terrified eyes. "Why did it take you people so long to remember?" He growled.

There was a pause before the next statement from the villager, who now stood a few feet from Guy looking at the poor girl sprawled on the ground. "I have only just arrived and asked what the fuss was all about until somebody told me."

"Where did they stay?" He was still fumbling with his hose now wanting to satisfy himself.

"At the inn my lord" came the hasty reply.

Guy hesitated a moment contemplating the situation. *Don't need to antagonize the villagers too much.* He thought to himself. *And time is of the essence.*

"It sounds as though you have your answer, Guy" his captain called out.

Guy gave the woman one last lecherous look. "Pity" he said; and thrusting his hand between her legs, evoking another scream, he got up. "Maybe another time." Now he felt very frustrated and angry. He hurriedly put his tunic and sword belt back on and climbed back on his horse as villagers ran to help the poor distressed girl to her feet and whisk her away sobbing to try and console her. "Now let's go and talk to the inn keeper" he muttered, as the troop rode on down the street.

The inn keeper was busy sweeping the floor of the main room when Guy and the soldiers burst in. He looked up in surprise.

"Sirs. You are in need of refreshments?" He stammered.

"More than that" Guy snapped. He glanced at the captain and tossed his head indicating for him to search the dwelling. "We have come for information about two monks who lodged in your inn last night."

The inn keeper glanced at the men who were dispersing about his house. "It is true that we had two monks staying here but I know nothing about them."

Guy pushed him down into a chair. "Come, you can do better than that."

Womens' voices and short screams emanated from upstairs.

"What are you doing to my wife and daughter?"

"Questioning them. Now tell me about these monks."

"There were just two of them who stayed overnight for food and rest." He continually glanced upwards as screams continued. "Please, leave my family alone. They don't know any more than I do."

"And what do you know? What did they look like?"

The man was now very distressed at what might be happening to his wife and daughter. "One was in his early thirties maybe but I don't know about the other I couldn't see because he had a hood over his head all the time."

"Didn't you think that strange?"

"Yes, but the man ... please, don't touch my family ..."

"Then hurry up and tell us."

"He said the other had sinned and was in penance."

More screams.

"My God, what are your men doing to them?"

"As I said, questioning them. Which rooms did they stay in?"

“They both stayed in the second room up the stairs.”

“Is that all?”

“Oh my Lord, please leave my family be.”

“I’m waiting.”

“I took them a jug of water to refresh themselves.”

“What were they doing?”

“The one who spoke took the jug, the other was kneeling by the bed praying.”

“What time did they leave? Did he, the talkative one, say where they were going?”

Sobs could now be heard and the inn keeper tried to get up, but he was pushed back down.

“They left early, very early and he said they were on their way to Arundel.”

Guy backed off. “Arundel” he spat. “Arundel again.” He turned back to the inn keeper.

“Next time you take in customers make sure you know who they are.” He grinned. “You never know what they might get up to.” He laughed and nudged a soldier who had just returned from his search. “Get the others. We’re finished here.”

The soldier dashed off upstairs and came down with the others, who were straightening out their clothes. The inn keeper sat staring at the men as they left.

“Did you get anything out of them?” He heard Guy ask.

“Not *out* of them” came the mocking reply.

The innkeeper immediately dashed upstairs to find his wife and daughter seated on the floor sobbing with most of their clothing torn off.

“My God. What have they done to you?”

They didn’t need to answer of course. He got down the floor between them and pulled them close to him. They both put their arms around him. “Curse that Montmery and his men. May God have vengeance on them and may they rot in hell for what they have done to you.” He sat there, the anger boiling inside him as he finally broke down in tears. Many villagers had gathered outside on hearing the screams. One or two close friends entered the inn whilst the others, shaking their heads, watched Guy and his men ride off.

17. Sanctuary

Henry and Anna had not long sorted out their clothing when they heard the barn door open and a figure enter carrying a lamp which lit up the interior. They kept quiet until they heard Alfred's familiar but hushed voice.

"Henry. Anna. Where are you?"

"Up here in the loft" Henry replied quietly.

Alfred lifted the lamp and looked up. The two of them were standing at the top of the ladder. "Come. I have found somewhere safe and more comfortable for you to spend the rest of the night."

They clambered down the ladder and brushed bits of hay off their clothing.

"Looks like you two were having fun up there" he commented, with a grin on his face.

"That we were" Henry replied as they glanced at each other in the gloom, smiling.

"I'm beginning to wonder about you two" Alfred commented, suspiciously. "I think you are spending too much time together alone."

"A bit late for that" Henry replied; thinking to himself '*Not enough in my opinion*'.

"It's not too far to walk" Alfred said, as he closed the barn door behind them. "We didn't want to risk bringing the cart as someone might have heard us."

"Sure. No problem." Henry replied.

"I have not informed the farmer who you are for his own protection, so behave as you normally would. Oh, and keep your head covered Anna; let's play safe."

"Thank you" replied Henry.

They walked in silence and soon reached a farmhouse not far from the barn. He tapped lightly on the door, which was opened by a middle-aged, slightly built man. He glanced questioningly at the hooded figure of Anna and then turned his attention to Henry.

"We truly appreciate this, my son" Henry said.

"Quickly, inside, all of you." He closed the door behind them and led them through the dwelling and up some stairs to bedrooms. "I have put you in here Brothers" he said to Henry, indicating an open door. "I hope you will be comfortable."

Anna entered the room and Henry paused before following her. "We can't thank you enough ..."

"Walter" Alfred added.

"... Walter" Henry repeated. "We will do our best to repay you sometime in the future."

"No need. It is my pleasure to help any of Alfred's friends. I have laid out a small meal in the room for your privacy and there is water to refresh yourselves. It's probably

safer than eating downstairs, just in case we have visitors, though very unlikely at this hour.”

“Plenty of spies about” added Alfred.

“Always have been, always will be” Henry responded.

“Rest well” Alfred said. “I will come and collect you before dawn”. He left Henry and Anna to their meal and returned downstairs with Walter.

Left alone, Henry and Anna removed their habits and devoured the meal.

“Gosh, I needed that” Henry said.

“And I need something else” Anna added impishly.

“This is becoming a habit” Henry stated, getting undressed.

“A habit that I can get used to” Anna replied, also disrobing.

Anna laughed as they threw themselves into each other’s arms before pushing the beds together for the night’s enjoyment.

Not many people were up before dawn the following morning. One who was though was Jack. He hadn’t slept well over the last few nights worrying about how he was going to pay his taxes. He was a good looking man who liked to enjoy the good things in life rather than work. His small holding was tended mainly by his wife, who had been seduced with his charms and personality. Most of the village girls thought him fun but the older members of the village were not impressed with his philanderous behaviour. He liked to drink with the young men of the village and flirt with village girls whilst his wife worked hard to earn a living. Occasionally he managed to earn favours by surreptitiously helping the knights from the castle. Now he was in debt and being scolded by his wife for not working hard enough and putting in more effort to help her. Recently he had heard rumors that most of the knights were actively searching for a couple of stupid fugitives and currently not in the mood for bothering with Jack. They had told him that if wanted to earn any more favours then he should help track down the fugitives down.

His attention the night before was alerted when, on his way back from one of the outlying barns where he had been enjoying the company of Gwen, one of the more easy-going village girls, he saw four people in a cart in the distance coming slowly down the road heading his way. They were moving slowly, presumably, he surmised, so as not to make too much noise. Apart from the driver there was another man seated in the back with two others who were dressed in monks habits. One of them had his cowl down and the other had the cowl over his head covering his face. The three in the back were sitting close together and seemed to be engaged in conversation. He strained his ears but they were much too far away for him to hear clearly what they were saying. As the cart moved slowly closer he ducked into the shadow of the buildings to watch what they were up to. It all looked a bit suspicious to him, particularly when they

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veered off towards the barns where he had recently been enjoying Gwen's company. Working himself as close as he dared, he watched the cart stop with the man continuing to talk with the monks and pointing to one of the barns. Shortly, the three of them jumped down from the cart. Jack thought it rather strange that the monk with his cowl back actually helped the other down from the cart. *'Surely, one would only assist a lady.'* Then he thought to himself. *'Ah, maybe they are the fugitives in disguise. Perhaps my luck is in.'* The trio then entered one of the barns and, after a few minutes, the man came out, closed and barred the barn door leaving the monks inside. He then joined the driver of the cart whereupon they continued on to the village. At that point he wondered whether he should attempt to contact the knights but as it was dark and late he thought better of it just in case his suspicions were wrong, resulting in a beating from the knights for disturbing them. He was now in a quandary as to what to do: whether to stay and watch all night or risk going to bed and missing what might happen next. He made excuses to his wife that he couldn't sleep and found a comfortable place to sit with a flagon of ale to keep watch. After some time he felt himself succumbing to drink-induced sleep when he was alerted by the sound of someone walking from the village back towards the barn. From the build of the person he was sure that it was the same man he saw earlier with the monks. His suspicions were confirmed when the man entered the barn to collect the monks and escort them back to the village. Once again he managed to follow the trio unseen until they entered one of the houses in the village. Now he had to stay awake to observe the outcome of this strange behaviour.

Somehow, Jack did manage to stay awake all night with frequent episodes of brief dozes. His decision to stay up was rewarded when, just before dawn, the cart with the two men reappeared and stopped outside the house. Whilst the driver waited, the other man entered the house and shortly came out with the two monks; the three of them climbing back onto the cart. Carefully tracking the cart, he followed it to the edge of the village and watched as the three disembarked again. The man embraced each monk in turn before the two of them walked off and made their way into the forest. The cart was turned around back towards the village. Jack thought for a moment. *'Should I follow the monks?'* But decided that would be difficult without being seen or heard so thought it better to contact the knights as soon as possible. He had to duck down as the cart came back past him so was unable to identify either of the two men. He returned to the village behind the cart and back to his home as the cart disappeared into the distance. With the first light of dawn he felt pleased with himself. *'This should earn me some really handsome favours'* he thought, smiling to himself, and now looked forward to the day ahead. He urgently needed to make some excuses to his wife so that he could go to seek out one of Montmery's knights

Later that day his wife was surprised when he helped out enthusiastically in the small holding and in a cheerful mood.

"What's got into you today Jack? Some good luck come your way?"

‘
“I think maybe it has Annabelle. Maybe it has.”

His wife paused in her work for a moment. “Do you still love me Jack?”

“Of course I do” he replied nonchalantly, continuing with his chores.

“You don’t pay much attention to me these days and spend more and more time with your friends.”

“That’s just me” he replied. “I just like to enjoy myself. You know that.”

“But I thought, once we were together ...”

“We’ve been through this before Annabelle” he snapped back. “Now drop it.”

Annabelle resumed her work and wondered whether she should broach the subject of a family again. She decided not to after his last outburst. The excitement of courting days, with fun ‘excursions’ in the woods and fields and her wedding day was long forgotten and the baby she longed for was a distant dream. Tears ran down her face, but he would never have noticed.

Half an hour into the forest Anna located a narrow track, which Alfred had indicated on his sketch map, leading off to the left. She pulled on Henry’s arm. “Here we are Henry, this way.”

With enough dawn light now filtering through the trees Henry had been preoccupied looking around and commenting on the abundance of early morning birds flitting about the trees and ground searching for their breakfast, but at the same time listening for any sounds of a possible pursuit.

“Sorry” he said. “I’m still feeling a bit uneasy. Montgomery’s men must be combing the forest as well as patrolling the roads. We must really be on our guard.”

The track wound a bit but seemed to be heading in the right general direction. As it grew lighter they decided to stop for a rest to consume some of the food that Walter had provided them with for their journey. The bottoms of their habits were now quite wet from the dew and dampness of the vegetation they had been walking through, not that it worried them at all. Anna had lowered her cowl once they were in the depths of the forest with her hair tied back once again in a ponytail. To Henry, she looked lovely, of course. Much of their conversation was now mainly concerned with nature and the environment and on a number of occasions they fell into silence when they glimpsed a deer or the flash of some other animal. Alfred’s directions, written on a piece of parchment that Anna kept in her hand, proved invaluable. They crossed many tracks, some broad enough to take horses others narrow, that people on foot would have made. About midday they had as long a rest as they dared, consuming the remaining food and drink; weary after having walked for so long. It was during their conversations that Henry found out a little more about her. Her lineage was Saxon and her grandfather had fought against the Norman invaders. As the Norman barons slowly took over most of the lands he managed to negotiate to keep his own, somewhat reduced, estate. Her father was very supportive of the Norman rulers (out of necessity really) and had always

been a strong supporter of Stephen. Her mother was also Saxon and, so Anna believed, had some Viking blood in her. She had been a very loyal wife and brave too. Her premature death had occurred when she saved some children during a village fire. This earned her much respect from the peasants. Her father had always found that treating peasants well earned their respect and loyalty. This, of course, had led to the present predicament.

"I still wish I knew what was going on back home" Anna said. "If Lord Montgomery is found to have been guilty of cheating we won't have to run anymore."

"That would be a relief." Henry replied. "It would be good to get back to a normal life." *'But what would a normal life be?'* He asked himself, as he started mulling over the same issues again.

Events put an end to his thoughts as Anna stopped suddenly. "Listen" she said. "Someone's coming."

Noisy activity some distance away, which sounded like some large forest beast rushing through the forest, alerted them. They strained their ears in order to ascertain the direction of the sounds but decided to move deeper into the forest further away from the track they had been shadowing. Moving as fast as they could, Henry finally noticed some denser growth over to their left.

"Anna."

"Yes."

"Over that way. The undergrowth looks much denser and will hopefully provide better cover."

He was now glad they had the habits on as they seemed to blend in well with the forest. As they made their way as quickly and as quietly as possible towards a tangle of bushes and fallen trees they could hear faint shouts which they assumed were from Montgomery's men looking for them. They climbed into the thicket behind a large fallen tree trunk scooping up the thick carpet of dead leaves to make a shallow hollow to hide in. Laying there close together, they heard the sound of voices growing louder.

"Look hard men. Don't forget there will be a big reward for those who find them."

Henry lifted his head with the cowl of the habit covering his face except for around the eyes. He peered through the thicket and could just make out movement in the undergrowth. He quickly lowered his head again as a horse whinnied and moved off leaving a couple of men on foot searching either side of the path. He heard one shout at the other.

"Waste of time if you ask me. The chances of finding them in this forest are pretty slim. They could be anywhere; even miles from here."

"They couldn't have got far though" came the reply. "Not according to our contact in the village."

"Oh, you mean that serf Jack. I wouldn't trust him, ever. He's just for an easy life. I don't know how he gets away with it."

Henry switched his glance to Anna, who was staring back at him. They were thinking the same thing. This serf Jack must have seen them. They hoped he hadn't seen them enter the farmer's house, otherwise the poor man would pay with his life. Anna looked nervous as the crunching sounds through the undergrowth grew closer, with both of them holding their breaths as they heard the soldier approaching, slashing about with his sword in what sounded like a half-hearted manner. When he was about a hundred yards away from their hiding place he suddenly stopped and looked about in their general direction. Recollecting the situation later, Henry knew that they were saved by Mother Nature. As the soldier was considering whether to investigate the area more closely, a large bird, possibly a pigeon, landed in front of their hiding place on the old fallen tree trunk. The movement caught the man's attention and he stared hard at the bird. The man seemed to be looking Henry straight in the eyes and started to move forward when suddenly the bird became frightened and took off noisily. The man immediately stopped and straightened up. He shook his head, turned and stomped back towards the path.

"Nothing over here" he shouted to his compatriot.

"Let's move on then" came the reply.

When the voices had died away into the distance Henry whispered to Anna.

"That was close."

"Was it? I didn't dare look up."

He raised himself up and sat on the ground. Anna did likewise.

"You know, this is getting to be a habit" he said.

"Don't I know it."

"Looks like nowhere is safe around here."

They sat quietly for a moment contemplating another lucky escape.

"I don't think there is much further to go before we cross into Geoffrey's de Champ's land now" Anna said, pulling out the parchment.

They studied the directions again.

"Looking at how far we have come I think we should be there by nightfall. Hopefully there will be a village or some type of shelter we can find before it gets dark" Henry said.

"I hope so. I don't really relish the idea of sleeping out in the open again after our recent comfortable lodgings."

"Ready to continue my Lady?" Henry asked, getting up.

"Lead the way sir" she replied.

They continued to make good headway and were much more alert after their close encounter. Towards late afternoon the map indicated that they were about to cross into Geoffrey de Champ's estate and both breathed a sigh of relief. Alfred's directions had been excellent.

"He must know the forest like the back of his hand" Henry commented.

“And there must be someway of rewarding him” added Anna. “Without the help he has given I don’t think we would have got this far or made it at all.”

“I just only hope he doesn’t stick his neck out too far and gets caught.”

As the sun dropped towards the horizon they were relieved to come across some farm dwellings just inside Geoffrey’s estate the other side of a small tumbling stream where the forest had been cleared. At last they had reached the border between the two Lord’s estates and now started looking for a place to cross the stream.

“Let’s hope we are in luck” Henry said. “I’m exhausted.”

Anna put her arm over Henry’s shoulder. “Me too. My feet ache after so much walking.”

Fortunately they didn’t have to venture too far before they found a place where some logs had been thrown across a narrow section. Henry stepped onto them and helped Anna over. As they started on a track that led towards the farm, Henry was contemplating the next challenge.

“Hm. I don’t know how we are going to handle it this time. Two monks seeking a place to rest; one being a woman. It wasn’t too bad at the inn where we found it fairly easy to keep you hidden, with the innkeeper paying you little attention, but here it could prove more difficult.”

As they entered the open yard of the house Henry noticed a barn to the right and various farm implements lying about. He raised his hand to knock on the door when a voice called out.

“Hey, you two. Can I help?”

The sudden voice made Henry’s heart jump even though it wasn’t threatening, as it would have been if it had been one of Montmery’s men. He and Anna turned around to see a man standing in the entrance to the barn holding a pitchfork. Henry walked over to him, leaving Anna by the cottage.

“Ah my son. I realize it is late but we would appreciate a place to rest our weary bodies.” Henry’s eyes flicked towards the barn, which the man obviously noticed, for he glanced to his rear for a moment.

“By all means Brothers. I would welcome you to stay in my cottage but it is small and ...”

“No, we would not seek to impose upon your generosity. A bed of hay in the barn would be more than adequate.”

The man put down the pitchfork he was carrying and approached Henry. “So, where are a couple of monks travelling to on foot so late in the day? The nearest village is some distance away and you look very weary and ...” he looked Henry up and down “... rather unkempt if I might say.”

“Henry looked down at his habit and noticed the bits of vegetation and other evidence of having trudged through the forest. “We are on our way to see your lord, er ...” he paused with fingers crossed, hoping that the map was correct.

“Geoffrey de Champ?” The man replied.

“Yes” Henry replied with relief.

Anna had turned to listen to the conversation, still with her cowl over her head. Henry could sense the relief in her as well.

"First though" the man said, starting to walk towards the house. "You must be in need of some refreshment. Please follow me with your colleague, brother."

Henry and Anna joined the man as he reached the house.

"That would be very much appreciated." Henry replied; then started to rack his brains as to how he was going to explain his 'Brother's' sex. They certainly couldn't eat and drink with Anna's cowl over her face for the whole evening. They would just have to come clean.

Entering the cottage they were greeted by the farmer's wife, a slightly plump, buxom lady, and two small children who stopped their playing on the floor to stare at the two monks..

"Betty. We have two men of God as guests for dinner."

Betty looked a bit embarrassed. "Oh. They are more than welcome to join us but we will all have to eat smaller portions as I was not expecting anyone."

"Please, don't put yourselves out" Henry added hastily. "Our needs are little." Henry felt his stomach rumbling a bit.

The farmer pulled out a couple of chairs tucked under a large table in the centre of the room. "Please be seated" he offered.

"Thank you" Henry replied. "I am Henry Longford by the way."

He looked a bit surprised but replied: "My name is Percival, Brother Henry. My wife, as you will have heard, is Betty and these two ..." he indicated the two youngsters, who were now staring with curiosity at Henry and Anna in their habits, "... are Jack and Jill."

Henry nearly burst out laughing but managed to restrain himself.

"And your companion?" He nodded towards Anna, who was sitting with her head down still.

"Ah, I have a confession to make and, once you have heard what I am about to say, you may wish to throw us out."

A frown crept across the farmer's face and Henry suspected that he was thinking that they might be a couple of homosexuals.

"We are not really monks."

A suspicious expression now took over from the frown.

"This is the Lady Anna Trellian."

As Anna lifted her head and pulled her cowl back, Percival and Betty uttered a gasp of surprise. Henry quickly put them at ease by relating briefly the background as to how and why they had ended up here dressed as they were. He outlined the reasons why she was not able to return to her father and was hopeful that seeking sanctuary under Sir Geoffrey's protection would give them time to prove and undo the wrongdoing. He avoided providing any background to his own involvement, merely stating that he was asked to do his utmost to prevent her falling into the hands of Lord

Montmery. He also mentioned that they had received help from one of Lord Montmery's men, without actually naming him. The farmer was sympathetic to their stance and said he would help them reach their destination.

"This incident could have resulted in fighting between the two barons" Percival suggested.

"True. True." Henry agreed. "But I hope we have managed to avoid that."

"That is good" Percival agreed. "There is too much fighting in these troubled times."

Following a good meal and refreshment, Betty insisted that Anna sleep in the cottage. "It's no place for a lady, in a barn." She said. "And ..."

"Don't worry about me" Henry interrupted. "We have put you out enough. I can sleep soundly anywhere."

Percival decided to join him, as there was only one bed in the cottage, saying that he would be glad to keep Henry company. Henry certainly missed Anna, after spending so many nights with her, but he and Percival talked quite a lot and Henry described in more detail his and Anna's adventures. Percival asked him about his travels, his profession and his background and described how tough his own life was but at least he was left in peace as long as he paid his dues to his Lord. Henry, of course, had to use a bit of artistic license when describing his own background but he had related it so many times that he no longer hesitated as he re-told his story.

The following day Henry and Anna decided to discard their habits and, following a good breakfast, Percival insisted on taking them by cart to Geoffrey de Champ's castle. They bade farewell to Betty and for the first time since Henry had arrived since his transportation, he felt relieved and safe. His only hope now was that they would find the sanctuary they were hoping for.

18. Geoffrey de Champ

As they passed through a village on their way to the castle, a number of villagers stared at them as they drove past. Henry couldn't help notice that they were focused on Anna, wondering how such a beautiful woman wearing just a chemise came to be sitting in the back of a cart. Much the same happened when they gained entry to the castle bailey with the guards and other small groups muttering amongst themselves. When the guards asked Percival who the two people with him were, he replied honestly and said she was Lady Trellian. Henry suspected that they didn't believe him but allowed them through the gate anyway. Travelling towards the motte, Henry commented on a number of dwelling places butted up against the inside of the castle walls.

"I presume these houses are for the castle workers" Henry stated.

"Of course; but you would know that, wouldn't you?" Anna replied, a little surprised by his statement. "But maybe other lords may have different arrangements. In my father's case, he would normally have the cook's helpers, masons, cobblers and all essential workers resident within the castle walls. Llewellyn, our fletcher and bowyer, does have a room in one of the houses but generally prefers to travel from the village where he and his brother-in-law, Harold, live."

"Harold?"

"He is our chief archer who is reputed to be the most skilled in the land. He can hit the centre of a target multiple times at speed."

"Wow! He must be good."

"Then again, he mastered archery as a young boy and was taught by his father, whom he lost some years ago."

They continued on until they arrived at the entrance to the motte where a couple of guards watched Henry and Anna intently as they disembarked the cart.

"We thank you Percival for your hospitality and assistance." Henry said as he helped Anna down.

"No trouble sir."

"I will see what we can do to repay you someday; but do just call me Henry."

"Only too glad to assist a Lady. I am only sorry you had to sleep in the barn."

"It was fine; very comfortable in fact."

"Thank you, Henry."

"Until we meet again."

"Yes, I enjoyed our little chat last night."

He drove off waving to them as they approached the two guards. Anna stepped out in front of Henry and approached one of the guards.

“The Lady Anna Trellian wishes an audience with Geoffrey de Champ” she stated in a clear strong voice.

The guard looked her up and down only half believing her. If it wasn't for her long hair falling about her beautiful face the guards wouldn't have been blamed for thinking them a couple of peasants from the state of their clothes. Anna had washed her hair that morning so its flowing sparkle seemed in marked contrast to her clothing. The guards looked at each other and then back to them with suspicion and disbelief.

“Well?” She demanded.

They stepped aside and Henry and Anna passed through a tall gate, being met just inside by another guard. He stepped in front of them demanding.

“What is your business?”

“The Lady Anna Trellian and Henry Longford are here to see Geoffrey de Champ” she repeated.

As with the guards at the front, he looked them up and down in disbelief; then looked through the gate and back at them.

“How did you arrive here? We have no knowledge of your visit and you don't exactly look like a Lady.”

“We were brought here by a farmer called Percival; our story is long and we are weary after many days travelling.” She brought up her two hands and pulled a ring off her finger. “Here” she said. “Take this ring to Lord Geoffrey. He will recognize its significance.”

The guard took the ring and studied the crest for a moment. “Follow me” he muttered, and led the way across the courtyard to two large oak doors that led into a vast hall. Henry and Anna followed him to the far end where on the left, in front of a single panelled door, stood another guard who became alert as they approached.

The guard who escorted them stated “The Lady Anna Trellian and ...”

“Henry Longford” Henry reminded him.

“... Henry Longford to see Lord de Champ.”

The other guard knocked on the door.

A strong baritone voice from inside called out. “Enter.”

The guard who had escorted them this far handed the ring to his colleague, who disappeared inside. Henry had a glimpse of two men seated at a table poring over some documents. One of them looked up at the guard as he entered without speaking. Henry saw the guard approach the seated men and pass the ring to one of them informing him of the two people waiting outside the room. The one who took the ring briefly looked at it and immediately glanced towards the door and got up.

“Show them in” he commanded.

The guard came back and beckoned for Henry and Anna to enter. Henry turned and thanked the one who had brought them to Geoffrey's chambers. He just nodded an acknowledgement, turned and walked off.

Geoffrey de Champ was a tall man of about six foot with a long narrow face and aquiline nose. He sported a full but closely cropped pointed beard, the same colour as his long ginger hair. He was wearing a grey hose and a light patterned tunic with gold coloured edging. From Geoffrey's appearance and demeanor Henry had the impression of a man that could be trusted. As soon as Geoffrey saw Anna he came around the table to approach and embrace her.

"My dear child." He backed off slightly holding her hands and looking her up and down. "As beautiful as ever; just like your mother, although not dressed as elegantly as she always was." He let go her hands and turned to his companion. "Please excuse us Robert. We will continue this discussion later."

Robert rose from the desk. "My Lord." He bowed and left the room.

"Please be seated my dear." Geoffrey indicated for her to sit in the seat vacated by Robert and pulled out another chair for Henry.

"And your companion, Henry ..."

"Longford." Henry finished.

"You must be in need of refreshments and ..." looking the state of their clothes "... some assistance from my Keeper of the Wardrobe."

"Later" Anna replied. "We had a good breakfast and managed to freshen up at one of your subject's farm and there will be time later to change our clothes."

"As you wish" he replied. "So who might this peasant farmer be? Come to think of it, how did you arrive here and why wasn't I informed of your intended visit?" He looked over at Henry. "And who might this Henry Longford be who accompanies you? A new servant?"

"Far from it" Anna replied. "This is a man to whom I owe so much and ..." she hesitated slightly and looked over at Henry "... will repay him ... in any way I can."

The look on her face and the way she made that statement told Henry what he knew was deep within both their hearts. A glance at Lord Geoffrey's expression also told Henry that he also suspected that there was something more between them than just 'Lady and servant'.

Anna then addressed Lord Geoffrey again. "Before I answer the many questions you must have, Lord de Champ, and explain how we arrived here, we both feel that the man who brought us here, Percival the farmer, and his wife Betty deserve some reward for their hospitality and kindness."

Geoffrey nodded. "I will see to it; and do please call me Geoffrey."

Anna then related what had happened following the wager, how Henry came onto the scene, her capture and rescue and their arduous journey here. She told him about Alfred and how, without his help, they would not be here now. Geoffrey had seated himself whilst she was talking but once she had finished he rose up and walked about the room.

"I thank you, Anna, for your honesty and your detailed report. As you may know, I consider myself a fair man and a great believer in justice. However" he added ponderously "it seems to me that you, out of your own free will, volunteered to be the

prize that our friend Lord Montgomery won quite fairly.” He looked over towards Henry. “That this well-meaning er ... gentleman... arrived upon the scene and ‘abducted’ you to save you from Lord Montgomery seems to have resulted in a number of problems. Should Lord Montgomery demand I return you to him it seems to me that I should comply with his wishes.”

“Just a minute ...” Henry started to interrupt, but Anna held up her hand indicating for him to stop.

“As I have already intimated Geoffrey, before I left my father there was unsubstantiated evidence of perfidy on the part of Lord Montgomery. I know my father commanded an investigation but have no idea what his knights may have uncovered in my absence, so I am throwing myself at your mercy until the case can be proved one way or the other.”

Lord Geoffrey stood thoughtfully for moment. “I agree, and will allow one month for the case to be presented. When is it likely that your father will arrive here with his evidence?”

“He doesn’t even know I am here. In fact we have had no contact with him since I left and I dare not return to him, otherwise Lord Montgomery will claim that he reneged on the deal. For all intents and purposes I was abducted by a Frenchman for ransom or other means.”

Geoffrey glanced at Henry. “Was this gentleman’s intention to ransom you?”

“Certainly not” they both replied firmly.

“Hm, that does pose a dilemma for your father. He delivers you, reluctantly, to Lord Montgomery, who subsequently loses you to this ...” glancing in Henry’s direction again “... gallant gentleman. He must be very anxious and angry, and the situation could well develop into a conflict. I will send a messenger to your father immediately. As for our friend Lord Montgomery, I will not notify him of your presence and let him find out himself, which he no doubt will with all his spies.”

“Thank you Geoffrey” replied Anna. “My father will be eternally grateful I am sure. It will allow us time to ascertain what my father’s knights have found out, if anything, and devise a possible plan to resolve this issue.”

Geoffrey nodded in agreement and turned to Henry.

“Now you my dear fellow. It seems to me very fortuitous that you appeared on the scene at such a propitious moment. A French knight come to rescue a damsel in distress. Except, of course you are not a knight I presume?”

Henry shook his head. “No, Lord Geoffrey. I am not.”

“Then you must tell me about yourself, how you came to be here and what your intentions are once you have returned Anna to her father ...” he glanced back to Anna “... should that be the outcome of this little escapade.”

That, Henry knew, was going to be a very difficult question to answer. He had managed to build a now well-related profile of his more recent background and actions so far but trying to come up with an acceptable plan for the future, without mentioning their love for each other, was another matter. The same niggling thoughts still swam

around in his head. *'Return to the twenty first century and get on with my life or marry Anna and settle down to ...?'* He couldn't actually think what he would do if he did remain with Anna but at least Geoffrey might hint at possible 'career opportunities' during their discussions. He certainly seemed a sympathetic and positive person.

"Still, enough for now; we will talk more later. After the rather long description of your recent experiences, it is now late and I insist that the two of you be issued with fresh, and in your case Lady Anna more appropriate, clothing."

The two of them rose out of their seats as Geoffrey walked towards the door.

"You are free of course to make my castle your home whilst you are here."

"Thank you" they both replied.

He opened the door and spoke briefly with the guard outside. "This man will find someone to attend to your needs. If you require anything, please let your attendant know. Oh, and you must meet my dear wife Eleanor. She will be very pleased to see you again, Anna."

They followed the guard who handed them over to a chamber maid who took them to separate rooms, understandable under the circumstances but much to Henry's disappointment.

"I will arrange for a page boy and a lady-in-waiting to assist you" the guard said to them as they entered their rooms. Shortly after that a couple of servants arrived at Henry's room with hot water and to measure Henry up for a new set of clothes. Once he had freshened up and changed into some temporary garments he was handed, he felt a lot better and relaxed, and with a good beard to match. After investigating his quarters and peering out of the small window, which looked out over a busy scene below, he left the room and wandered along the corridor. Anna's room was only a couple of doors away so, after hanging about a bit in case she emerged, he wandered down to the courtyard and sat on a bench admiring the flowerbeds. Most of the people he passed on the way nodded a 'good day to you sir' greeting, which he returned. He was now mulling over how he should respond to Lord Geoffrey about his future plans, when he sensed someone approaching him. He looked up. 'Wow' he thought, followed by a very audible "Wow!"

Anna looked radiant, wearing a green corset dress with two decorative white panels separated by a central panel of the same green material. The corset was threaded with a yellow ribbon and the long sleeves opened wide with a white patterned edging. Her long blonde hair flowed over her shoulders. Henry stood up as she held out her hand to him.

"Why are you staring at me so?" She asked with a contented smile across her face.

"Because you look so gorgeous" he replied, taking her hand and adding "and also absolutely ravishing."

"Thank you, Henry" she replied. "You look pretty handsome yourself now, in those fine clothes."

Henry himself was wearing a long purple tunic with open sleeves and a brown leather belt over dark grey leggings.

They sat down and released hands; but after a few moments he grabbed it back, muttered a “Oh what the hell”, then turned to face her and gave her a kiss on the lips.

“Henry!”

“Anna, we can’t hide forever what we feel for each other and why should we? What is Lord Geoffrey going to do about it?”

“He could expel you from the castle for liaising with a Lady above your station.”

“People should be free to choose who they want as a partner. Let’s face it, that’s what all the peasants do isn’t it? A man courts a girl in the village and they get married. If the girl doesn’t like his advances she will respond to another’s.”

“That may be so amongst the peasants” she replied “but marriages make alliances, supposedly help towards peace and strengthen the state.” She turned away and withdrew her hand from his hold. “It’s like that with Lord Montgomery. I know what he is like, I did go to him of my own free will and the outcome would likely have resulted in a stronger alliance between him and my father.”

Henry was surprised and disturbed by that last comment. “I can’t believe what you have just said, Anna. What are you saying? You agreed to go to Montgomery under false pretenses. He doesn’t deserve you, especially you, and I know that you don’t want to be with him.”

“Relax Henry, I was speaking hypothetically” she laughed. “I am no one special.”

Henry couldn’t let it go now. “But from what we heard he could caste you aside once he has had his way with you.”

“That maybe so but do not underestimate the power women have and how they can influence events.”

“Why isn’t Montgomery already married?”

“I understand that he has been married, possibly more than once, but now I believe he is in the habit of taking in mistresses.”

“And that’s all you would be: married to him but just another mistress in reality. Fortunately we managed to circumvent that happening so there will be no question of you submitting to him.”

“I hope not” she replied as a sad expression crept across her face. “It may still ultimately come to that if no evidence of treachery can be found.”

That made Henry’s stomach drop and he could feel frustration building up inside him again. Anna must have sensed his feelings.

“Henry?”

He didn’t reply but took her arm and led her out of the garden to wander down into the bailey to watch the people busy at their trades. She knew he was upset at the thought of possibly losing her so let the matter drop. They were busy watching some children playing when they heard footsteps approaching from behind. They turned to see Lord Geoffrey.

‘
“Ah, there you are.” He stopped and put his hands on his hips. “That’s better. You both look very smart and you my dear look absolutely radiant.”

“My sentiments exactly Lord Geoffrey” Henry replied, noting Anna’s somewhat embarrassed smile.

“But come” he continued, moving between them and putting an arm around each of their shoulders. “Let’s go eat and find out more about this young man who has deprived Lord Montgomery of such a prize.”

They started back up towards the motte.

“I have noticed that you two appear to have, should I say, a very close relationship.”

“Y-e-s” Henry replied slowly.

“From what you both have told me, I understand that you, Anna, was about to be collected by her future husband; but just prior to that happening him you were abducted or rescued by a complete stranger.”

“A chance encounter” Henry laughed.

“Not so. Let us re-examine the sequence of events. The Lady Anna is delivered to an inn with instructions from her priest that no one should remain in attendance. That evening, a young man happens to come along and lodges in the inn and makes her acquaintance. Learning of her predicament, he decides to ‘rescue’ her.” He transferred his attention to Henry. “A chance encounter you say.”

Henry felt a little, though not unduly, worried. Geoffrey’s comment was delivered in a rather off-hand manner so Henry did not attach much weight to it..

“So, what is your background, Henry Longford, and where do you come from?”

Henry glanced at Anna’s smiling face whilst he related his now well-rehearsed profile, which appeared to satisfy Lord de Champ’s curiosity. He was now hoping that Geoffrey was not going to ask more searching questions about his involvement with Anna but fortunately he provided an answer that Henry wouldn’t even have thought of.

“You know what I think?” He said, with a twinkle in his eye. “I believe you two have been having a secret liaison for some time and you planned this whole escapade so that you could elope together, knowing that your father, Anna, would never sanction a marriage between you two.”

‘Phew’ Henry thought, whilst Anna had a look of relief on her face. “So, what do you think we should do?”

They were now nearing the banqueting hall. “Nothing” he continued. “No doubt Lord Montgomery will make an appearance soon and I have already notified your father of your arrival, Anna.”

She glanced at him. “You have? He will be here soon?”

He ignored her question. “I will let them sort it out between them when they are present together.”

They passed through the two oak doors into the hall, where they sat at the table. Henry noticed a very well-dressed woman talking with two other ladies halfway down

the hall, thinking that maybe she was Geoffrey's wife. The next moment Geoffrey called out to her.

"Eleanor, come and talk with us and hear of our Anna's interesting but disturbing story."

The woman turned round, excused herself to the two ladies and walked over to join them. Once again, Henry couldn't believe his eyes. She was beautiful; not, in his opinion, as beautiful as his Anna but still a head-turner. She was wearing a crimson dress with a white neck-piece and white lace-edged flared sleeves. Sitting herself next to Anna, she grasped a hand.

"My dear Anna. This is such a pleasure to see you again and I am sure you grow more beautiful every time I see you."

"Thank you Lady Eleanor. It has been many months since we spent time together and I miss our exchanges of news."

"Geoffrey has told me all that has happened. How dreadful. Let us hope it will be resolved soon." She glanced over at Henry. "And this is the gentleman who has helped and treated you so well."

"Yes, Henry Longford: the man to whom I owe so much."

There was a slight pause before Lord Geoffrey spoke again. "I have already related to Eleanor how you both feel about each other and of the complications." He turned his attention to Anna.

"So tell me Anna. Do you think your father would approve of a marriage to this gentleman?"

Anna gritted her teeth. "I think not, Geoffrey."

"Why not?"

She looked over at Henry with concern on her face.

"He is not of high standing and I admit myself that I know very little about his background: what wealth he might have or what lands he might hold. However," she continued, "he did 'rescue me' from Lord Montgomery and has behaved impeccably all the time I have been with him. He has proved to be an honorable man, very caring and honest with admirable qualities. He has done his utmost to protect me and has now delivered me into your hands to give me time to find out more about how Lord Montgomery won the archery contest against all odds. In fact I know of no other person in whom I would place my trust, safety, life and even ... my future."

"Impressive indeed. In that case does it matter if he is not a knight nor, apparently, possessing great wealth?"

"Yes, because I don't think my father would give permission."

With comments like that, Henry felt her slipping away from him and was about to say something that he might regret.

Geoffrey directed his attention back to Henry. "So tell me Henry, do you own any lands or have a source of income?"

"No I do not, but I ..."

"Have you excelled in battle and deserving of high rank?"

‘
“No, I have never had the need to test my fighting skills, being primarily a scholar” Henry replied disconsolately, thinking that the only ‘battles’ he had fought were technological ones.

“In order to protect the life and honour of Lady Anna you definitely require the skills to confront a determined adversary. How are you with a sword and other weapons?”

Henry cast his mind back to the 21st century and more recent events. “I have partaken in fencing competitions but otherwise have only been involved in minor skirmishes since escorting Anna from the inn. I must admit never having to face a serious conflict or challenge.”

“In that case, my dear learned man, I would strongly commend that we give you some additional training.”

Henry felt a little apprehensive, wondering if he could ever win a fight against skilled medieval swordsmen. “Yes, certainly” he agreed.

“I will arrange for some intensive training from my best trainers. That will be a start. We can discuss later a suitable profession to which you can employ the other skills you possess. Your training will commence tomorrow; now let’s eat.”

Anna’s smiled and Henry felt happier but still a little apprehensive. They ate well that night and managed to find a few moments together to contemplate on how things were turning out. They were comforted by the fact that Geoffrey appeared sympathetic to their predicament.

Early the following morning Henry was introduced to Alex, Lord Geoffrey’s Master of Arms.

“Good day to you Henry. I understand that we need to improve your combatant skills.”

“Yes, so it would seem” Henry replied.

“There are many skills that a man needs to acquire in order to defend himself, his Lady and, of course, his Lord. These include swordsmanship, archery, use of the lance plus many other weapons and of course horsemanship. Not many men will excel in all of these but usually become very proficient in one or two. For you, we will concentrate on three - the sword, use of the lance and horse riding. Archery is a particular skill that requires years of training, the most skilled ones being taught from a young age, usually boyhood.”

“I think those three will keep me busy for a while” Henry replied, with some apprehension with regard to handling a lance.

“It’s going to be hard work as you need to develop these skills quickly. From what Lord de Champ tells me, you have had some very close encounters which could have landed you in much trouble.”

“Maybe I’m lucky.”

“Luck doesn’t always last.”

Henry nodded. Alex then introduced him to three trainers - Michael, who would teach him how to use a lance; Philippe, who would teach him swordsmanship; and David, who would teach him horsemanship. They agreed time slots during each day for each session beginning with the sword.

"Best of luck" Alex said to Henry as he handed him over to Philippe.

"Thanks" he replied.

"Work him hard Philippe" Alex called out as he walked off.

Philippe led Henry to an area where a few other men were undergoing sword training. "I see you've brought your arming sword with you, so let's start with that so that I can get some idea of your skills, then we can move on to the two-handed and then the Great Sword." Philippe drew his sword and Henry did likewise. "I'll start by feigning an attack and you attempt to defend yourself."

When the attack came Henry surprised himself when he easily managed to fend off Philippe's thrusts. *'My fencing hobby has actually proved helpful after all.'* Henry thought to himself as he wielded the weapon to the surprise of the trainer.

"It seems we underestimated you" Philippe stated. "Are you sure you haven't had much experience?"

"No" Henry replied. "Just lots of training and practice." He now switched to attack mode and soon managed to disarm Philippe. Philippe was amazed and looked a little hurt at what had just happened.

"It seems that my Lord Geoffrey underestimated you. I don't think I can teach you anything. Let's try a two-handed sword and see how you handle that." He selected a couple of large swords from a wooden rack and handed one to Henry. "Take this" he said.

Henry took the sword and felt the weight.

"Heavy?"

"You could say that."

"Swing it around a bit to get used to the feel and its handling."

This, Henry proceeded to do until Philippe told him to start swinging at him, adding "Don't worry, you won't harm me."

Although Henry had never handled such a sword before, he found that he could wield it quite effectively, but Philippe was right of course. Every swing or thrust that Henry aimed at him he brushed away or avoided with relative ease and on a few occasions actually disarmed Henry.

As arranged, his training continued with horse riding and use of the lance which, as he suspected, was less satisfactory. Michael pointed out that it was early days yet and trying to ride a horse holding a lance steady took a lot of practice, but at least he found horse riding not too difficult to master. By the end of the first day he was exhausted.

The following morning Henry awoke with many aching muscles, especially his arms where he had been using the much heavier swords than he was used to. The

, training continued and he made good progress to his trainers' delight. They all commented on how quick a learner he was, but then of course he had the incentive. The main issue that remained was learning to fence from a mounted horse. During the training he unfortunately had little time to spend with Anna except during the evenings. Although they were obliged out of etiquette to retire to their own rooms for the night they did manage to find private moments together in secluded parts of the castle and grounds where they were able to grab the opportunity to indulge unseen in passionate love making. Recollecting such events later they considered themselves lucky that they were never discovered in any compromising situations, but there were certainly some near misses and it soon became very obvious that nearly everyone knew of their relationship. Throughout this period Henry felt contented and more optimistic that everything would turn out okay. He also had busy and interesting days learning about the activities that took place around the castle, whilst Anna spent most of her free time with Eleanor. Henry's most pleasurable moments, of course, was spending time with Anna and he knew within his heart that he did not want these to end. He was now beginning to think that perhaps he would not want to return to his own time after all.

Finally, his trainers came to the conclusion that they couldn't teach him anymore and asked him what other equipment he would like to be trained in or require. He made a request for a conical shaped shield in the style of the Scottish targe but with much more sloping sides. When it was handed over to him he found it was made of linden wood with a leather covering and faced with smooth metal. When asked why he wanted such a shape as opposed to the traditional one he pointed out that the sloping sides were more likely to deflect the blow of a sword rather than taking it full on as with the flat design. With continuing practice and joining in the group training sessions his confidence that he would be able to defend himself in a fight grew daily.

* * * * *

Lord Montgomery was furious as he strode about the room shouting at his knights. "Lost them again. Where are they now? How is it that a stranger can abduct my ... future wife not only from the inn, where you were supposed to collect her, but also from my castle right under your noses and then disappear into my forest? It seems to me that they are always one step ahead of us. That accursed Frenchman has humiliated me." He slammed his fist on the table yelling even louder. "I want her back. I want to know who this stranger is. I want to know why he was not also brought to my castle. I want to know who has assisted him and how they got out of my castle." He strode up and down the room whilst his knights stood rigid watching him. "Any answers? From any of you?"

"Yes my lord." Replied Guy.

"Well."

“We now know that the abbot took them in and gave them sanctuary.”

“And where is the abbot now?”

“We apprehended him.”

“And what did you learn?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?” He bellowed. “Where is he now?”

“He has been dealt with.”

“Well, I just hope you don’t get us in trouble with the church.”

“We won’t.”

“Any else to report?”

“We also interrogated peasants in the first village where they stayed, including the keeper of the inn where they lodged.”

There were some sniggers from those who had heard about the interrogation methods used.

Lord Montgomery heard them and snapped his head around. “And did he tell you anything?”

“He confirmed that two monks had indeed stayed at the inn the previous night.”

“Ah yes. The monks. That fiasco.”

Guy continued. “We traced their movements to the next village, which they entered under cover of darkness, knowing that our men had probably visited the village during that day.”

“Always one step ahead. They must have had assistance from someone.”

“There, we are in luck.”

Lord Montgomery walked over to the bench and planted both hands on the top staring at Guy.

“Our contact saw them arrive in the village at night and depart in the early hours in a cart.”

Go on.”

“He said he did not know where they came from but managed to follow them to the outskirts of the forest, where they left the cart and continued on foot. He then returned to report to us.”

“It seems to me that at that point you should have been able to apprehend them being so close behind them.”

“The forest is large and dense my Lord. We had many men searching but found no trace of them.”

Lord Montgomery resumed his pacing. “I want to know who got them into the village and provided them with the means to find their way through the forest. Most people would get lost but they seemed to know the exact direction to Lord de Champ’s.”

“And there we had another stroke of luck.”

There was a pause.

“Well don’t keep me waiting; what is this stroke of luck?”

‘
“Who would know the forest well enough to guide someone through it or, more to the point, provide them with directions?”

“Many peasants I should imagine.”

“Peasants may know their own locality well but not the greater part of your estate.”

Montgomery walked up and own pensively for a few moments and then shot the reply. “Alfred, my woodsman.”

Guy nodded slowly.

“But the description we had from our observer doesn’t really confirm that it was him, as it was dark so he did not get a clear view.”

“Go and apprehend this Alfred anyway and find out if he knows anything. Meanwhile, what do I do now? Will I have to ride to de Champ’s to claim my prize.”

“My lord; we do have another plan that will save you the embarrassment.”

“And will this be yet another failed attempt to return this woman to me?”

There was no reply.

“It seems that I now need to visit my friend Geoffrey, where at least I will have the opportunity to see who this fellow is who has somehow managed to outwit you all. He is obviously very persistent and must be earning a handsome reward for the risks he is taking. Maybe he is someone who should be in my employ or perhaps we can bribe him; after all there are many men who would sell their wives for sufficient silver. God; there is so much incompetence around me.”

The group of knights glanced at each other.

“What of the report that someone suspects we haven’t played by the rules?”

“That has also been dealt with my lord” came the reply from another knight.

“How?”

“The main participant in the incident is no longer available.”

Montgomery’s eyebrows were raised in an expression that he was waiting for more.

“It seems that he had an accident in the forest which unfortunately led to his demise before he was er ... apprehended.”

“Did he talk to anyone?”

“Only briefly to his contact, who also suffered an accident.”

“I am really sorry to hear that” Montgomery responded sarcastically.

“Are we exonerated then?”

“I believe that to be the case my lord.”

“I hope so. Now go, all of you.”

As they began to leave the room he called after them. “Serve me well on this occasion and you may be surprised by my generosity.”

Once they had all left, Montgomery sat down muttering to himself. “Soon you will be mine, my beautiful creature.”

* * * * *

Alfred was in his hut in the forest repairing his bow when Guy arrived with his men. He heard them coming and stepped out of his hut to welcome them. "Ah, Guy. Good to see you. What brings you to the forest this day?"

Guy was not smiling and even looked a bit guilty at what he was about to do.

"Seize him."

The soldiers dismounted and grabbed hold of Alfred. He looked at the men around him.

"What's going on? Let me go."

"Alfred Beaumont, you are accused of helping enemies of our Lord Montgomery."

"What? I don't know what you are talking about."

"You helped a Frenchman Henry Longford to abduct and carry off the Lady Anna Trellian, Lord Montgomery's betrothed, and gave them assistance to flee to the supposed safety of Lord Geoffrey de Champ."

"Abduct Lord Montgomery's betrothed. That is preposterous. I demand to see Lord Montgomery in person."

"He doesn't want to see you. Tie him to the tree over there."

Two men did as ordered.

"Let me go you fools. Your accusations are preposterous."

Alfred struggled to free himself until one of the soldiers stunned him with the handle of his sword. In his groggy state he was tied to the tree whilst two of the men entered the hut and came out with one of them holding Alfred's bow and a hand-full of arrows. Alfred looked around at the group soldiers watching him.

"Do you deny helping this philanderer Henry Longford to abduct Lady Anna Trellian from the inn where she was to be collected by our Lord Montgomery?"

"Yes, of course I do."

Guy glanced over and nodded at the soldier who was holding the bow and arrow. "Not fatally" he said; at which the man brought up the bow and shot an arrow into Alfred's upper left arm. There was a grunt as he took the hit. Blood seeped out of the wound onto his shirt.

"You are lying, Alfred. After the Lady Anna was rescued ..."

"Rescued? What do you mean?" Alfred asked, painfully.

"... rescued by Lord Montgomery's men, do you deny helping this Henry Longford to abduct her once again from his Lordship's castle against her will?"

"I deny everything and don't know what you're talking about. Who is this Henry Longford anyway?"

Another nod and a second arrow struck him in the other arm. More blood seeped onto his shirt as he cried out in pain.

"Do you further deny helping the two fugitives to reach sanctuary in the monastery?"

"Y...e...s."

An arrow in his left thigh followed.

"And from there, through the forest and on to Lord Geoffrey de Champ's estate?"

Alfred was struggling to remain conscious. "I have nothing more to say" he drawled through the pain.

"We're going to get nothing out of him, unless we take him back to the castle and try other methods to persuade him to talk. Shall I finish him off?" The soldier suggested.

"No" replied Guy. "We've wasted enough time already.

Even things up and we'll leave him to the wolves; there are still a few around here. They'll soon sense the smell of blood."

The man fired the last arrow into Alfred's right thigh, at which point he lost conscious, his body sagging against the bonds. The man walked forward and lifted Alfred's head by the hair, letting it drop down again. "Shall I cut him loose?"

"No" replied Guy. The wolves will have more fun tearing flesh off him that way.

The bow and remaining arrows were thrown to the ground as Guy and his men mounted their horses and rode off laughing. Once they were some distance away the bleeding unconscious Alfred was unaware of rustling in the forest and stealthy movement towards him.

With Henry's skills as a swordsman having been reported to Geoffrey, the Lord commented on Henry's performance during dinner on the fifth day.

"You have surprised everyone with your skills" Geoffrey commented.

"Thank you Lord Geoffrey."

"I am surprisingly impressed."

Henry felt a bit embarrassed, particularly when Anna smiled at him in admiration.

"You said you were a learned man who has not had any fighting experience, yet you wield a sword well and can use it with astonishing dexterity. In fact my men have never come across such a man as you."

Henry remained silent.

"Maybe you have good reason for keeping your superb skills hidden; but a scholar with such martial skills has me wondering."

Henry was formulating a response in his mind when Geoffrey continued.

"There has also been a lot of curiosity about you. Your persona, behaviour and manner of speech have been commented on. I don't doubt for one instance that you are a chivalrous, honest, brave and a clever person but one thing worries me."

"And what might that be?"

"You seem ... how should I say ... out of place here. I would describe you as an anachronism, Henry. "

There it was again. Everyone whom Henry talked to seemed to draw the same conclusion; that he was out of place in this era.

"Should that really bother us Geoffrey?" Eleanor asked. "Henry's attributes are such that he stands out from the crowd."

“That’s exactly the problem” Geoffrey replied. “Too much so; that it engenders questions about his background and motives.” He turned his attention back to Henry. “It is high time that we had a long discussion of your background to allay any suspicions on my or anyone else’s part.”

The next moment, they were interrupted by a servant who came up to the dining table and whispered in his ear. “Ah” he said, turning to Anna. Lord Trellian, your father, will joining us shortly.”

Anna smiled and expressed her excitement at seeing her father once again. Henry’s feelings were more pessimistic.

It was market day when Anna’s father was due to arrive at Lord Geoffrey’s castle. Although she told Henry how excited she was, they both had a sense of foreboding about how he would view their relationship. They had already decided that they would let him know how they felt about each other but ultimately her fate was in her father’s hands. They tried to analyze the situation, looking at the pros and cons, from her father’s and even her point of view. Anna knew how much she loved Henry, so marrying a man without property, wealth or a source of regular income and of dubious origins did not really bother her. Henry wasn’t too concerned either but was a bit apprehensive for the future, although he knew that he could probably turn his hand to anything. He even saw himself in a ‘Lord Chancellor’ type of role, not that he would even contemplate usurping the current holder of that office. He knew how politically risky some of these senior positions could be. The main point was that he and Anna were madly in love with each other and somehow they had to make it work.

As on previous occasions when the future held doubts, Henry tried to look logically at the reasons why he ought to return to his own century, there were some obvious and some not so obvious considerations. Anna was a very attractive, desirable and clever woman who could help her father to forge a strong alliance with a Norman baron. This would help him politically, being of Saxon origin. Her offspring could very likely inherit large territories and become powerful landowners with much influence. Then there was him: some guy who turns up, kidnaps his daughter and falls madly in love with her. He has few obvious skills that are applicable to the era and nothing to offer except his labour and brain. His swordsmanship was untested in battle and he never really thought about himself as a great or brave fighter nor did he relish the thought of riding into battle with the likelihood of getting his arm sliced off or an axe in his head. ‘*My brain.*’ He said to himself. ‘*I have to use my 21st century brain to survive here and make a name for myself.*’ He had to admit that even in the middle ages there had always been a lot of clever people about who worked in devious ways to attain power; but was he up to it? Are 21st century people cleverer than their ancestors? Just more civilized more like, generally speaking of course. As these thoughts rolled through his head he began to feel apprehensive again about whether he should remain here after all. It would be impossible for him to return to the inn, where he arrived in

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this era, so how would he get back? This Father Bernard he had heard spoken about must know where the crystal is and the link no doubt resides in Lord Trellian's castle. His quest now must be to locate the monk to enable him to analyze the options logically. All these thoughts were hidden from Anna, who had known early on that something was troubling him. Her declaration of love for him but acceptance of a scenario that they might not be able to stay together provided some sort of relief for Henry's internal conflict but it still left his mind in turmoil. So much for the power of his brain which flounders when faced with a difficult decision. Could he really survive here? Something made him doubt it.

19. Abduction

It was market day and the two men who had entered the castle earlier were on a mission. They had to succeed. Failure would have serious consequences for both of them. They had left their cart close to the entrance to the mote. It already had several sacks of maize loaded up but they carried one, along with a large spare sack, purposely to the kitchen, having bluffed their way past the guards. When they reached the kitchen, where the cook and staff were busily preparing food for the next meal, they dumped the sack just inside the door.

“Here’s the grain we were asked to deliver” called out one of them, who was rather rotund, unlike his thinner compatriot.

The cook glanced round and, wiping her hands on her apron, came over towards them looking a bit annoyed. “I didn’t order any grain. Anyway, I would want it milled to be of any use to me.”

“Oh. We were asked to drop it here.”

“Well, I don’t want it. Take it back from whence it came.”

The two men looked at each. “Look, we don’t want to carry that back again.” He lowered his voice. “Hey, tell you what; you can keep the grain to share amongst your staff ... but don’t tell anyone. It might get us into trouble.”

“Oh. We don’t want that to happen do we?” The cook replied, grinning.

The rotund one gave the cook a gentle nudge. “Our pleasure.”

“That’s very good of you. Thanks.” She returned to her chores but turned around again. “You’d best put it over there in the corner and we’ll divide it up later.”

“Will do.” They dragged the sack over to the corner of the kitchen. “Looks like you’re preparing a big meal. Got an important guest arriving?”

“No.” She paused in her work momentarily. “Well I suppose we have in a way; but one of them has been here a while now.”

The two men glanced at each other. “Oh. Who is that then?”

“The Lady Anna Trellian. She turned up with a strange fellow.”

The two men nodded to each other knowingly with a nudge.

“He seems to be all over her” the cook added.

“I bet she’s hidden away then so he can’t ‘fondle’ her.” The two men chuckled loudly. They nudged each other again. “Must say I wouldn’t mind a fondle.”

“Oh, go one. You are so crude.”

“I hear she’s quite a beauty” the thinner man commented.

“Hm. That she is and safely lodged in the West Tower away from the likes of you.”

Most of the kitchen staff laughed along with the two men. They had all been listening to the verbal banter. The fat man nudged his mate.

“Well, we must be off now before we get into trouble.” They moved over to the door. “Bye for now. See you again soon.”

“Yes. Thanks for the grain and mind what you two get up to.”

“Ha. We will.”

They left the kitchen and made their way to the West Tower carrying the spare sack.

“The stranger must be the one who got into our Lord’s castle and took off with this Lady Anna.” The thin one said.

“Yes, and now we get our own back!”

One or two people passed them on the way to the tower but fortunately did not pay them much attention. They knew which room she was in from their spy in the castle and eventually they found themselves standing outside her door listening to her singing. The larger one knocked on the door. Anna, thinking it was probably Henry coming to collect her called out.

“Come in, Henry”.

The two men entered and closed the door behind them. The thinner one stood just inside the door whilst the other slowly moved towards her slightly to her left. She was facing away brushing her hair and, sensing the silence, turned and on seeing him standing there dropped her hand.

“Who are you and what are you doing her in my room?”

The man facing her bowed slightly. “I am sorry my Lady. Sir Henry asked us to come and collect you.”

Her suspicions were immediately roused and she replied angrily. “I don’t think so. He would have come and collected me himself.” She failed to notice that the thin man had moved behind her. Something hit her on the head and all went black. The two men bound and gagged her and got her into the spare sack. Fortunately, with all the activity outside the guards accepted their claim that the sack of ‘grain’ they were carrying was not required by the kitchen after all.

Henry was so fascinated watching the throngs of people going about their business that he didn’t realize how long he had been standing there until Lady Eleanor approached him.

“Where is Lady Anna? I thought she would be with you by now. Lord Trellian will be arriving soon.”

“Hm. She does seem to have been a long time.” Henry replied, rather concerned. “I’ll go and check to see if she is ready. Knowing her though, she is probably chatting to the other ladies of the court.” He wandered back towards the apartments when a worried looking lady in waiting came rushing towards him.

“Excuse me sir, but we are worried about the Lady Anna.”

Henry’s expression immediately changed to one of concern. “Why?”

“I went to attend to her but found her gone, and her room was in turmoil.”

Now Henry was worried. He dashed over to the West Tower and up to her room where he found a hairbrush on the floor, a chair knocked over and general scene of disturbance. His immediate thought was that she had been kidnapped again. Anger and distress welled up inside him at not keeping a closer eye on her and losing her for the second time. He turned to the lady in waiting.

“Notify Lord Geoffrey immediately and ask him to order the castle gates closed. I fear she may have been kidnapped.” He rushed out of the room and made his way to the entrance to the motte and asked one of the guards on duty if he had seen anything untoward. He replied negatively, so Henry asked him to check urgently whether others might have seen anything or anyone acting suspiciously. The guard replied that he had only seen traders coming and going but hurried off to make enquiries.

Henry scanned the area looking for anyone acting oddly amongst the throngs of people but everyone seemed to be going about their business in a normal manner. His gaze moved over to the main gate of the castle. Traders were still entering the castle on foot or in carts laden with produce whilst a queue of those leaving was being inspected by the guards, who were presumably checking documents of sale and collecting taxes. There were carts loaded with sacks of maize and other produce and pedestrians carrying goods and a variety of animals and birds in cages. Something stirred at the back of his mind but he couldn’t quite put his finger on it. Presently, a soldier appeared and spoke with the guard. Shortly after, the portcullis came down accompanied by the guard making an announcement to the crowd. There was a bit of commotion when people realized they couldn’t leave or enter the castle.

Henry began to feel empty inside. He knew that if Anna had been taken to Lord Montmery’s castle again there would be no chance of getting her out a second time. She would be put under extremely close security. The soldier he spoke with earlier reappeared.

“I am sorry sir. No one has seen anyone acting suspiciously nor have they seen Lady Anna.”

“Nothing? No one? Not one stranger? Nothing unusual?”

“No. Except that a couple of peasants, one fat and one thin, tried to deliver a sack of maize to the kitchen by mistake.”

Henry’s heart sank. *‘Oh no, I have lost her for good this time. A fat lot of good I was in rescuing the damsel in distress.’* Then it came to him and lit the light bulb in the head. He flipped around to face the soldier once again.

“What did you say? A sack of maize? Here? In this part of the castle? What would they be doing with a sack of maize up here? It would normally be delivered to the miller for milling.”

“I must admit that now it seems very strange; but they didn’t leave it.”

Henry's gaze switched back to the carts at the gate as he thought out loud. "That's it! They've smuggled her out as a sack of maize."

He dashed back towards the kitchen nearly running straight into Lord Geoffrey, who was looking very concerned. "What's going on Henry? Is Lady Anna in some trouble? I hear she has disappeared." He continued before Henry had chance to reply. "You also requested that the castle gates be closed. Whilst I agreed, I am at a loss to understand why. We do not seem to be under any threat."

He could see that Henry was anxious to continue to wherever he was going.

"I think Anna has been kidnapped and smuggled out in a maize sack" Henry blurted out and dashed off leaving a puzzled Lord Geoffrey.

On reaching the kitchen he checked with the kitchen staff and was told by the cook that two men had left the sack of maize standing in the corner, whereupon he retraced his steps passing Lord Geoffrey again.

"I am on my way to find out how many carts laden with maize sacks have already left the castle and then I am going after whoever took her."

Lord Geoffrey quickly stepped out of Henry's way. "Then go to it young man."

They both hurried from the motte, across the bailey to the guards at the gate. People were milling about and grumbling about the disruption but stopped to watch Henry rushing up to the guards.

"How many carts laden with maize have left the castle within the last fifteen minutes and who was riding them?"

The two guards glanced at each other looking a bit perplexed. They looked back at Henry as one started to reply.

"Er, I think about five."

Henry was starting to show impatience. "No. I don't need 'think'. I need to know exactly how many, a description of the traders riding the cart and which direction they took, if you can remember. I believe the Lady Anna has been kidnapped in a maize sack."

The guards glanced at each other in agitation when one ducked into the guard room and reappeared with a log sheet. He traced the entries down with his finger.

"Five, sir."

"And?"

Counting with his fingers he started recalling the cart drivers. "The first was ridden by a lone elderly peasant. I think I recognized him from one of the villages."

"And the next?"

"A young man with, I presume, his wife. The third was by another peasant and a lad." He looked up. "They also had chickens with them. "The fourth ... here's a strange one."

Henry felt his heart thumping. "Yes?"

"Two shift looking fellows. A fat one was driving the cart and the other one, a rather skinny bloke, was sitting on the sacks of maize, not that they had many, in the cart."

“That’s them.” Henry said. He turned to another guard. “Saddle my horse whilst I fetch my sword. I must give chase.” He turned back to the guard to whom he had been speaking. “Do you remember which way they were headed?”

“Straight along the main highway and they were in a bit of a hurry as well.” He returned to his document. “The last one, not long before we closed the gates, had another peasant and his two sons.” He put the papers down. “Oh, and the road does split into three further on.”

Henry tried to visualize the routes and the one they were on when they arrived from Montgomery’s estate through the village. He presumed they probably wouldn’t take that route as it was too obvious and village folk would notice them; but then again they might be bold enough to do just that. He decided against.

“I know the western branch runs through the village not far from here. Where does the northern branch go?”

“It splits further with a rough track, although wide enough for a cart, heading west towards Montraie Abbey in Lord Montgomery’s estate. I don’t think many people use it so I don’t know how good it is. I would hazard a guess that they were most likely to have taken that route.”

This man had grasped the situation well and as Henry dashed off to fetch his sword calling back to the guard.

“Good, man. What’s your name?”

“Peter.”

“Get saddled up, Peter. We must make haste up.”

“You’ll need more men.” Geoffrey commented rhetorically.

Henry didn’t reply as his mind was focused on catching up with the cart.

Soon, he and Peter were galloping along the road as fast as they could drive their horses. The fading sound of shouting behind them, Henry guessed, was another group of men about to be dispatched to help him and Peter. When the road split, as described, they took the northern route and soon came across the cart with the man and his sons, who all looked rather worried as Henry and Peter galloped past them. Further on they found the rough track leading to the monastery.

“This way” shouted Peter, as he pulled his horse to the left followed by Henry, who tried to visualize how far the abbey might be. They needed to find the cart before it crossed into Lord Montgomery’s estate, where it was likely that a reception committee would be waiting.

“Don’t worry Sir Henry.” Peter called out, trying to reassure him. “We will find her and slice the two kidnappers into pieces.”

Henry just nodded in agreement without answering. They seemed to be riding for an eternity and Henry was becoming unsure that they had taken the correct road. Peter seemed to read his mind and tried to reassure him..

‘
“I’m confident that we are on the right road. I was told before we left that a group of men were about to be dispatched along the road through the village to see if the cart went that way.”

“Thank you Peter” Henry replied, as the track started to descend into a shallow but narrow valley with gentle slopes either side. He still had his doubts thinking ‘*They can’t have come this way. We must be wrong. We have travelled too far.*’ Peter detected Henry’s despondency and was now becoming concerned, knowing that the estate boundary was not that far now. As the track ahead curved round to the right Peter suddenly swerved off and rode up the right bank. For a moment he disappeared, with Henry wondering where he was going, but he shortly reappeared coming back down. Henry stopped as Peter rode up to him.

“Sire, I see them. The cart with two men seated in it. It is not far around the bend but now close to the estate boundary. We must make haste.”

Henry clapped his hand on Peter’s shoulder. “My God. Thank you Peter. Let’s go get our Lady Anna.”

They set off again and, as they rounded the bend, saw the cart with the fat and thin occupants. As they neared the cart, the thin man sitting in the back of the cart turned around and shouted to the fat one who attempted to drive it faster, but Henry and Peter soon caught up with it, riding on each side of the cart.

Henry called out. “Stop. Immediately.”

The driver ignored Henry as they approached an old wooden bridge in the distance. Henry knew instinctively that it was the boundary stream between the de Champ’s and Montgomery’s estates so quickly rode level with the cart’s horse and pulled it up to a stop.

“Why are you stopping us?” The fat driver barked. “We are delivering grain to Lord Montgomery which, I might add, he is waiting for.”

“Must be a good quality grain” Peter mocked.

“Soft and tender no doubt.” Henry nearly spat the words out.

The driver glared at Henry whilst the thin man in the back looked up from his rather strange position.

“Looks like you’re protecting that grain with your life.” Henry added.

“And you are not going to take it. We bought it with good money.” The man replied.

“We have no intention of taking your *grain*.” Henry emphasized the last word strongly and climbed onto the cart. “Now, move out of the way.”

The man ignored Henry, until he unsheathed his sword, whereupon the man moved quickly. Henry started feeling the sacks then noticing a long strange looking one packed loosely between two others; he was also convinced he saw it move slightly followed by a faint murmur.

“You know what I think?” Henry said, reaching down to inspect the sack.

The man’s response was fast; he pulled a sword out from beneath the sacks close to him, as did the driver from under his seat. Henry quickly stood upright as he raised his own sword.

“That was a mistake” Henry said, waiting for the man to attack.

At the same time, Peter leapt down from his own horse ready to face the fat man who growled “It will be worse for you.”

Neither man was a match for Henry and Peter as their swords met. The thin man soon had his sword knocked from his grip after only a few blows whilst Peter clashed swords with the driver who fell off the cart and ran off towards the bridge just as a group of riders appeared on the track on the other side. The thin man, seeing his colleague fleeing, jumped off the cart and ran to join him. The fat man was now shouting to the approaching riders

“We have her, Sir Guy; in the cart.”

Immediately, the horsemen started galloping towards the bridge. Henry counted six of them, all drawing their swords. He thought of Anna, in the sack and on her way to Montmery. *‘My Anna.’* He thought with anger boiling up in him. This gave him the resolve and courage to take on the group, even though they were outnumbered. The man at the head of the group galloped at Henry with sword raised and bringing it down against Henry’s with crashing blow. Henry had anticipated this and managed to grab the man’s tunic as he passed, pulling him off his horse to the ground. Peter rushed to Henry’s side as four of the other riders dismounted and ran to engage them. The last man, who was dressed in black, also dismounted and called out, mockingly.

“Would this be the mysterious Frenchman, and an accomplished fighter at that; but let’s see how good he is with a sword.”

Henry guessed that this man was the one known as Guy, as two of the others started to tackle him. The other two went for Peter. Meanwhile, the man Henry had unhorsed was getting to his feet. Henry managed to easily parry both his adversaries’ swords and flipping one of them out of its owner’s grip whilst Peter was having a bit of a hard time being slowly driven back. The unhorsed man now joined the other one still holding his sword to confront Henry but suddenly cried out, wounded in the arm. Peter had managed to maneuver himself to a position where he could also leap up onto the cart to gain the advantage of height. The five men were now battling with Henry and Peter but not making much headway.

Guy now walked slowly forward. “He is indeed quite good.”

With the fighting continuing and Henry besting his three attackers, the wounded man having stepped forward again, he suddenly heard Peter cry out. His sword fell from his grip as he grabbed his injured arm. Guy had now leapt up onto the cart and approached Henry, signaling for his men to back off, which they did.

“You and me” he said slowly. “Say your prayers, Frenchman.”

As their swords clashed Guy’s men stood around the cart with swords ready, waiting for a signal from Guy. Henry now realized that fighting for real was a lot different from fencing lessons and the training he had received from Philippe. Guy was a skilled fighter and Henry was beginning to feel the power of Guy’s onslaught. Fortunately fate came to the rescue when there was a shout from Peter as about a dozen men came galloping around the bend in the track and began to bear down on them.

Guy glanced around and, on seeing the horsemen, jumped down from the cart. “We are out of here men.”

They all ran for their horses as Lord Geoffrey’s men closed in.

As Guy mounted he called back to Henry. “We’ll meet again Frenchman; then we’ll see how good you are.”

Henry was now oblivious to Geoffrey’s men swarming around them as he dropped his sword and quickly pulled the two grain sacks away so as to get access to the one sandwiched between the two. He lifted it gently and undid a rope around the top, pulling the sack down to reveal a bound and gagged Anna. Quickly he removed the gag, released her bonds and helped her to sit up, at which point they engaged in a tight embrace.

“Oh Anna” he said. “I am so sorry.”

“It’s not your fault my darling. I knew my hero would save me once again.” She released herself from the embrace with a smile on her face.

“Yes, but it was close” Henry responded, indicating the boundary bridge. “We certainly can’t take any more chances. I will have to watch you day and night.”

“That would be nice; but I must be careful whom I let into my room in future” she answered, rubbing her head.

“Yes you must. How is your head?”

“Just a bit tender where I was knocked out by the skinny one.”

Henry examined her head, carefully moving her hair aside. “It doesn’t look too bad.” He then helped her out of the sack, removed the rope from her ankles and lifted her off the cart. “I think we should return to the castle before more trouble befalls us?”

One of the horsemen had already brought Henry’s horse up, which he mounted, and then helped Anna up to sit behind him. Those attending to Peter also mounted up as they all turned their horses to return to the castle.

Anna hugged Henry around the waist, rested her head on his back and whispered. “Oh, I do love you Henry.”

“And I love you dearest Anna.” He whispered back.

“Well Sir Henry” one of the knights called out. “Let’s get you both back to the castle post haste. Half of us will ride in front and half behind, just to be sure.”

“Fine by us” Henry replied as they moved off at a gentle trot.

Most of the journey back was in silence with the occasional snippets of conversation between various members of the group.

“Are you sure you feel well?” Henry asked Anna as they reached the main track leading back to the castle.

“Yes” she replied. “You know, I have always prided myself on being able to look after myself but it seems that without you, I would have failed miserably.”

“Circumstances beyond your control my dear. Your agreement to go to Montmery could be interpreted as the action of a ...”

“Brave woman?”

‘
“I was going to say determined or foolish.”

“Foolish? What you mean by that?” She demanded, thumping him on the back.”

“Hey, be careful. That was hard.”

“If I didn’t know you better Henry Longford, I could take great offense at that remark and”

“Have me hung, drawn and quartered?”

She thought for a moment before replying. “No, I can think of something far worse.”

The softness in her voice gave Henry an indication of what that might be.

“In that case I might be forced to whisk you away to a place where no one could ever find us.”

“And would that be where you come from?” She suggested.

“Yes” Henry replied, thinking back to the twenty first century and trying to imagine what it would be like trying to assimilate Anna into such an alien environment.

“That might be quite nice” she added quietly and laid her head against his back.

Henry spent the remainder of the journey thinking what a culture shock it would be for Anna, who of course knew nothing about what the world would be like in even ten years, let alone a thousand. Easier for him, of course, having a fair knowledge of the era he was in. Then the thoughts rolled around in his head yet again. *‘Would I ever get back? Do I want to go back? Could I live even survive in this violent era? Anna can’t come back with me? But what they’re wrong and she could? Do they really know?’* The thoughts just percolated through his brain with no answers at the end when the castle came into view.

As they reached the castle walls, the gates were open and there was a loud cheer from the crowd that had gathered as they recognized that Henry had been successful in rescuing Anna. They rode through cheering crowds as they made their way to the motte. Henry thanked all the men who had come to their aid, at which they all nodded in acknowledgement. Once in the courtyard Henry dismounted and helped Anna down as Geoffrey and Eleanor appeared descending the steps from the Great Hall. Geoffrey walked forward arms outstretched.

“My dear Anna. I am so glad you are safe.” He caressed her as a father would a long lost daughter. “I have already been updated on what happened.” He stepped back and took hold of Anna’s hands. “I have failed miserably to provide you with the protection that you deserve. Please forgive me.”

“No Geoffrey. It was my own foolishness that led me to take for granted that I would be safe from such a determined man as Lord Montgomery. Clearly I was wrong.”

“He will not get another chance.”

“That I am sure of” she replied glancing at Henry.

Geoffrey released Anna and moved round towards him as Eleanor stepped up to embrace Anna.

‘
“I am just thankful that our men reached you in time, but of course we should be really grateful to your brave Henry Longford for his persistence and loyalty to you.”

“I have a lot to thank him for” Anna added.

“I am sure my dear.”

“More than you could ever know.”

She glanced at Anna and then back to Henry with a knowing look on her face, then changed the subject, placing her hand on Henry’s arm. “I understand you have done well with your training Henry. In fact, I hear that you were already skilled as swordsman and are now an accomplished horse rider. Our men tell me that you handled yourself very skillfully when rescuing Lady Anna.”

“Just doing what any man would have done for such a wonderful woman as Anna” Henry replied. “But I couldn’t have done it without your guard Peter; and I will be the first to admit that Guy is a very formidable opponent and could have bettered me but for the opportune appearance of your men.”

“Which is even more a brave and noble gesture whereby you risked your own life to save Lady Anna. Still, now I think we need to allow her to refresh herself after the ordeal she has been through and then we shall meet for dinner when you can relate to me exactly what happened. Hopefully, your father will be able to join us. He is expected very soon.”

A lady in waiting appeared to escort Anna back to her room.

“I am really looking forward to see him again, even though it hasn’t really been that long.” She glanced at Henry as she moved off with the lady in waiting and noticed him wink as she left.

“See you at dinner Lady Anna” he said, bowing slightly.

“Can’t wait” she mouthed back slowly and smiled.

Back in his own quarters Henry refreshed himself and dressed for dinner. He felt nervous about meeting Anna’s father and anxious about how things might develop. He knew that he was going to find it difficult to hide his feelings for her and wondered how Lord Trellian was going to react when he became aware that this ‘strange Frenchman’ was making a play for his daughter. Not that he would give it any real consideration, but how would he react if he found out that they had made love on a number of occasions. Henry knew that he wanted her and couldn’t face her being in someone else’s arms. Somehow he had to convince Lord Trellian that he and Anna needed to be together, but how was he going to do that!

20. Reunion and Challenge

Anna's father arrived with his entourage, which included Arnold Barlow and Brother Hubert, late afternoon just before dinner was to be served. Anna came running into the courtyard as he dismounted from his horse.

"Father, Father."

Lord Trellian walked towards his daughter with open arms. "Anna my dearest daughter. I am so glad and relieved that you are safe and well."

"I am very well father."

He embraced her closely. "I was most surprised when Lord de Champ told me you were here but I am so glad that you managed to avoid Montgomery's clutches. You must tell me all that has happened after you were left at the inn."

"You will never believe it" she replied as they made their way to the Great Hall followed by her father's entourage. "I see you have brought Chancellor Barlow and Brother Hubert with you" she said, glancing back to see the two men following directly behind them. "I must have a talk with Brother Hubert at some point. He has always been most supportive of me over the years."

"Yes, certainly" her father replied.

Henry was wearing a grey hose with long black boots and a purple vest with a deer embroidered on the front as he entered the Great Hall. He looked around and saw Geoffrey at a long bench at the far end of the room with Anna seated between him and Anna's father on his left. To his right sat his wife, Eleanor, with a vacant seat between them. As soon as he noticed Henry, he beckoned him to come and join them. As Henry approached, Anna, who had been talking with her father, looked across the hall when she noticed Geoffrey indicating to someone. On seeing Henry coming to join them she waved.

"Who is that my dear?" Lord Trellian asked.

"It is the man who rescued me from Lord Montgomery and from two abductions. If it hadn't been for him I wouldn't be here now, and ..." She felt like saying that they were madly in love but it was not the right time.

"Then I look forward to meeting this man and learning more about him." After a slight pause he added. "You were about to say something else?"

"No. No father."

Lord Trellian noted the hesitation in her voice but brushed it aside.

"Come sit by me" Geoffrey stated, as Henry came round the table, giving Anna a brief embrace as he passed behind her. Lord Trellian's face displayed a disapproving countenance as Lord Geoffrey stood up and rapped the table and Henry seated himself.

“My dear friends, first I wish a warm welcome to our honoured guests Lord Trellian and his daughter, Lady Anna. As most of you know, they have been great friends of mine for many years and I would appreciate all courtesies being extended to them.” He then indicated Anna to his left. “I will now briefly relate to you an extraordinary tale of how this brave young woman arrived here.” At this point he knew he had to be diplomatic by adopting a neutral stand with regard to the dispute between Lords Trellian and Montmery, of which his court was unaware. He began.

“Whilst finding herself in situations that might well have ended up being detrimental to her happiness and health, Lady Anna was brought to safety not just once but three times by this brave man on my right. May I introduce Henry Longford.”

Henry nodded in acknowledgement as murmurs arose from the court with nods of agreement from many.

Lord Geoffrey continued. “This man, about whom we know so little, appeared like a guardian angel to pluck Lady Anna out of danger and at risk to his own life. In the process of bringing her safely to us, he again did not hesitate to immediately dash off to help her for the second time when she was snatched from his care. Yet again, due my own carelessness in protecting her, she was snatched a third time from this castle and our young hero immediately set off to track down the villains and bravely fought for her release.”

There were claps and cheers from the banquet attendees.

“But now we will eat and learn more about our Henry Longford after we have eaten.”

Servants now brought food and drink out as the guests began to help themselves to the various dishes.”

With the meal over, some of the guests had left the hall whilst others remained, talking amongst themselves. Lord Trellian and Geoffrey de Champ were standing together in conversation. Henry moved over to sit in Geoffrey’s vacant seat next to Anna.

“Let’s go outside.”

“Lead the way” she replied.

Halfway to the door, Lord Trellian, on seeing his daughter walking out with Henry, called out to her. “Anna, my dear, please come over here and talk to me.”

Anna tugged Henry along beside her as they walked over to him. Her father embraced her, ignoring Henry at her side.

“Please forgive me for what you have been through. I should never have let you go in the first place” he said.

“It is all over now father. My fate was in God’s hands and he has protected me and shown me where my future lies.”

“Of course.” He released her from the hug but held her by the hands stepping back.

“You look as beautiful as ever and, if I may say so, full of life and happiness, considering what you have been through. I am sure you have more to add to what our friend Lord Geoffrey has already told me so I am anxious to hear all about your exploits, but admittedly somewhat surprised at some of the things he has related.”

“There are very good reasons for that, father” she replied, with a backward glance at Henry.

Lord Trellian noted the gesture but ignored it. He released her hands.

“I am so glad to have you back with me. After I received the message from Geoffrey, I was beginning to doubt that you would even be here and had the fear that you had perhaps been stolen from me again.”

“No chance of that any more” she replied, again with a glance at Henry.

This time he had to respond. He moved over to look Henry up and down.

“And this fine looking gentleman, I presume, is the man who rescued you; on three occasions I hear.”

Anna smiled a seductive smile at Henry, which her father didn’t notice. “That he did father.”

“He must be a very resourceful and brave man ...”

“He is.”

“... and lucky the maiden who he selects as a spouse.”

“Certainly.”

“That is assuming he is not already spoken for.”

“He is ... now.”

A flicker across Lord Trellian’s face indicated suspicion and concern over his daughter’s last statement. Finally, he addressed himself directly to Henry. “I have heard of some of your exploits from our friend Lord Geoffrey de Champ, Henry ...”

“Longford” Henry replied, aware that Lord Trellian had feigned forgetfulness when it came to Henry’s surname.

“I am indebted to you Henry Longford for saving my daughter on more than one occasion and humbling me for my failure, as a father, for not properly protecting her.”

“Far from humbling you my lord” Henry replied “I believe you have been very brave yourself and, it seems to me, a caring person of much honesty and integrity in agreeing to let your daughter honour your commitment for the sake of your loyal subjects.”

He looked a bit embarrassed. “They are very noble words and I thank you for that.”

“You also have a daughter who is not only very courageous herself but of strong will and very caring.”

He nodded in acknowledgement. “You must tell me more about yourself someday” he said, taking hold of his daughter’s hand. “We must also discuss the issue of a handsome payment for your services.” He took her arm and led her off. She

glanced back at Henry for an instant with a worried and concerned expression as he started speaking to her.

“Now tell me all about your ordeal” he said to her. “Oh, and I have some good news for you.”

Henry stood watching them walk off feeling angry and dejected. He could sense that although her father was grateful to him for saving his daughter; that was as far as it would go. Was Henry going to lose her again? Permanently this time? He knew that he couldn’t bear that. He made a move to start after them but a hand suddenly rested on his shoulder which stopped him. He turned around. Geoffrey de Champ was standing there.

“Patience Henry. We are all well aware of your feelings for Anna and hers for you but I am sure you understand the situation.”

Henry nodded, but it didn’t make him feel any better.

“Let him have time with his daughter” he continued. “She is a very strong willed person like her mother and if anyone can influence him it will be her.”

“I hope you’re right. I would do anything to have her.”

“Now you are sounding like our friend Lord Montmery” he replied “but I can understand why.” He smiled. “Come, let us talk; over a game of chess perhaps. You play chess?”

“I have not played for some time, so might not be that good now.”

Henry followed him out of the hall. ‘*At least*’ he thought, ‘*it might help me take my mind off of how I am feeling inside.*’ It didn’t of course. Although they had some good games, Henry found it difficult to concentrate and Geoffrey beat him at most of them due to some stupid moves.

“Your mind is definitely not on the game” he commented as they finished the last one. “Let’s see if some wine can numb those senses of yours.”

‘*On the contrary*’ Henry thought. ‘*I’ll probably blurt out my feelings and put my foot in it.*’

Henry didn’t have the opportunity to see Anna for the rest of the evening but woke up early the following morning and wandered down to the castle gardens in the hope that he might see her. Fortunately, their recent exploits resulted in her also rising early and hastening down to the gardens in the equal hope of seeing him, which she did, sitting on a bench with his head in his hands. She walked over and sat down beside him. He raised his head as Anna took his hand.

“This time I do know what is wrong Henry.”

Before he had time to respond, she answered the question for him.

“It’s my father isn’t it; and us.”

He turned to face her and took her hands. “What are we going to do, Anna? I can’t lose you now. It’s the reason I came to help you. It’s the reason I’m still here.”

She squeezed his hands tightly. “I know that this whole mission was planned by Father Bernard and I know that things weren’t meant to turn out the way they did; but

something happened between us that we didn't expect and now our feelings for each other are overriding the logic of the situation."

"I know that Anna and it was my intention to just take you to a place of safety and then return, but ..."

"Return? Return to where?" She squeezed his hand. "Wherever you come from, I will come with you."

He drew her closer and looked her closely in the eyes. "That's not possible for a number of reasons, Anna, but what I do know is that I fell in love with you and want to be with you always."

"I love you too, Henry, but I fear that my father may have other plans for me. So why can't I come with you? It would upset my father but I won't let him stop me."

"There are reasons that currently make it impossible for you to return with me." He decided to change the subject before his evasiveness elicited more questions. "But what is more important at the moment is this issue with Lord Montgomery. Have you heard anything?"

Fortunately, she did not question him further regarding his origin but brightened up to report an encouraging update. "Ah, there we have some good news. Apparently, proof has been obtained that confirms treachery on the part of Lord Montgomery."

Henry also brightened up. "What sort of proof? Have they found evidence or obtained a confession?"

"Evidence yes, but they could always dispute that, and certainly a written and signed confession."

"And the confessor?"

"He was Lord Montgomery's man but unfortunately dead, murdered, but they did managed to have him sign a confession before he died."

"Dead? That's a pity. They could always claim that the confession was a forgery."

"But we do have the traitor from one of our villages who can verify the confession."

"Convincing, but there is an element of doubt. However we may be able to use it as a bargaining chip."

They sat there in silence both thinking about how they were going to confront Lord Montgomery when, rather than if, he comes to claim his 'payment'.

"Rather than worry for the present about what might happen with regard to Lord Montgomery's claim on you, I am more concerned about our relationship. What if I just ask your father for your hand in marriage?"

Anna was silent and unsure how to answer. "I ... I ... don't know how he will respond but, I am convinced that he will refuse."

Henry got up from the seat. "Let's find out."

After a light breakfast, when Lord Trellian once again called for his daughter to join him, ignoring Henry standing next to her, he approached Lord Geoffrey with Anna

still at his side. Anger again welled up in Henry at the way he was being ignored, more so when the two Lords glanced over at him and were obviously talking about him. The next minute, Lord Geoffrey beckoned Henry over to join them. Anna was looking serious.

As Henry joined them, Lord de Champ put his arm around Henry's shoulders. "Come join us Henry. We have some things to discuss." He started walking towards his office. "Come" he said to the others. "We will adjourn to my office to discuss the next steps regarding Henry here and Lord Montgomery, who I expect will be joining us very soon now."

The two Lords, Anna and Henry were joined by Arnold Barlow and Brother Hubert. Chairs were arranged around Geoffrey's desk. Before Geoffrey started talking, however, there was a knock on the door.

"Please come in Eleanor." The door was opened and Geoffrey's wife entered. He turned to the others. "I have asked Eleanor to join us."

There was a look of surprise on Lord Trellian's face.

"I feel that, as a woman, she can view events with less emotion. I also feel that, as a woman, she can view events with less emotion and provide support for Anna, who is rather outnumbered by all the men present."

Lord Trellian looked a bit uncertain but there were chuckles from the others.

"Well John" Geoffrey began, "shall we start with the evidence of Lord Montgomery's treachery?"

"Certainly." Lord Trellian turned to his chancellor. "Arnold?"

Arnold Barlow produced the signed confession as they began a discussion of their planned approach. Brother Hubert warned that Lord Montgomery was likely to challenge the confession as a forgery.

At this point Anna commented "That's exactly what Henry suggested he might do."

"Is he a scholar of law?" Lord Trellian asked, sarcastically.

"Maybe not, but he is right" Arnold Barlow agreed.

Henry decided to ignore Lord Trellian's comment. "We may have what we consider ample evidence with confessions from the two peasants involved, but with one of the main participants deceased one might claim that the evidence is circumstantial."

Lord Trellian was getting angry. "He can't refute the evidence; or we will demand a new contest."

"That might not be such a bad idea" Geoffrey commented.

"It's worth giving it some consideration" Arnold Barlow added.

Lord Trellian calmed down. "Yes, Arnold, perhaps we should." He shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "Now let's move on to our friend Henry Longford here with us."

Henry and Anna glanced at each other, anticipating how this was going to pan out. Lord Trellian began.

‘
“First, I again express my deep gratitude to this young man for rescuing my daughter from a very uncertain and probably not a very happy future.” He then went on to elaborate in a longish speech reiterating the problems, as related to him by Anna, that she and Henry had faced during their journey since leaving the inn until their arrival at Lord de Champ’s castle. He admitted how he had failed as a father and how the Lord had provided a brave man such as Henry to put right the wrongs. ‘A true crusader’ he had said. He painted an historical picture, of the conflicts in the land and of the need to work together for peace and harmony and even used Henry’s actions to exemplify the type of people the country needed. Henry began to feel more relaxed thinking that he maybe he would after all agree to accept him as a son-in-law but then remembered the sarcastic comments and his ignoring Henry on many occasions. His worse fears were about to unfold.

As Lord Trellian finished he turned to face Henry. “Henry Longford, you have performed a great deed for both my daughter and myself. At much risk to yourself you have delivered my daughter, whom I nearly lost due to my own folly, back to me safe and sound. She is very dear to me, as you know, and my gratitude holds no bounds. As a reward, I feel I must offer you anything you desire, apart from my own position of course.”

There were some chuckles of laughter, except from Henry.

Lord Trellian continued. “I can offer you gold, or some role to suit the skills you possess and you would certainly be most welcome in my court, as I hear from Lord Geoffrey that you are a very learned man. So, Henry Longford” he said pointedly, “name your price.”

Henry stood up slowly and looked down at Anna for a moment to soak up her upturned smile. He then glanced briefly at Lord Geoffrey, who responded with a slow nod which Henry interpreted as a ‘go for it’. He then began.

“I thank you Lord Trellian for your high opinion of and trust you have in me. I have returned to these lands after many years absent but have learned a great deal in my travels. Although I do not currently have much wealth nor hold any lands, I have accumulated such knowledge and acquired many skills that I feel I can contribute a great deal to this realm and to ever I may serve.” There were some nods of approval from Geoffrey, Arnold and Hubert. Henry continued.

“After I was approached by Father Bernard regarding this mission and arrived at the inn where Anna, your daughter, was staying and found her in great distress I was determined to do all I could to spare her falling into the hands of Lord Montmery. Although she said she was obliged to go through with the agreed exchange I told her that she was too good for such a fate and deserved treatment befitting her status and loving personality. From the time we left the inn until we reached the safety of Lord Geoffrey’s castle I have always behaved chivalrous and respectful towards her and just regret that I did fail to provide adequate protection on two occasions, of which you are well aware. We spent many days and nights together in difficult circumstances

avoiding various search parties and were fortunate in receiving help from a very brave man named Alfred Beaumont.” At this point Arnold Barlow’s eyes opened wide with raised eyebrows in recognition. “I have yet to learn that he is still safe and in good health.” Henry added, as an aside. He continued.

“Spending so much time together and discovering each other’s personality and interests we found that we had a lot in common with the result that nature took its course and we fell in love.” Henry included the phrase ‘nature took its course’ intentionally, leaving it to the listener to interpret the phrase as he wished. Now he was coming to the crunch line and faced Lord Trellian directly. “Lord Trellian, whilst I am indeed grateful for all that you offer, I do not require a reward, as you say, for what I have done for Anna.” There was now an expectant hush in the air as Henry turned to look at Anna, who was returning his love in her expression. “What I desire most in all the world is the hand of your daughter Anna in marriage.”

A tense silence followed whilst they awaited Lord Trellian’s response. He was obviously taken aback by Henry’s declaration of love for his daughter and the request for her hand in marriage. Events were moving too fast for him and out of his control. After nearly losing his daughter to Lord Montmery he had told himself that he would not lose her again. He was obviously pondering how to react and what to say in response. Finally, he broke into false laughter. “Aha. Very comical and noble, sir. I see the humour in your response. You dash to the rescue of my daughter and, like a gallant knight, wish to take her for your bride. For a moment, I thought you were being serious; but let’s get back to your payment.”

Anna had turned to look at her father and displayed a disbelieving, but unexpected, expression on her face which she now presented to Henry, who responded with renewed determination.

“I do not jest my lord. You could offer me all the wealth in the world but the only thing I desire is for Anna to be beside me, always.”

The smile disappeared from Lord Trellian’s face. The other three men were also stony faced as the atmosphere grew tense.

“Out of the question.”

“Why, may I ask?”

Lord Trellian snapped back at Henry. “It is not for you to question my decisions. In spite of what you have done I could have you whipped for such insolence if it weren’t for offending our host ...”

“Father!” Anna exclaimed in shock at his outburst.

“... and out of respect for my daughter.” His anger subsided a little as he continued with his diatribe. “As you are indeed a learned man I will accord you with some intelligence and respect for your recent noble deeds. However, we know nothing about your background or where you come from and how Father Bernard managed to persuade you to help. He must have offered you a substantial payment for the risks you were about to undertake; but more importantly, you are not a knight nor a noble and would be unable to support my daughter.”

There were nervous exchanges of glances as he continued.

"You are a completely unknown individual with, if I may add, strange ways and speech. All things considered, it seems to me that you do not present a very good prospect as man to keep my daughter in the way she is accustomed or deserves."

Henry felt like challenging him on why he even agreed to allow his daughter go to Lord Montgomery, but felt it would only aggravate the situation. Instead, he let Lord Trellian continue his fabricating excuses why he didn't want him to marry his daughter. As Lord Trellian continued, Henry noticed the questioning expressions upon faces of Chancellor Barlow and Brother Hubert, a seemingly sympathetic one from Geoffrey and a very worried one from Anna, who now glanced back at him despairingly. Finally, Lord Trellian finished and sat down with folded arms.

The silence was broken by Brother Hubert. "My Lord ..." As he started to speak, there was a knock on the door. Geoffrey rose from his seat and opened the door to a guard, who whispered something in his ear. He dismissed the guard and returned to his seat.

"My Lord" Brother Hubert began again. "I appreciate that you desire the very best for your daughter but ..."

"My answer is no" interrupted Lord Trellian. "She will not be wedded to this man" he said, pointing at Henry.

At this awkward moment Geoffrey interrupted the dialogue. "I fear that the decision may soon be taken out of our hands."

The others all looked at Geoffrey.

"What do you mean?" Asked Lord Trellian.

"Lord Montgomery has arrived."

There was a stunned silence as glances were exchanged. Henry rose and stepped over to Anna, who stood up as he took her hands in his. She gripped them tightly.

"Lord Montgomery? What is he doing here?"

Lord Trellian had turned to his chancellor not noticing Henry's action, to discuss their next move.

Brother Hubert approached Geoffrey. "The arguments are about to commence" he said.

"You understand that I must remain neutral regarding this dispute."

"Of course" Brother Hubert replied. "That is why we need to seek a solution to this dispute whilst Lords Trellian and Montgomery are both here. They will be obliged to accept you as a neutral judge whatever is decided."

"Certainly" Geoffrey replied. "If it comes to it, we could suggest a repeat of the archery contest but I know that Lord Montgomery will reject that. We could organize an alternative physical contest but I am reluctant to sanction anything that involves combat, as I believe this would be an affront to the Lady Anna. But now we need to join Lord Montgomery. We don't want to anger him more than necessary."

‘
“I agree” Brother Hubert added. “And I will meanwhile give much thought to a new and hopefully acceptable challenge.”

Throughout the whole proceedings, Lady Eleanor had remained quiet in the background listening carefully to the exchange of dialogue and making her own assessment of the situation.

The seven of them made their way back into the Great Hall to wait for Lord Montgomery to be brought to them. Henry and Anna made their way anxiously, disengaging their hands as they entered.

“This can’t happen” Anna said, hopefully. “We have proof of his cheating.”

She didn’t exactly sound convinced, following the doubts expressed during their previous discussions that Lord Montgomery would accept the evidence presented to him. Geoffrey instructed one of the guards to fetch Lord Montgomery and stood in front of the group to welcome his neighbour. They didn’t have to wait long before Lord Montgomery was shown in accompanied by his Lord Chancellor and three knights led by an impressive well-built, bearded knight dressed in black. Henry recognised him immediately as the man he fought briefly on the cart: Guy of Kent. When Guy’s eyes fell upon Henry his expression hardened, as a look of scorn passed across his face.

The two lords walked towards each other and met with an embrace.

“I welcome you and your colleagues to my home Lord Montgomery. I do apologize for keeping you waiting. It has been some time since we met.”

“It is of no consequence my dear friend Geoffrey. I am glad you were able to receive me at such short notice.”

“I presume your visit concerns the presence here of Lady Anna and her father.”

“Well, just Lady Anna actually. I heard that she had been brought here by a strange Frenchman who abducted her on her way to join me. In fact she did manage to escape and was helped by some of my villagers who escorted her to my castle but she was then spirited away a second time, so I have now come to take her back to her new home.”

“That is most disturbing” Geoffrey replied. “There was also an incident where two peasants tried to abduct her from my castle and take her to you ... in a maize sack.”

“I know nothing of that” Lord Montgomery lied. “I presume it was two of my loyal followers who were under the impression that they were helping her. I apologize if they caused any distress.”

Lord Geoffrey ignored the ridiculous assertions and turned slightly to introduce the group standing behind him. “As you have observed, the Lady Anna is indeed here and has been joined by her father with two of his advisors: Chancellor Arnold Barlow and Brother Hubert. The other gentleman present is Henry Longford, the Frenchman as you say, who brought her here, and my wife Eleanor.”

Lord Montgomery wasted no time. “Be that as it may, please advise Lady Anna to prepare herself for her journey. The sooner ...”

Geoffrey interrupted. "Might I suggest that you and your chancellor join us in my office for a moment. Lord Trellian disputes your claim on his daughter and, as you are well aware, I am not in a position to release her until I am convinced that your claim is legitimate."

Lord Montgomery exploded with anger. "She was won fair and square in an archery contest and I demand ..."

"Please, Stephen, you must appreciate my position here. Both you and John are great friends of mine and I must allow John to present his counter-argument,"

Lord Montgomery quietly fumed.

"Lead the way" he snapped. "My Captain of the Guard, Guy, will join us."

Lord Geoffrey said nothing but turned to return to his office accompanied by his wife and now eight guests. More chairs were brought in as the group took their seats. The three lords, Arnold Barlow and Lord Montgomery's chancellor sat at Lord Geoffrey's desk. Once they were all seated, Lord Montgomery immediately launched into the attack.

"What's your game, Trellian? Reneging on our deal?"

"No" replied Lord Trellian "because there is no deal."

Montgomery slammed his fist on the desk. "What do you mean no deal? You know as well as I do that we won that contest."

"Not by fair means though."

At this point Arnold Barlow produced two documents that he handed to Lord Trellian, who proffered the first one to Lord Montgomery.

"This is a signed confession of the man you sent to exchange some of our champion archer's arrows for inferior ones thus giving your man an advantage and weighting the contest in your favour."

Lord Montgomery snatched the document from Lord Trellian's hand and read it through quickly.

"And what form of evidence is this?"

"As I said, a signed confession from one of your men, and here ..." he passed the second one over to Lord Montgomery "... is the second confession of one of our villagers describing what they both did to achieve the result you wanted."

"So where is this peasant of mine who supposedly signed this confession?"

"He is dead" Chancellor Barlow replied. "Murdered; but he survived long enough to sign a confession admitting his part in the treachery."

"Dead? In that case the document is useless."

Chancellor Barlow continued. "The dead man admitted that he was one of your serfs. His contact was one of ours who has also confessed and is fortunately still alive, even though an attempt was made on his life."

"It doesn't change the situation. It is still invalid." He thrust the documents back at Lord Trellian. "Now I demand that you hand over your daughter immediately." He looked over and pointed at Henry. "And while we are at it, I demand the arrest of that man for abduction on three occasions."

"Where did these abductions take place?" Brother Hubert asked.

“Firstly from an inn where Lady Anna was waiting for an escort and where the landlord was assaulted by that man. On the second occasion he had help from a man by the name of Alfred to remove her from the safety of my castle.”

Henry became alert at his friend’s name being mentioned.

Guy now joined in smiling as he spoke. “I am pleased to report that this Alfred has paid for his treasonous act and is no longer with us.”

It hit Henry in the pit of his stomach. Anger boiled up inside him which he had to suppress to avoid compromising himself. He promised himself that he would take revenge if Alfred had come to harm. Anna apart, Alfred was the only person that he had the privilege to meet and could count on as a close friend in this era. Lord Montgomery couldn’t help but notice the anger in Henry’s expression and switched to a more humble approach.

“My dear friend Geoffrey, please accept my apologies for my outburst but you surely understand my position.”

Lord Geoffrey’s remained quiet with an expressionless face.

“Knowing you to be a fair man in the administration of justice” Lord Montgomery continued, “I came here to your castle to seek redress for wrongs done to me by a certain person present.” He glanced briefly at Henry. “And to claim the prize that I won fairly in a contest with our dear friend Lord Trellian. I am willing to overlook the trouble this man Henry Longford has put my people through trying to help Lady Anna to join me, so just allow me to escort her now to my castle, where everyone is looking forward to meeting her.” He nodded in Anna’s direction. Henry couldn’t see Lord Montgomery’s face but the expression on Anna’s face told him that she was fearful of what might happen next.

“I thank you for your faith in me, Lord Montgomery.” Geoffrey replied. “But what you are asking is really beyond my control.”

Montgomery looked over at Henry. He was obviously getting impatient and showing signs of renewed anger. “Look, let’s forget about everything that’s happened; all I wish is to claim my prize, the lovely Lady Anna Trellian, who agreed to join me as the winner of a tournament between me and our good friend Lord Trellian.”

Henry could see the anger on Lord Trellian’s as he was about to respond to the Lord Montgomery’s intransigence but Lord Geoffrey quickly intervened.

“It would seem to me that we have a dilemma.”

“How is that?” Questioned Lord Montgomery.

“I have heard in detail the sequence of events that brought these two young people to my castle and I have also heard of a disagreement regarding a certain archery contest between you both that requires resolution.” Geoffrey was trying to be as diplomatic as possible.

Montgomery was having difficulty remaining calm but Geoffrey continued.

“Allow me to restate some facts that I am aware of that may help us to resolve this issue. Firstly, the charge of abduction is refuted. The Lady Anna claims she was not abducted by Henry Longford who brought her here but, on the contrary, was abducted

from him to be imprisoned in your castle, but subsequently rescued. She was, though, abducted from my castle by two serfs who were trying to take her, in a sack, to your estate against her wishes.” He continued before Montgomery could interrupt. “This was witnessed by two of my own knights.”

There was a tense pause while Montgomery looked visibly uncomfortable.

“So, we appear to have reached an impasse which has left me in a bit of quandary. I, personally, cannot comment on your claim to Lady Anna and it seems that our friend Lord Trellian now has evidence that you, or maybe just some rogue elements in your employ, did not act very honourably during the deciding contest which was only won by foul means.”

Montgomery did not seem to know how to respond. His chancellor moved over to him and whispered in his ear with the result that he looked up at the group waiting for his next outburst. “I admit that since sitting around here isn’t going to resolve the issue so my chancellor is suggesting a compromise.”

“Which is?” Asked Chancellor Barlow.

“We will forget the abduction charges. Some of my men must have taken actions without my permission in the belief that that they were rescuing the Lady Anna from the Frenchman. Also, being a magnanimous person, I will allow Lady Anna to bring this Henry Longford along as her personal bodyguard.”

They were all taken aback by Henry’s quick and angry response.

“No. Out of the question. Neither I nor Lady Anna will be coming to your castle.” Henry knew that once he was in Montgomery’s castle he would as likely suffer an ‘accident’ and never come out alive.

“Who asked you?” Barked Guy. “This is none of your concern. You are nobody.”

At this point Lord Geoffrey de Champ interrupted. “Come now gentlemen; this dialogue is getting us nowhere and we do not wish to embarrass ourselves by not being able to settle this with a mutually acceptable solution.” He moved forward between the two protagonists. “Allow me to make a suggestion.”

“Which is?” Lord Montgomery asked suspiciously.

“Why don’t we forget the last contest and hold another in its place.”

Now Montgomery looked suspicious. “What are you suggesting?”

“A new contest between each of your champions.”

“I accept” Montgomery replied hastily, thinking that it would be a trial of strength. “As long as it is held today.”

“Lord Trellian?” Geoffrey added, turning to Anna’s father.

After a slight hesitation he responded. “I agree, but who we select will depend on the contest.”

“I have already selected my man” Montgomery responded gleefully.

“Who?” Asked Chancellor Barlow.

He turned and raised his arm to point at Guy. “Guy.”

“But I have no one here who might be able to act on my behalf” Lord Trellian continued.

“Yes you do” Henry called out.

They all turned to look at him, at which point Guy spoke mockingly.

“This man is obviously intent on *trying* to protect the Lady Anna’s honour.”

Anna looked aghast at the suggestion. Guy was grinning relishing the thought of delivering a coup de grace to Henry, who was wondering now whether he had been a bit too hasty; but what was the alternative. Henry knew that he would have a tough fight on his hands against this well-built skilled swordsman and wasn’t really confident that he could better him. He had also heard of his reputation from Lord Geoffrey. Lord Trellian, meanwhile, was in a quandary and didn’t seem to know how to respond. He had no idea of Henry’s fighting skills but after a brief aside with Lord Geoffrey he reluctantly agreed.

“I agree” he finally said.

At this point Anna stepped forward. “No. This man has already done enough for me. I will not let him fight for me.”

Montmery’s nasty side came to the fore. “I will accept no one else. He has humiliated me enough. Now I want to return the favour.”

Anna looked at Lord Trellian. “Father?”

Lord Trellian looked uncertain. The verbal banter gave Henry a few precious moments to think how they might even up the odds. He nudged Anna and gave her a nod when she glanced him. She now had the trump card and used it.

“I think the idea of a new contest is a good idea but with the following conditions; and if these conditions are not agreed then no one shall have me, if you know what I mean, and that will be the end of it.”

They all knew what she meant: suicide.”

Lord Trellian moved forward. “Anna, you don’t know what you are saying. You can’t possibly”

“Oh!” She snapped back, to the surprise of her father and all the others. “Then maybe this is God’s way to bring this senseless controversy to a halt.”

“What are your conditions my dear” Lord Geoffrey asked, calmly.

“Well, it seems that if Lord Montmery’s champion, Guy, wins then I am to marry Lord Montmery; so, if Henry wins, as I obviously can’t marry my father, then I will wed Henry Longford.”

Stunned silence followed but Henry felt encouraged, and it gave him inner strength. Now he had to win whatever contest was arranged. Montmery scowled and Lord Trellian reluctantly had to agree. Now everything rested with him.

“I suggest we commence the contest at noon here in the bailey” Montmery said gleefully.

Henry was racking his brains trying to think of an alternative to the increasingly likelihood of a hand-to-hand combat. He muttered to Anna. “I don’t really know how well I am going to do against Guy. I know that I do have skills as a swordsman but he is a born fighter. We must find an alternative contest.”

They didn't notice that Lord Geoffrey and Brother Hubert were in quiet conversation once again. Anna took the lead again.

"I have also decided" she suddenly proclaimed loudly "that there has been too much fighting already and I will not have any more blood spilt on my behalf. Therefore we need to devise a fair but non-violent contest."

"And what might that be?" Montgomery asked mockingly. "Is your 'champion' afraid to fight?"

"Not at all" Henry responded, stepping forward.

"That's my decision and you already have my conditions" Anna snapped back.

"You, my Lady" charged Lord Montgomery "are in no position to dictate terms."

"Oh no?" Anna responded and, before he could stop her, she pulled Henry's sword from its scabbard and turned it around to rest the point against her throat.

"Anna!" Cried her frightened father, along with gasps from others present.

"This will be the end of this stupid argument." She shouted. "There was nothing in the agreement to say that I should be delivered to Lord Montgomery ALIVE!"

For a tense moment no one knew what to say, until Lady Eleanor stepped forward. "My lords; if I may be so bold as to suggest that maybe a woman's touch is necessary to calm the belligerences being displayed. Considering that the subject of this discourse is Lady Anna, who is considered an intelligent, sensitive and caring person, wouldn't it more appropriate that the contest should be decided by the demonstration of skills such as ingenuity and reasoning rather than brute force."

"What does that supposed to mean?" Guy snapped, feeling disappointed that he wouldn't be able to get his revenge on Henry.

Lord Geoffrey picked up on the theme. "Well spoken, my dear. I think that is an admirable, fairer and more civilized suggestion."

"And what does that mean?" asked Lord Montgomery's chancellor.

Brother Hubert, who had earlier been talking with Lord Geoffrey, now stepped forward. "I suggest that we select three items and hide them within one hour's ride from this castle. Where they will be hidden will be sequestered within a riddle. The simple task will be to extract the locations from the riddle and go fetch the items."

Guy obviously wasn't enamoured by the proposal. "This isn't a task for fighting men."

"No, it isn't" replied Lady Eleanor. "It utilises skills of intelligence and understanding which are more befitting of Lady Anna."

Lord Montgomery's chancellor was now muttering something else to his lord but whatever he said obviously reassured his Lord, when Montgomery readily agreed. Henry smelt a rat and a suspicious look even came over Anna's face.

Lord Montgomery had made no comment regarding the suggestion out of respect for Lady Eleanor and so as not to offend his host; but now he asked "What would these three items be?"

Lady Eleanor spoke again. "As Lady Anna is the subject of this contest, then she should select the items."

There were nods, some reluctantly, all round.

“What do you suggest my dear?”

Anna handed Henry’s sword, which she was still holding, back to him and removed the veil she was wearing, allowing her long hair to flow about her shoulders.

“Hold up your sword Henry.”

Henry raised his sword as requested as Anna held out her veil.

“Please cut it into three pieces.

He did as she asked and, once he had cut the veil, Anna handed the pieces over to Lord Geoffrey.

“Please instruct your men to take these pieces and hide them in places of Brother Hubert’s choosing. He will then compose the riddle that will guide he who can solve it to their locations. I will remain neutral in this plan.”

Reluctantly, Lord Montgomery and his chancellor accepted the proposal. Guy however looked distinctly annoyed at missing the chance of hand-to-hand combat with Henry.

With the proposal agreed, the parties dispersed whilst Hubert remained with Lord Geoffrey to discuss the locations for the pieces of veil and for Hubert to compose the riddle. At Lady Eleanor’s request, Geoffrey agreed that his wife could join them.

“I think it should pertain to Lady Anna and what has happened to her on her way to and since her arrival at the castle.” Hubert suggested.

“Well, as we are now both familiar with how she arrived and her later rescue from an abduction, I suggest we focus on the significant events of which both parties will be aware, in particular Henry Longford.”

“Yes certainly, but without making it too obvious. Yet we must include a bias to avoid her falling into Montgomery’s clutches; and I do not trust that Guy of Kent.”

“By the way,” Lord Geoffrey asked, “who is that bearded giant with Guy?”

“That is Will, Montgomery’s champion archer. He is the man who supposedly won the archery contest.”

“Ah. I have never met the man but he certainly looks bad news. What about Lord Trellian? Did he bring ...”

“Yes” Hubert replied. “Harold and Llewellyn, his brother-in-law, are lodging in the village inn unbeknown to Montgomery and his entourage. In fact, that would be an ideal place to hide the first piece of the veil. We could then instruct your man to brief them about the contest whilst he hides the piece of veil.”

“Agreed. They can look out for Henry in the event of any further treacherous behaviour on the part of Lord Montgomery. I wouldn’t put it past him. It has turned out quite fortuitous that Henry and Anna passed through the village. Henry should pick that up from the riddle.”

“Where do you suggest the piece should actually be hidden?”

“There is a guest room, where I stay when hunting in the area, and above the bed is my crest.”

Hubert smiled. "Good; a useful pointer. For the second location I suggest under the bridge over the stream from where I heard that Lady Anna was rescued?" He hesitated. "Hm, but isn't that some distance from the inn?"

"Fortunately, there is a little known short cut. Henry should be able to reach that location very quickly if he heads for the inn first."

"Excellent! I already have the outline of a suitable riddle in my mind. What about the last piece?"

"I know that Henry and Anna spent quite a lot of time together in the castle garden and the colour of Anna's veil, as it happens, will blend in well with some of the plants and will only be visible to the very keen eye."

Hubert smiled. "Good; so that's settled. I will now go off to write the riddle whilst your man, or men, set off to hide the pieces of veil."

"I will just use one loyal servant. The fewer involved the better."

Geoffrey turned to Eleanor. "Do you think Lord Montmery will go along with this my dear?"

"I don't think he has much choice considering all that has been said."

"Good, then let us depart to attend to our tasks. Are you coming Eleanor?"

"I will join you shortly, Geoffrey."

"as you wish."

The two men left the room leaving Eleanor thinking about how she can ensure that Henry will win the contest for Anna's sake. She decided to slip a note under Henry's door to provide him with a hint to help solve the riddle. No one must suspect any underhand moves, even though she knew that is exactly what Lord Montmery did to win the archery contest."

Later that day Hubert passed the riddle to Geoffrey for his approval, and with minor changes they agreed the result.

"That's excellent" Geoffrey concluded. "If Anna is aware of its message when she reads it out, that should be to our advantage."

Pleased with their joint effort Hubert departed to produce two copies: one for Henry and the other for Guy.

As agreed, there was no contact between the competing parties for the rest of the day; but as the castle closed down for the night Eleanor passed by Henry's door and, glancing up and down the deserted corridor, slipped a folded note under the door. She then proceeded to Anna's room and tapped on the door. Anna opened the door and was somewhat surprised to see Eleanor at such a late hour.

"Lady Eleanor; what brings you to my room at such a late hour? Is something wrong?"

"Not at all Anna; and please call me Eleanor. May I come in for a moment?"

"Of course." Anna stepped back to allow Eleanor to enter and close the door before offering her a chair.

"Thank you Anna."

Anna was wondering why Eleanor had called in to see her alone but assumed it was something related to the contest that was to take place in the morning.

“You and Henry are very much in love aren’t you, Anna?”

Anna was surprised at the comment. “Yes, Eleanor; but why do you ask?” She replied hesitantly.

“I couldn’t help notice how you looked at each other and to both your reactions during the discussions with your father and later in the presence of Lord Montgomery.”

“Was it that obvious?”

“To a woman, yes. You also belong to and need to be with him.”

“That is true, but it may not come to that.”

“It *must* ‘come to that’, as you say, because, if you will excuse my impertinence, he has bedded you has he not?”

At first, Anna was taken aback at the effrontery of the woman but then nodded slowly. “Is it that obvious?”

“Only to myself, and probably Geoffrey, who has expressed his suspicions to me.”

Anna felt a bit flustered. “Being in each other’s company for so long, our emotions ...”

“You don’t need to explain your actions to me, Anna. Henry is a very attractive and intelligent man. With his other qualities I can completely empathize with you and can understand your attraction to him.” Eleanor got up from her seat. “Henry has a good chance of winning” she said. “May God be with him.” She walked over and opened the door. “Goodnight Anna.”

“Goodnight Eleanor.”

The door closed leaving Anna wondering what Eleanor was implying when she said ‘*Henry has a good chance of winning.*’

Henry had heard then saw the note being slid beneath the door. He quickly picked it up and opened it. It read:

Think of the key events since you and Lady Anna Trellian arrived in this estate when you read the riddle, and burn this note once you have read it.

He read it through two or three times before he believed he understood its meaning. He listed the events in his mind:

- Percival’s and Betty’s help in providing food and lodging
- Arrival at and journey from the village
- Sanctuary, happiness and romance at the castle
- Training
- Abduction and rescue from the bridge over the stream
- Lord Trellian’s arrival

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He quickly discounted the fourth and sixth events as there would be nowhere to hide pieces of veil. So, would one piece be hidden in Percival's cottage? No, more likely in a public place like the village inn. Now he was confident that he knew where her pieces of veil were likely to be hidden and hoped that Guy wouldn't interpret the riddle in a like manner. Now all he could do was hope and pray for success, else he was sure that Anna would end her own life.

21. The Riddle and the Veil

The following morning the two parties met in the bailey, as agreed, where a crowd or people were waiting, having heard the rumour of the contest that was to take place that day. There was both an exciting yet solemn mood amongst the crowd. Most were aware of the reputations of both Lord Trellian and Lord Montgomery and it was clear where their sympathies lay. They had observed Henry's behaviour first hand since he had arrived at the castle and Guy's reputation was well known. Horses were being saddled up for the two contestants whilst Guy was conversing with Lord Montgomery and his chancellor and Henry was in discussions with Anna's father and Arnold Barlow.

"You know you cannot fail" Lord Trellian said, still in some doubt as to whether Henry was the best choice.

"Yes, I am well aware of that" Henry replied, trying to exude an impression of confidence.

Whilst they were waiting for Anna, Lord Geoffrey and Brother Hubert to appear, Henry noticed Guy moving towards a group of his fellow knights and having what appeared to be an intense conversation. "I don't like the look of that" he commented to Lord Trellian and Chancellor Barlow. "Something's going on."

A quieting of the crowd of onlookers signified that Lord Geoffrey had appeared with Anna and Brother Hubert. Eleanor appeared behind them as the trio came down the steps from the Great Hall with Lord Geoffrey holding rolled parchments in his hand. When they stopped at the bottom step, Eleanor stepped forward to stand by her husband as he indicated that he was ready to speak. A hushed silence descended over the gathering.

"My Lords, Ladies, Gentlemen and citizens; an interesting contest is about to commence between two participants for the hand of Lady Anna on behalf of their Lords." He did not mention that in Henry's case that it was for Henry himself and not Lord Trellian. "In deference to Lady Anna's wish to avoid violence and possible bloodshed by the participants, the contest will take the form of a riddle. Hidden within this riddle are the locations of three items belonging to Lady Anna. The winner will be the one who acquires at least two of these items, which have been hidden by one of my men within one hour's ride of this castle. Lady Anna will now read the riddle once, and then pass a copy to each of our two contestants – Guy of Kent, for Lord Montgomery, and Henry Longford, for Lord Trellian." Lord Geoffrey proceeded to pass the rolled documents to Anna who opened one and, after scanning it briefly, read:

*Seek thee now the pieces three
Two will have a claim on me.*

*The first is in a place of rest
Focus on his Lordship's crest.
Shortly you will reach a stream
All is dark, or it would seem.
The second might well float away
Do make haste without delay.
The third is at the journey's end
With shrubs and flowers will it blend.*

Henry listened carefully and cast his mind back to their journey. It was certainly a high point and a moment of relief when they passed through the village at the edge of Lord Geoffrey's lands. Had they not come across Percival's farm they would most as likely spent the night in the inn – '*The place of rest*'. They also crossed a stream, being the boundary demarcating the two Lord's lands but more importantly it was the same stream where he had rescued Anna: another key event which, of course, Anna was only partly aware because she had been hidden in a sack where '*All is dark*'. Once they were safely in Lord Geoffrey's castle they enjoyed many pleasant and intimate moments in the peaceful surroundings of the castle gardens amidst the '*shrubs and flowers*'. Now he fairly sure that he knew where all three pieces of veil were hidden.

When Anna had finished she held out the two copies which were collected by Henry and Guy. Guy glowered at Henry as he took his copy from Anna and rejoined Lord Montgomery and his chancellor, who took the document to read through the riddle. Henry read through his own copy and decided to head straight to the village. He noticed Montgomery's chancellor pointing in the direction of the castle gardens, so guessed that Guy would probably head there first. His thoughts were interrupted by Lord Geoffrey.

"You have the riddle gentlemen, let the contest begin."

Henry signaled to the squire holding his horse to bring the steed over to him. As he mounted it Anna came up to him and took hold of his arm.

"God be with you Henry. Do not fail me."

"I won't let you fall into that man's clutches" he replied.

"I never will" she replied, and he knew what she meant and was determined that he couldn't let that happen.

Anna turned and approached Lord Geoffrey and Lady Eleanor to thank them for their support and understanding and to speak briefly with him. Lord Geoffrey then broke away to approach, first, Lord Montgomery, clapping his hand on the man's arm.

"Best of luck Stephen." At which Montgomery scowled in reply.

He then approached Henry to wish him luck

"I thank you for your support Lord Geoffrey" Henry replied.

"My pleasure. So, where are you now headed?"

"The village."

‘
“A wise choice.”

Henry turned his horse and set off through the castle gate to the sound of cheering crowds. Guy made his way in the direction of the castle gardens. At the same time, a group of six knights standing close to Lord Montgomery mounted their horses and surreptitiously followed Henry out of the gate.

As Anna watched Henry galloping off, Lord Trellian approached his daughter.

“I only hope that your faith in this Henry Longford will prove to be justified. Personally, I still have my doubts.”

The coldness of her father towards Henry was beginning to irritate her, so when he suggested they take a stroll together she made the excuse of feeling unwell and wished to rest in her room alone, even though the thought of Henry’s searching would be constantly on her mind.

Henry rode fast, confident that he had made the right choice in heading for the inn first. As he rode into the village, dressed in his finery, he noticed the many onlookers.

“Henry? Is that you Henry?”

He looked about to see where the voice was coming from and saw Percival carrying a pannier of logs.

“It is you Henry; I didn’t recognize you. Last time we met, you and your lady looked rather bedraggled from your journey here.” Percival put down the pannier of logs. “Have you time for a ...”

“I am terribly sorry Percival” interrupted Henry “but I am on a mission and time is critical; but, sure, the next time I am here we will certainly get together. Meanwhile, could you tell me where the inn is?”

“Sure. It’s down the street on the right.”

“Thank you Percival.”

“Next time then.”

Henry rode on until he came to the inn, where he dismounted. A young boy was ambling along the road kicking a ball.

“Hey lad” he called out. “Look after my horse for a short while and I’ll give you a shilling.”

“A shilling!” he exclaimed, and quickly came over to take the reins from Henry.

“Another for you when I return.”

The boy couldn’t believe his eyes. “Thank you sir.”

Henry walked into the inn through the open door and immediately noticed two men seated at a bench on his left drinking ale. They both looked up when he entered and mumbled something to each other, obviously commenting on his attire Henry thought.

The landlord came over to him. “What can I get you sir?” He asked in a jovial voice.

“Do you have lodgings?”

“Certainly. Are you looking to stay a while?”

“Maybe at some point, but do you have a special room for more honoured guests?”

“Y-e-s” he replied hesitantly. “But the best one is usually reserved for Lord Geoffrey when he stays whilst hunting in the area.”

“Ah. May I inspect it ... on his Lordship’s behalf?”

The landlord looked at him quizzically. “I suppose so.”

Henry waited while the landlord hesitated wondering what to say or do, but then he headed towards the stairs, taking a bunch of keys off a wall hook on the way.

“This way sir” he said.

Henry followed him up the stairs and along a corridor to a room at the end. The man selected one of the keys from the bunch and opened the door to allow Henry to enter. Immediately, Henry noticed Lord Geoffrey’s crest over the bed and started searching the room.

“Are you looking for something sir?” He asked, with suspicion in his voice.

“Yes” he replied and proceeded to open drawers and cupboards. Next he looked under the bed and pulled the bedclothes back. When removing the pillows also revealed nothing he mumbled to himself.

“Where can it be?”

The landlord looked astounded. “Something wrong sir? Everything is in order, I assure you.”

Henry stood and scratched his head a moment until his eyes fell upon the crest. Climbing on the bed, to the consternation of the landlord, he lifted the crest off the wall and there, pinned behind it, was the piece of yellow veil.

“Ah, found it!” He exclaimed with glee. “Thank you for your patience sir.”

He tossed the man a shilling and bounded down the stairs glancing again at the two drinkers watching him as he left the tavern. Outside, the boy was still standing holding the reins.

“Thank you ... what’s your name?”

“Harold” the boy replied.

“Thank you Harold.”

He gave him another shilling and took the reins from him. The two drinkers rose from their seats and made their way to the doorway watching Henry conversing with the boy, who now thought he might be on to a good thing.

“Can I be your page boy, sir?” He asked almost pleadingly.

“Sorry, I wish you could but I have to go and collect something urgently.”

“Where might that be, sir?”

Henry didn’t see any harm in telling the boy.

“To an old wooden bridge over the stream east of here; and it’s a long ride.”

The boy hesitated for a moment. “I know a shortcut, sir. It won’t take you very long to get there.”

Then Henry remembered the phrase in the riddle ‘*Shortly you will reach a stream*’.

“You do?” Henry said. “Which way my clever lad?”

The boy pointed down the road. "Down there on the right just past the blacksmith is a narrow track not many know about. It follows the stream and is just wide enough for a horse-rider."

Henry was overjoyed and gave the boy five more shillings. The boy's eyes nearly popped out of his head. "Thank you sir."

"But don't tell anyone else. It's important."

Henry remounted and rode down the road soon turning on to the track into forest. The two men from the inn, with bows and quivers of arrows strapped to their backs, followed him at a reasonable distance.

Not long after they had left, six men on horseback rode into the village and stopped in front of the inn. One noticed a boy sitting by the road counting something which looked like coins.

"You" he said, pointing at the lad. "A fine looking gentleman rode in here a short while ago."

The boy didn't answer. He didn't much like the man's attitude.

"Answer me or you'll get a spanking" the man barked.

"He did sir and now he's gone."

"Where did he go?"

"Dunno, I only just got 'ere."

"Which way did he go?"

The boy wasn't sure how to answer.

"Dunno. He just rode off but I didn't see which way he went."

"Liar." The man said, but knew he couldn't take it any further with many of the villagers standing around watching them. Instead, he shouted to the gathered crowd.

"Anyone see which way a well-dressed man went? Ten shillings for any information."

No one replied but returned to their activities. He was about to raise the amount but sensed it wouldn't make any difference and they couldn't force anyone to tell them as they were 'guests' of Lord Geoffrey.

"He's obviously been and gone" the man said to his compatriots. "We're wasting our time here. Let's retrace our steps and head for the stream. He must have gone there as the Lord Chancellor surmised."

They all turned and rode off, watched by glowering villagers, as a second rider commented: "Strange we didn't pass him on the way here. He must have taken another route."

"Then we'd better make haste" the first one replied as they galloped off at speed to make up for lost time.

Guy had wandered around the garden searching for the piece of veil and getting angrier every minute until he remembered the riddle about it ‘*blending in*’ with the shrubs and plants. He was now in a yellow rose bed and assumed that the piece of veil was probably carefully hidden there, somewhere. Finally he spotted an odd looking bloom, slightly larger than most of the others and stepped over to it.

“Incredible!” he exclaimed. Even his sour mood he couldn’t help but admire the craftsmanship that had gone into forming the piece of veil into the shape of a rose. He pulled the ‘rose’ off its stem, stuffed it inside his tunic and returned to bailey to collect his horse. Lord Montgomery’s chancellor stopped him as he headed for the gate.

“Head directly to the stream where Lady Anna was taken in the grain sack. Our men have already left for the village so you will have a better chance of procuring the second piece or maybe both pieces”

Guy knew what he meant and galloped off. Anna and her father watched with some trepidation.

Henry rode as fast as he could, occasionally hearing the sound of tumbling water over to his left as the track zig-zagged close to the stream. Finally, he reached the wooden bridge, remembering his rescue of Anna and the confrontation with Guy and his men. He jumped down from the horse and ran onto the bridge.

“The second might float away” he said to himself. *It must be close to the water.* He thought.

He lay on his stomach and looked under the bridge. Nothing. But wait. Was that something yellow on the other side? He got up and crossed over to lay down again and peer underneath. There it was; attached to a nail hammered into the bottom of the bridge. He had to enter the water to retrieve it and shouted out with glee. “Got you Anna, my dearest.” He stuffed the second piece of veil inside his tunic with the first piece as two men some distance away stopped when they heard him shout and looked at each other.

“What does he mean by that?” Said one.

The other just shrugged. “By his tone, I would say that he has found the second piece of veil.”

They exchanged smiles and continued towards the bridge.

Feeling pleased, and knowing that Guy had probably found the last piece of veil, Henry remounted and set off up the track back towards the castle. After about half an hour he saw a group of horsemen in the distance riding towards him.

“This looks ominous” he muttered to himself, slowing down and moving his arm to the hilt of his sword.

As he neared the group – there were six of them – they stopped and spread out forming a curved barrier in front of him. Will, Lord Montgomery's champion archer was amongst them.

"I believe you have something that doesn't belong to you" Will called out.

"Everything in my possession belongs to me" Henry replied, thinking that with the possession of two pieces of veil even Anna now 'belonged' to him.

"We disagree" Will replied. "We believe that you now need to hand over two items that belong to someone else and further strongly suggest that you comply with our request."

"I will do no such thing and if you want them, then you had better come and get them."

The man glanced at his comrades to the left and right. "You heard the man" he said. "Go get them from him."

Henry drew his sword as two of them trotted towards him. They also drew their swords and next minute were clashing steel from their horses. Henry easily disarmed one and was giving the second a hard time when three others rode forward, with swords, drawn to join their comrades. Meanwhile, the disarmed man had dismounted to retrieve his sword. Finding it awkward fighting from the saddle with four men circling about Henry quickly jumped down and edged towards the surrounding woodland where it was difficult to maneuver on horseback. The attackers in turn also dismounted and Henry was starting to feel the pressure but still managed to wound one in the sword arm and disarm two of the others. Will gave a sigh and brought his bow round and was about to fit an arrow when the sound of another rider approaching made them hesitate as Guy appeared galloping towards them, which then encouraged them to attack Henry with more gusto.

"Come on men" he called out as he dismounted. "He's only one man. I guess I will have to deal with him myself." He smiled as he approached the fighting group swinging his sword. Henry was now getting worried and was forced to take on Guy's onslaught while trying to watch his back. Guy was certainly a much greater challenge with swords clashing as Henry tried to avoid being surrounded. He didn't notice that one of the men had circled round into the woods and was now behind him only feet away with raised sword. Will had now fitted the arrow to his bow and brought it up to focus on Henry. Suddenly there was a swishing sound followed by a thud as the man behind Henry fell forward with an arrow in his back. This was followed by a further swishing sound as Will cried out with an arrow sticking out of his right arm. The other men all stopped fighting and lowered their swords looking about them.

"I suggest you all ride back from where you came," called out a hidden voice, "before you all die."

Guy still stood facing Henry with sword raised.

"You too" shouted the voice.

"No" responded Henry. "Let me handle this one."

While his men all backed off towards their horses, carrying the dead man with them, Guy resumed the fight with Henry. Henry was already weary from fighting multiple opponents and suddenly found his sword flying from his hand. With a quick glance at Guy, Henry made a dash to retrieve his sword as Guy started towards him with sword raised ready to deliver a fatal blow. His forward steps were halted as another swish was followed by an arrow that landed on the ground between Guy's legs. It gave Henry the vital seconds to pick up his sword and resume the fight. Unbeknown to Henry, two archers appeared out of the forest with bows armed with arrows ready. Guy's men were now all mounted ready to ride off, whatever the outcome of the fight between the two seemingly equally matched fighters. Henry certainly found inner strength, aware that his and Anna's happiness was at stake. Finally, it came to the point where Henry found himself beating down Guy who was now visibly flagging. He now stopped and backed away.

"Are we finished?" Henry snarled at Guy.

"Until the next time" he replied, and walked over to mount his horse and ride back to the castle with two of his men following. The other three rode on down the track towards the bridge with the dead man's body flung over his horse. They didn't want to have to try and explain why they were returning to Geoffrey's castle with a dead comrade.

Henry sat on the ground exhausted as the two archers approached him and sat either side of him. "You're the two men from the inn."

"That we are" one replied.

"And am I grateful for your appearance and assistance" Henry said. "But who are you and what made you follow me?"

"I am Harold" said the first one "and Lord Trellian's chief archer."

"And I am Llewellyn also an archer and a bow and arrow craftsman. I am also Harold's brother-in-law. "We came with Lord Trellian in case we were required but decided to stay in the inn rather than burden Lord Geoffrey with too many guests."

"Just as well as it turned out" Henry commented. "In fact, Lady Anna told me all about you two and mentioned your reputation, Harold."

"People sometimes exaggerate" Harold replied, with a little embarrassment.

"Be that as it may, I don't think I'd like to be at the sharp end of your arrows."

The three of them laughed.

"In answer to your second question" Harold said, "we heard about the contest when one of Lord Geoffrey's men turned up to hide a piece of veil in the inn. Once he knew that we were Lord Trellian's men he was most voluble and full of praise for you."

"I am honored" Henry interjected.

"He also heard about your rescuing the Lady Anna after she was kidnapped and was concerned for your safety, so we thought we would follow you in the event of an ambush; which is what happened."

‘
“I certainly am impressed with your skills - planting that arrow neatly between Guy’s legs. I believe it probably saved my life. I thank you for that.”

“We were most impressed with your swordsmanship. Guy has a fearsome reputation as a swordsman. Where did you learn to fight?”

“I had some experience of sword fighting when I arrived at Lord Geoffrey’s castle but he was kind enough to arrange for his trainers to provide me with intensive lessons. Just as well it seems.”

“That figures” Llewellyn commented.

Henry got up. “I had better be getting back to the castle, since Guy is probably already there and the others are probably wondering why I haven’t returned.”

“We will accompany you to the castle gates just to make sure you are safe and not liable to be attacked again.”

“Not much chance of that I hope, but thank you. It is much appreciated.”

The three of them mounted up and made their way to castle along the same route that Henry had taken when he rescued Anna.”

Word of Henry’s success had obviously gotten around, for as he rode up to the castle gates people crowded along the battlements and at the drawbridge cheering loudly. Entering the bailey he noticed various groups standing about, including one with Anna, her father and his entourage and to his right, Geoffrey and Eleanor, who watched as he stopped and dismounted. As Henry handed the reins of the horse to a squire who ran up to lead the animal away he couldn’t help noticing Lord Montmery’s group huddled together talking, or plotting, amongst themselves with scowls on their faces. Henry approached Geoffrey, who clapped his hands for everyone’s attention. They all stood and watched as he spoke loudly to Henry.

“Guy of Kent has one piece of veil. How many do you have Henry Longford?” Henry opened his tunic and pulled out the pieces of veil and held them up for all to see.

“”Two” he responded.

Lord Geoffrey smiled. “I hereby declare Henry Longford the winner.”

The crowd cheered and Anna whooped with delight as she ran over to Henry, threw her arms around him and kissed him, whilst her father looked on disapprovingly. “I knew you’d do it” she said with traces of tears in her eyes. “God obviously looks favorably upon us.”

“He sure does” Henry replied, tongue in cheek, and returned her kiss.

The first to congratulate them was Lord Geoffrey and Lady Eleanor, and Henry couldn’t help notice an expression of relief on their faces. “Well done Henry” he said grasping Henry’s hand. “You have done it again and certainly earning a reputation for yourself.” He moved closer to him and whispered “Some may be quite envious and jealous. You must take care.”

“Thank you Lord Geoffrey, but I had something worth fighting for.”

Henry pulled Anna closer to him as Geoffrey gave him a wink. Anna's father and Brother Hubert joined them. With some reluctance, Henry felt, Lord Trellian now approached Henry.

"For what you have done for my family, and Anna in particular, it seems that I can no longer deny your request, particularly as my daughter is obviously very much in love with you."

Henry broke away from Anna as Lord Trellian embraced him for the first time. "I congratulate you, Henry."

'First name terms as well' Henry thought. "It's the least I could do for someone so wonderful in every way" he replied, looking at Anna.

Their attention was diverted to Lord Montgomery's group from where raised voices emanated. They saw Guy detach himself from the group waving aside a comment from Lord Montgomery and make his way towards them

"Here comes trouble" Henry said.

As Guy drew closer, a smile spread across his face. He walked straight up to Henry and held out his hand.

"Congratulations Henry Longford. You have proved a worthy opponent."

Henry wasn't sure how to interpret the comment seeing as what had happened. "You also" he replied. "But I don't think your Lord is very happy with the outcome."

Guy briefly cast a glance over his shoulder. "Oh don't mind him. He's a querulous sort of person and not always appreciative of what people do for him."

Henry found that an odd comment from a Lord's knight until Guy clarified.

"He pays me well for the services I provide him but he is not actually my lord. I consider myself a soldier of fortune; available to the highest bidder."

Even with the charm offensive, Henry didn't trust the man. "You must have considerable skills for sale. Perhaps we'll meet again."

"Surely." He then directed his attention to Anna but whispered in Henry's ear as he turned. "Next time, you won't get off so lightly and then you will beg for mercy." His smile returned. "Well Lady Anna, it seems that you have what you deserve: a brave young man from ..." he waved his hand about "... somewhere, of which we will no doubt find more about someday."

Henry knew he was being derogatory, as did Anna and her father, but did not respond to the provocation. Anna did however.

"This brave and intelligent swordsman/scholar came into my life by accident. He has always treated me in a most chivalrous manner with kindness and selflessness and constantly exposed himself to risks in order to protect me and return me to my father safely. I have never known a man so caring, to the extent that I have always felt safe in his presence. The warm feelings and companionship that ultimately developed between us led, with God's help, to love; therefore I decided that I wish to spend the rest of my life with him."

Henry could see in Guy's eyes and thoughts running through his head that he would have liked to goad him more; but the man seemed to come to the conclusion that it would be futile. He had to utter one more sarcastic remark.

"I am pleased for you Lady Anna and am sure your suitor will be able to support you in the manner to which you are accustomed."

"*Poisoned charm*" Henry thought to himself.

"I don't trust that man" Lord Trellian commented as Guy started to walk back to join Lord Montgomery's group, who were mounted up ready to depart. He then hesitated and turned around to single out Henry in his gaze.

"Oh, I forgot to say – sorry to hear about poor Alfred, Lord Montgomery's woodsman whom I believe you may have befriended. I understand that he was attacked in the woods by wolves; poor chap. He will be missed."

Henry grabbed the hilt of his sword and was about to dash forward to face Guy but Lord Geoffrey and Brother Hubert each took an arm.

"This is not the time, nor place Henry." Lord Geoffrey said. "Justice will be done."

Henry doubted that but desisted out of respect for his host.

Now, Lord Montgomery himself rode across to Lord Geoffrey. "I thank you my friend Geoffrey for your hospitality and efforts to resolve a certain dispute. The outcome is not as I wished or expected and, although I have been misjudged and wrongly accused of certain actions, I accept the outcome of the ... contest ... and wish you farewell. You are, of course, most welcome to visit my court any time; to enjoy a spot of hunting perhaps."

"Thank you Stephen. I am glad that the issue has been settled and I accept your invitation. I will ask my chancellor to liaise with your man to agree some mutually convenient time. I also extend an invitation in return and we can then discuss whose boar or deer tastes best." He chuckled as he made the last statement.

Lord Montgomery nodded his agreement and was about to rejoin his men when Lord Trellian stepped forward.

"Lord Montgomery."

"Yes" he replied abruptly.

"I appreciate your acceptance of the outcome of this contest but I will still honour my debt to you as a goodwill gesture. I will ask Arnold Barlow to liaise with your chancellor to agree the amount and arrange for a regular stipend until the debt is clear."

"As you wish, Trellian."

Lord Montgomery turned to rejoin his men and rode off, to the relief of Lord Geoffrey and his guests.

Geoffrey now approached Lord Trellian, Anna and Henry. "I am pleased that everything turned out as you wished, John, and that any injustice has been rectified. It was my pleasure to host your lovely daughter and this charming man, Henry Longford.

I have heard all about their tribulations and all I can say is that had it not been for the help and efforts of this brave man, the outcome would not have been so encouraging.”

“I thank you for all your help, support and advice Geoffrey, but my daughter ...”

“Your daughter” Geoffrey interrupted, having an inkling of what he was going to say “could not hope for a more intelligent and brave man as a husband, presuming of course that you weren’t thinking of withdrawing your approval of their marriage. He may not possess much, if any, wealth or own any lands as yet, but I believe he has the skills and ability to make a great and lasting contribution to our society. Lady Anna is a lucky lady and you are a lucky father.” Geoffrey’s emphasis on the *as yet*, implied that Henry was capable of earning substantial rewards for his achievement and prospects.

Lord Trellian was dumbstruck and couldn’t think of anything else to say. “Well, Geoffrey, I believe it is now time for us to return home.”

“No hurry You must stay tonight and leave in the morning. It is time to celebrate the outcome and the success of the union of Anna and Henry. I will arrange a grand banquet for tonight.”

Lord Trellian was lost for any more words and thanked Geoffrey again for his kindness. Henry and Anna held hands tightly, happy in the knowledge that they would soon be united in love.

The banquet was a grand affair with plenty of game, boar and venison. As before, Lords Geoffrey and Lord Trellian sat at the top table flanked by Henry and Anna respectively. There was much merriment and also plenty of wine flowing, but Henry ensured that he was careful how much wine he consumed even though others were trying to persuade him to drink more. He knew that if he did drink to excess, something about his life in the 21st Century might slip out, and that must not happen.

Towards the end of the feast Brother Hubert approached Henry and Anna, who had moved together when the two lords had left the table to speak with other guests. “I will inform Father Bernard of the successful outcome, of which he will be most pleased; and relieved” he added. “I prayed for you both every night and the Good Lord answered my prayers.”

“Thank you Brother Hubert” Anna replied. “You have been most helpful and please extend my gratitude to Father Bernard. I don’t know what he did to arrange my deliverance from the hands of Lord Montmery but I will be eternally grateful. True, things did not always go according to plan but with surprising and welcome help, we managed to recover the situation.”

“Yes” agreed Henry. “And that help he paid for with his life.”

“Not so” replied Brother Hubert.

Henry turned to face him. “What do you mean? Alfred is alive?”

“Yes, but very weak. At risk to their own beings, a couple of villagers had observed what happened to Alfred and found him tied to a tree with arrows stuck in him bleeding badly. Fortunately he was still alive and they managed to get him to the

monastery where the monks attended to his wounds. It was touch and go but his life was saved.”

“So where is he now?” Asked Anna.

“Safe in the care of your father’s apothecary.”

“God be thankful” Henry said, again with tongue in cheek. At least he was getting used to thanking God for their good news.

Anna was overjoyed and gave Brother Hubert a hug.

“Not my doing” he said. “I am just the carrier of the good news.” He then left them to enjoy the news together.

“I can’t wait to see and thank him” Henry said.

“Me too” agreed Anna.

Once the banquet was finally over, Henry and Anna bid each other goodnight, wishing that they could have spent the night together.

Alone in his room Henry’s thoughts turned again to his situation: how his heart was definitely ruling his head and that he was just being carried along by the events around him. What was he doing getting married to a medieval noble lady in England in dangerous times? How did he let himself get into this situation? Should he just disappear and return to his own time before he tied the knot, even though he didn’t know how he would get back. He knew that a Father Bernard was instrumental in bringing him here and that this Father Bernard resided in Old Sarum. Perhaps he should make his way there; but that might be easier said than done. Somehow he managed to get to sleep.

Henry awoke in the morning to a bright day with the immediate thought of meeting Anna for a breakfast before setting off to his new home with his future wife and her father’s entourage. His anxious thoughts the previous night had temporarily moved into the background. Anna looked ravishing as usual as she entered the hall, he having arrived earlier to convey a good impression. He immediately walked towards her and took her hand as she excused herself from her father, who was accompanying her with Arnold Barlow. He kissed her and led her to the table. After the meal the group assembled in the bailey where their horses had been prepared for their journey. Following the usual farewells, with the promise to Lord Geoffrey of an invite to Henry’s and Anna’s wedding, the party mounted up ready to leave. As the gates opened and the party began to move Henry sensed Lord Geoffrey was watching him closely. He turned his head to see the Lord beckoning to him; but for him alone.

“Please excuse me a moment Anna” he said to her riding by his side. “I believe Lord Geoffrey wishes to have a final word with me.”

“I’ll wait for you” she replied.

Henry rode up to Lord Geoffrey who came up close and beckoned him to lean over. He obviously wanted to say something that no one else would hear. “You wish to say something Lord Geoffrey?”

’
“Just a warning Henry.”

Henry sensed what the warning was going to be about even though he had never divulged his true background to anyone.

“A warning? What for?”

“You have provided a very interesting story about your background and, although I accept what you have told me, there are some who might question it.”

Before Henry could think of a response, Geoffrey continued.

“Notwithstanding your physical appearance, which is perfectly typical for a man like yourself, there is certainly something very unusual about you which might raise suspicions.”

Henry was feeling uncomfortable.

“I am not going to dwell on the subject but merely wish to say ‘be careful’. These are dangerous times and there are many who will envy you; but my final word is that I wish you and Anna the greatest happiness and success.”

“Thank you Lord Geoffrey. I will remember your words and warning”

Henry smiled, shook his hand and turned to rejoin Anna and the rest of Lord Trellian’s party for the ride home.

“That looked very secretive” Anna said. “What did Lord Geoffrey say?”

“He told me to look after you and said to mind what we get up to.”

Anna slapped him on the arm. “Cheek. What does he expect us to do?”

Her laugh was heard by Lord Geoffrey, who had been joined by his wife, Eleanor. Geoffrey shook his head slowly. “I wish him luck; I really do.”

“So do I” she agreed. “They make a lovely couple who are very much in love.”

His chancellor looked at Geoffrey questioningly, thinking that there must be a subtle meaning to what his lord had just said.

22. Lord Trellian's Estate

The journey to Lord Trellian's estate initially took them south following the stream adjoining Lord Montgomery's estate. Lord Geoffrey's estate stretched across Lord Montgomery's southern boundary where it eventually abutted Lord Trellian's on the other side of the river that formed the western boundary of Lord Montgomery's estate which they wished to avoid in order to circumvent any potential trouble.

They arrived back at Lord Trellian's castle to be welcomed with celebrations from the townsfolk and assembled courtiers, so glad that Lady Anna had been returned. Henry personally received many thanks and congratulations for delivering their lady back to them safely, having heard of his bravery from Alfred and Llewellyn when they returned after accompanying Henry back to Lord Geoffrey's castle. Lord Trellian arranged for another celebration banquet and promised Anna that his gambling days were over, having learnt a near fateful lesson. Henry observed how different Lord Trellian's castle was compared with those of Lords Montgomery and de Champ. A keep had been built in Norman style but the castle lacked the motte typical of Norman construction. Since he was well respected by most of his Norman neighbours he claimed that he did not consider the expenditure necessary.

Henry's first action once the welcome party had dispersed was to visit Alfred in the infirmary. He found him lying on a cot with arms and legs swathed in bandages, and still very weak.

"Ah, Alfred; I am truly sorry for what happened to you and thank God that you were saved and treated by the monks at the abbey. I am sure that the abbot ensured that you received the best attention."

"Yes, I have a lot to thank them for and especially for smuggling me to safety, here; but I know nothing of the abbot. He wasn't in residence whilst I was there and no one spoke about him except to say that he wasn't returning."

Henry knew what he meant and felt remorseful at the abbot's probable demise. He remembered the warnings that he was living in dangerous times; and then thought about the doubloon that the abbot had shown him. Maybe he should try and retrieve the coin before anyone else found it. He made a mental note to follow it up at some point in the not too distant future.

"The abbot was a very caring person and we would not be here had it not been for his help. With one man dead and you badly injured, I only hope that no one else with whom we have been in contact has suffered, but I suspect that I may well be wrong."

"You and Anna are wonderful people and I am sure that you will both be able to bring justice to this land. It has been an honour to serve with you and consider you my closest friend."

‘
“Thank you Alfred. You are a very brave man and I regret ever having doubted you. Which brings me to another point.”

“Oh yes, I hear you two are to wed.”

“That’s what I want to talk to you about.”

“Oh?”

“Will you be my best man; that is, if you will be well enough.”

“I will make sure I am, don’t worry. I wouldn’t miss your wedding for the world and am deeply honored that you have asked me. I thank you Henry.”

“Good. That’s settled. Now I will leave you in peace to build up your strength.”

Henry bid Alfred a good day and returned to join Anna.

“Alfred is well?” she enquired.

“He is recovering well thank you.”

“Good. I will visit him myself shortly.”

Soon, the announcement was made that Anna was to be wed to Henry and that a banquet was to be prepared and attended by the townsfolk and village elders. When Lord Trellian introduced Henry to the court he referred to him as Sir Henry Longford; he couldn’t accept that Anna was about to marry a little known commoner. When Henry expressed surprise, Lord Trellian asked him to kneel in front of him.

“For services to my family and my people; for displaying selflessness and a disregard for your own safety in rescuing my daughter Anna from a very uncertain future; and for the bravery you have exhibited since you arrived amongst us; I bestow upon you a knighthood of this realm.” Placing his sword on Henry he stated loud and clearly. “Arise Sir Henry Longford.”

This was followed by loud cheering from all those present.

Henry stood up to face Lord Trellian. “I am most humbled my Lord” he replied “and not deserving of this honour. Any man would have done the same.”

“Do not denigrate yourself Henry. Many men would have given up. As I understand from Bother Hubert you volunteered for this mission with no preconceptions or promise of reward. The outcome might not have turned out so well and could have even resulted in the loss of your own life, so I will have no more of it.”

Henry turned and joined Anna who could hardly conceal her excitement that her father had honoured Henry so. They excused themselves from the group around them and walked off arm-in-arm to grab some moments of privacy to talk about the impending wedding. Whilst Anna was obviously very excited with the prospect, Henry was suffering from an inner guilt about his having to lie about his true background. Also, the thought that his marriage to Anna was now all but inevitable it was becoming more likely that he would not be returning to his own century. He had allowed himself to be slowly but inexorably drawn to love this beautiful woman whose company he had enjoyed in so many ways. It was so different from his former bachelor life living alone with occasional dates but no long lasting relationships.

They were sitting in the castle garden recalling all the adventures they had been through, laughing at some of their escapades and times when they were alone at night when they were interrupted by Brother Hubert.

"I congratulate you both on your betrothal and you, Henry, on receiving a knighthood."

However, from the expression on the monk's face, Henry had the impression that he wanted to say something else.

"You have something else you wish to say Brother Hubert?"

"No, no. It can wait" he replied. "I will leave two alone to enjoy the moment."

He departed.

"Something is on his mind" Anna said.

Henry agreed, but the thought soon faded from his mind, as over the following days he was introduced to various members of the court and given a tour of the castle. On one occasion when they were walking along the battlements overlooking the countryside around them, Anna suggested a tour of the villages in her father's lands.

"The villagers will be pleased to meet you; and Alfred and Llewellyn, I'm sure, would love to see you again."

"Yes" Henry agreed. "I have to thank them for saving my life and never really had the opportunity."

"I noted that when Guy came over to us after the contest, you did not mention the ambush and the attempt to take the other pieces of my veil from you. Why didn't you say something when you had the opportunity to expose him for what he is?"

"I'm not in the blame game" Henry replied. "In time, Guy will receive his just desserts."

"Hm, you are a very forgiving man Henry. I hope you don't live to regret it, for both our sakes."

It was a few days later when Henry was passing Brother Hubert in a corridor that the monk stopped him and took hold of his arm.

"We must talk sometime, Henry."

"I look forward to it. Anna and I have lots of questions."

"Just the two of us" he clarified.

"Oh, what about?"

"About your future."

Henry knew what he meant of course. "Yes, we must. I need to, soon. I am confused about what I should do."

The monk nodded. "Let's say tomorrow evening."

Henry's stomach began to churn. "Yes, tomorrow evening."

He left Henry standing, contemplating what the hell he was going to do.

Later that day Henry and Anna were discussing their wedding plans but Henry's thoughts kept distracting him. He was thinking about the meeting with Brother Hubert

and what he was going to say. At one point he was so deep in thought that he wasn't even aware that she had asked him a question.

"Henry" she said, startling him.

"Oh, sorry Anna. I was just thinking about our future together."

"You worry too much, Henry" she said, taking hold of his hand and pulling him close to her. "With the skills you have and the support of my father and Lord de Champ I do not visualize any problem that we will be unable to overcome. If you have any concerns then you must share them with me, particularly once we are married. We have to be completely open and honest with each other."

"Yes, we must. Oh, Brother Hubert wishes to see me."

"Oh, just you? What about?"

"I'm not sure but I suspect that it has something to do with our marriage vows."

"When?"

"This evening."

"Good. Let me know what he says" She released his hand. "Now let's get back to our wedding plans. Since my mother cannot advise me I need your guidance with certain matters."

Later, as they walked together down the corridor for supper, Henry found his thoughts preoccupied with what Brother Hubert was going to say that evening.

"I hope you're not worrying about the wedding" Anna said.

"No, not at all Anna" he lied,

Henry was standing outside Hubert's room with a raised a clenched fist.

"Come in Henry" Hubert called out before Henry had time to knock.

Henry opened the door and walked in, closing it behind him. Brother Hubert was sitting at a desk reading a book. There was another chair close to him.

"Please sit down Henry" he said, closing the book and looking up. "You are well, I hope."

"No, not really; I am confused."

"About your situation I presume. I can understand that." He paused, a little uncertain as what to say next. "Although you have gone so far as to commit yourself to a future here with Lady Anna, do you think that was wise to impose such a constraint on any future action you might decide upon? "

"In retrospect I would say 'yes' in normal circumstances and if things had gone smoothly; but nothing has been normal and things haven't gone smoothly."

Brother Hubert nodded. "You are correct and it is unfortunate that things happened the way they did, such that you found yourself over such a long period helping a very beautiful woman such as Lady Anna. I may be celibate but I am very much aware of how human relationships develop and can understand how you became so attracted to her. That besides, was it your plan to return to your own time once your mission had been accomplished?"

Henry didn't quite know how to answer. "Return? Well, yes, I guess it was." He paused wondering where this conversation was supposed to be going. "Is there a time limit on when I need to decide?"

"It has already been too long in my opinion. This whole mission was meant to last just a few days but due to the many events beyond our control we could be reaching a critical point."

"Could you clarify that statement? What do you mean a critical point?"

"I far as I understand it, but I may be completely wrong, if too long a period should elapse without the reverse transfer taking place, the image of your journey's parameters will fade and you will never be able to return, but we need to confirm with Father Bernard on that point. He is much more familiar with how the crystal functions. I think it best if I arrange for us to meet up with him."

Henry was now feeling anxious about the decision he must make. Brother Hubert sensed his confusion.

"I know you are arranging to wed Lady Anna, which in itself will present you with an even greater dilemma. So, do you really think it wise to proceed and not return to your own era now?"

"That's just the decision I am finding it so difficult to make. I love Anna deeply and she loves me. Even if I wanted to, I think it would be very difficult not to marry her now. It would be very traumatic for her. How do you think she would feel if I said 'Sorry Anna, it's all off; I have to go back to the future'."

"If you are adamant about going ahead with wedding then I really think we do need to discuss this with Father Bernard urgently. On the other hand, if you decide you have to remain here to help and support your future wife, then I can just let him know and we need not take this any further and this conversation never happened."

Henry thought hard about the options but decided on one thing. "I have to go through with the wedding. It's too late to back out now. But, yes, please contact Father Bernard so that we can speak with him."

Brother Hubert rose from his seat. "I respect your loyalty and devotion to Lady Anna, Henry, but it will make your final decision that much more difficult."

Henry also now rose from his seat. "Thank you for your advice, Brother Hubert. I do appreciate your trying to help me but, as you point out, the ultimate decision lies with me and I accept that."

"In that case I will speak to Father Bernard when he arrives for your wedding."

Henry was surprised. "He has been invited?"

"Yes, Lord Trellian is very grateful for his help in bringing his daughter back."

Henry left Brother Hubert's quarters with a feeling of relief but still uncertain what the future portended. Anna, of course, asked him what their conversation had been about when she joined him for the morning meal.

"He just asked me if I understood what the meaning of our union is and was I truly committed to you and in love with you."

"And are you, Henry?"

‘
“More than you’ll ever know my darling.”

They embraced, and Henry felt his desire for her and the warmth of her love surging through his body.

Father Bernard was not surprised when Cedric called in to deliver the message from Brother Hubert.

“Enter” he called out when Cedric knocked at his door, following the announcement of his arrival by Brother Thomas.

Cedric entered, looking pleased.

“Ah, from your expression” commented Father Bernard “I presume you bring good news Brother Cedric.”

“That I do Father.”

He handed the note to Father Bernard who started to read it then paused half way through.

“Will excuse me for a while Brother Cedric; but do join the other brothers whilst I digest this rather long missive from Brother Hubert.”

As soon as Brother Cedric had left the room Father Bernard read through the note carefully. At first he smiled when he read that the mission had been successful with the return of Lady Anna to her father. Then his countenance changed when he read about her impending marriage to Henry and Brother Hubert’s request that they have an urgent meeting. He frowned and muttered to himself “Oh dear, this has gone further than was intended and now presents us with a new problem.”

He rolled up the note and put it in his habit pocket, took a set of keys from his desk and made his way to the crypt.

Alan and Alice were sitting eating a fish and chip supper accompanied by a glass of claret when the special phone that they had been provided with emitted a recognizable beep. They both stopped eating immediately, stared at each other, got up and made a dash for the door.

“He’s coming back” Alice said excitedly.

“At bloody last” Alan replied. “I was getting fed up sitting around here even though we are getting paid.”

“At least they gave us plenty to get on with; and we have enjoyed some interesting countryside walks.”

“Not much else to enjoy though” he couldn’t help adding, with a grin on his face.

“Alright Mr. Deprived; but I’m not here to satisfy your lust as I have already told you. Anyway, there are plenty of sheep out there.”

“Ugh! Alice. Sometimes your humour is rather vulgar.”

It didn't take them long to set the equipment up once again in the bedroom.

"On reflection, perhaps we should have left the setup in place." Alan said.

"Yes, but there was always the risk that someone might turn up and see it, which would raise awkward questions. You know we have strict instructions to keep the crystal in a secure place when not in use. It can't be allowed to fall into anyone else's hands."

They switched on the equipment and waited, watching the computer screen for signs of activity with one eye on the bed in front of them. Wavering waves of light could be seen moving around within the crystal.

"Come on" Alan muttered. "What's keeping you?"

"Patience" added Alice. "He's got a long way to come: a thousand years don't forget."

"Funny."

What happened next, took them by surprise. Instead of a regular wave pattern the screen display a jagged line.

"Looks like a noise pattern" Alice said.

"Something's gone wrong" Alan replied.

As soon as he had made the statement they both jerked back in their seats when, instead of beams of light arcing towards the bed a bright ghostly mist appeared above the crystal.

"What's going on?" asked Alice, feeling a bit uncertain.

"Search me" Alan replied. "Wait! There's someone inside the mist."

Sure enough, a shimmering figure dressed in a monk's habit slowly formed until the person was fully formed but without being solid; more like a hologram Alan thought. The man looked in his sixties with a full beard and a kindly face.

"This isn't supposed to happen" Alan said.

"He's trying to communicate with us. Have you experienced this type of phenomenon before?"

"No. As far as I am aware the guardian only communicates with Philip."

"It must be serious then if he wants to talk with us. I hope nothing's happened to Henry."

"Not our problem Alice but ..."

"Good day to you both." The figure said in a calm baritone voice.

Alan and Alice switched their attention to the figure.

"Good day to you too." Alice replied.

"I am Father Bernard" the figure replied. *"To whom am I speaking?"*

"Alan and Alice" replied Alan. "Is this something to do with Henry Longford?"

"You must be the ones who sent him. Am I correct?"

"That is correct but why are you contacting us? Is he in good health? Safe?"

"He is safe and I am glad to say that the mission has been a success."

He was about to say more but Alice interrupted him. "So why are you calling us? Why isn't he coming back?"

"I was coming to that." The monk replied. *"We have a problem."*

"Are you really communicating with us from the twelfth century?" There were so many questions Alice wanted to ask.

"Where is Philip? I wish to speak with him."

"That's not possible I'm afraid. He is many miles away from us and it would take several hours to bring him here. We are here on his behalf." Alan responded.

"In that case I would ask you to give him the following information as soon as possible and with the utmost urgency."

"We will do our best and offer our help if you require it."

"I don't think anyone will be able to help under the circumstances."

"So what's the problem? Why hasn't Henry returned?"

"He is to be wed to the lady he saved."

"What!" They both exclaimed loudly in unison. "Married? What happened?"

"It would seem that during their adventures they fell in love and although Henry expressed the wish to marry her he is still in a quandary as to whether he is making the right decision or whether he should be returning to you. I will be meeting him shortly to discuss his dilemma but there is now the distinct possibility that he will remain here even with all the risks involved."

"I wonder what he's been up to during his adventures?" Alice whispered to Alan, who now responded to Father Bernard.

"Henry is his own man. He will make up his own mind and will not be persuaded otherwise. He is a very logical thinker. All we can do is to wish him the best of luck if he decides to remain with you."

"Thank you. I must leave you now but please pass my message on."

"We will. Goodbye."

The image and ghostly mist disappeared as the two of them sat there dumbfounded.

"I was only joking when I said he might not come back" Alice said.

"I know" Alan replied. "What's he thinking of?"

"Philip isn't going to like it."

"Bugger Philip. Henry can't stay there. A man can't just disappear. There will be lots of questions which will bound to involve VRM."

"You're right there."

"Oh God, what a mess. Philip with his great ideas. I've had it with him."

"Let me ring him; then he can sort it out."

They packed the kit away once more and decided to leave the inn the next day.

23. Wedding

Henry's and Anna's wedding day had finally arrived and the celebrations promised to be an elaborate affair as befitting a noble's daughter, especially now that Henry had received a knighthood and was promised a position at court. Anna's father had finally accepted reality and expressed his complete support for the marriage. Flags were decked out all over the castle with tapestries draping the Great Hall and main corridors of the castle. Musicians and entertainers had been brought in and the kitchen was busy preparing a sumptuous feast with plentiful quantities of mead and wine. A number of nobles were invited including Geoffrey de Champ and Lord Montmery, but the latter declined, surprisingly. It still seemed unreal to Henry: getting married to someone a thousand years younger than himself. He had enjoyed a good night before the wedding drinking moderately with fellow knights and friends in a local tavern answering questions about his travels and receiving comments about his strange dialect. He did not notice two men sitting at another bench within earshot, in the pretense of having a discussion. They retired for the night just after Henry and departed the castle early the following morning.

Henry arose early on his wedding day so he decided to take a stroll outside the castle, before most of the inhabitants had risen, contemplating his situation once again and preparing himself for the ceremony. He had befriended many people at the castle but in particular a knight by the name of John Stanford. About two weeks before the wedding he had been drinking one evening with John in a village tavern. John had served Lord Trellian for about five years, was his Master of Arms and also responsible for the castle security. He was tall with a long face sporting a well-trimmed beard ending in a point and Henry put his age at about forty years. Anxious to obtain as many opinions as possible to help him make that final decision, Henry decided to present the problem to John in a more subtle way.

"John my friend, can I seek your advice?"

"You certainly can Henry and I hope I can give you some."

"Imagine that you are faced with a dilemma in which you have two choices. Your first choice is something that you really desire, would make you very happy and is what your heart tells you to do, but is in an alien environment laced with many unknown dangers. The alternative choice, what your head tells you to do, is to suppress that desire and choose safety in a familiar environment but which may well result in regret and unhappiness, albeit maybe temporary."

John was a bit taken aback. "You pose a very perplexing question if you don't mind me saying so and I don't think that I could ever come up with a definitive answer."

"Have a go anyway. You may come up with some logic which points to the best path to take."

He sat back in his chair stroking his goatee beard. "Let's start with the second option. It is true that initially there will be much regret and, whilst it may fade into the background as time goes on, I suspect that the decision could well come back to haunt one and result in a persistent doubt. One might never find a replacement for that most desirable thing.

As to the first option: well here lie many challenges and it could be that in order to maintain one's happiness and 'protect' that which one most desires, one will develop the inner strength and guile to overcome all obstacles that stand in one's way. As long as one is honest, stays within the law and avoids any compromising situation that might rebound on one, I think that would be an acceptable option."

Henry thought for a moment over what John has just said. "I think you have analyzed the situation very well John."

"I would, of course, add a word of warning" he added. "These are times, and they may very well continue into the future, that many people strive for power and influence and can become very jealous of other's rank, wealth and possessions. Even in my position responsible for castle security I know of some who would like my position, so I have to be very careful to ensure that whatever I do will never rebound on me."

"Thank you John; I will give your advice a lot of thought."

There was a slight pause before he said. "Of course you are talking about yourself aren't you Henry?"

Henry smiled. "Yes. I came to this country seeking my fortune and ended up here and in this situation by accident. As it happens, it has all turned out well for me and I couldn't be happier."

"I'm glad to hear that, Henry, and I envy you marrying such a beautiful and lovely person as Lady Anna. You are a very lucky man and if you do choose to remain here I do wish you all the happiness and success in this venture. As regards to your other option, I cannot really advise without knowing to what you would be returning. Perhaps you could enlighten me a little more."

"Under the circumstances, John, it is not really relevant, but I thank you for your advice."

Henry arose from his seat. "At that, I think it is time to call it a day."

"I agree" added John. "Anyway it is time for my last patrol of the castle walls before I retire for the night."

As Henry walked back to his quarters he felt more confident that he could survive in this era but needed to try and forget everything about his life in the 21st century. That would be a challenge in itself.

When Henry and Anna arrived at the chapel where they were to be wed, a crowd had already gathered. A choir was singing in Latin inside the chapel whilst Henry and Alfred waited at the door for Anna, who soon arrived on the arm of her father. As was the custom at the time, the ceremony took place in front of the chapel door with Henry standing on the right and Anna on the left side, facing the door. Following the vows, Alfred passed a gold ring, crafted by a local artisan, to the priest who offered a short homily on the sacred act of marriage. He then blessed the wedding ring and handed it to Henry, who placed it on Anna's finger before they entered the chapel for a nuptial mass. Even though Anna was initially veiled, she looked stunning in an elaborate wedding dress. Instead of the white gown, which is traditional wear at modern weddings, Anna wore a deep blue (a symbol of purity) bejeweled velvet dress with satin edging and long trumpet sleeves. Even though they had been intimate on numerous occasions, Henry's heart was pounding with excitement of having this woman at last, whilst any thoughts about what the future might hold no longer entered his mind. When she finally stood beside him and lifted her veil, he was bowled over. *'My God.;* He thought *'How do I deserve such a stunningly, beautiful woman? Isn't this a good enough reason for staying here?'* Henry wore a green doublet with a gold embroidered pattern, black breeches and short black leather boots.

Following the mass, the couple made their way to the Great Hall accompanied by minstrels playing various instruments including bagpipes, a six-stringed viol, flutes, drums, and trumpets. It was a grand affair with many cheering the procession along and, on entering the banqueting hall, Henry noted that many tapestries had been hung along the walls. Tables had already been laid with candles, pewter drinking vessels, wooden plates, knives and spoons. Henry remembered that forks weren't part of the cutlery in the 12th century. Containers of wine, mead, beer and some non-alcoholic drinks were also set on the tables. This was obviously an occasion for a great excess in all areas from food to pageantry. Guests were entertained with performers providing entertainment throughout the meal and between courses with actors, fools, jesters and acrobats. Gifts were presented not only by court members but also villagers and included items of leather, wool, silk and various metals.

Henry and Anna sat at the top table flanked by Lord Geoffrey de Champ and Anna's father respectively, with Geoffrey's wife Eleanor seated next to her husband. The meal commenced with a veggie first course, although some guests opted for a salad dish, followed by meats, breads and cheeses as appetizers. The main course consisted of pies filled with a mixture of meat or fish, spices and vegetables. There was also a pig roasting on a spit. To finish the meal, bowls of dried fruit like apricots, cherries, and figs were set on the table. All the food was served by colorfully dressed women

and men from the villages. They also brought in basins of perfumed water and napkins so that guests could wash their hands before and after the meal or between courses.

During the wedding festivities Brother Hubert introduced Henry to Father Bernard, who had been seated next to Hubert during the meal.

"Henry, allow me to introduce Father Bernard."

Henry saw an elderly gentleman of about sixty with a lined face indicative of many years of worry. "Good day Father, I am honoured to meet you" Henry said, holding out his hand. "I look forward to speaking with you some time."

"The honour is mine" he replied, ignoring Henry's outstretched hand. "I have heard so much about you."

Henry was looking at two searching eyes burrowing deeply into his mind trying to ascertain his thoughts.

"I understand from Brother Hubert that you seek my advice" he stated.

"Yes" Henry replied. "I need your help in resolving a particular conundrum."

"I will do my best to help you choose the path that will give you peace of mind. Let Brother Hubert know when you wish to see me." He started walking off.

"I will do that" Henry replied, excusing himself from Brother Hubert and rejoined the wedding celebrations.

At a now very late hour guests started to move off or collapse into drunken sleep in their seats over the table. The state of the hall was chaotic as Henry and Anna left for the bridal suite amid cheers and lewd comments from all those still conscious. Reaching their room, they quickly dismissed a couple of ladies-in-waiting who were hovering about to see if they required any assistance. They closed the door softly as they left. The room itself was richly decorated for their wedding night with tapestries on the walls and a large four poster bed in the centre of the room set against one wall. They looked at each other, both smiled impishly and, like a couple of kids, dashed for the bed and flopped on it side by side observing the desire on each others face.

"Not sinning now are we" Henry stated.

"Certainly not" Anna agreed; and with that they embraced briefly before hurriedly helping to remove each other's clothes. Then the real fun began!

For the next couple of weeks Henry and Anna spent much time together touring her father's estate and visiting various villages, where they were well-received. Arnold Barlow had to drag Henry away at times to run through the administrative processes at the castle, which included tax collection and the castle accounts amongst other things. They also called in to see Brother Hubert who was chronicling court events.

"Your knowledge of monetary matters is very impressive" Arnold Barlow commented on one occasion. "Where did you say you were educated?"

"The Abbey of Valmagne in Languedoc" Henry replied.

By now, Henry had his background 'story' firmly in his mind, having related it on numerous occasions. There were also incidents when he felt able to impart some of his

twenty first century knowledge, but here he had to take care what he said. Whenever he was questioned about how he acquired a particular piece of knowledge he referred to his time he spent in France, which was where he said he gained most of his skills. Lord Trellian had come to accept and respect Henry to the extent that on one occasion, when Lord Trellian was outlining his family's history he brought up the question of his own successor.

"You realize of course that Anna will inherit all my property and wealth, which means that you, in effect, will become the lord of this estate. It is most unlikely that I will ever re-marry or provide a male heir even though many of my knights suggest that I should." He paused for a moment before looking Henry in the eyes and asking. "I am not planning on dying anytime soon but do you think you could take on this burden?"

Henry felt overwhelmed and humbled as he absorbed what Lord Trellian was saying to him. He tried to act modestly by brushing off Lord Trellian's statement. "Oh come on Lord Trellian, you have years ahead of you yet and I certainly don't envy your responsibilities to your people and king."

He laughed. "Well that's encouraging. No danger of being usurped by my son-in-law then."

"No way" Henry replied. "I am devoted to your daughter and will support her and do anything I can to guarantee her happiness and safety."

"I am so glad to hear that." He said, embracing Henry. "Now I will let you return to Anna's side as I know how much time you two like to spend together whilst you can. You are aware that over time there will be increasing demands on your time, so make the most of the opportunities whilst you able."

"I certainly will."

Henry left Lord Trellian, now realizing that he had convinced himself into remaining in the 12th century but still wondered whether he would really find life interesting and exciting enough compared to what was available in the 21st century. Although his talk with John Stanford also confirmed his own thoughts about staying he did feel that he really needed nonetheless to have that discussion with Father Bernard.

The opportunity arose a week later when Father Bernard paid Lord Trellian a visit. Henry and Arnold Barlow had just returned from one of the villages having inspected the harvest when Brother Hubert approached them.

"Henry, Father Bernard is here and is available to speak with you before supper, if that's possible."

"As good a time as any" Henry said. "Please excuse me Arnold."

"It is no problem Henry."

Arnold Barlow walked off as Henry accompanied Brother Hubert to a room off the Great Hall where they found Father Bernard seated at a desk with a bottle of wine and three goblets.

"Wine Henry?"

"That would be most welcome, Father."

Brother Hubert poured out the wine whilst Father Bernard was pondering how to start the conversation.

"I think we owe you an apology, Henry."

"Oh, and why is that?" Henry replied, wondering what the abbot was meaning.

"We should have remained in the inn when you were transported here."

"Why? You left instructions and a map with Anna to guide us to safety and the mission turned out successful."

"True, it is pleasing that the objective of saving Anna from Lord Montgomery turned out a complete success but had we been present in person we would have emphasized that it was critical for you to return to your own era as soon as Lady Anna was safe."

"What happened, is not your fault, father, and I don't believe the outcome would have been any different. The sequence of events that occurred once we had left the inn, were unforeseeable and it was entirely my emotions that led to my current predicament."

"Yes, I am sorry it turned out as it did. This was not how events should have unfolded and, yes, you unfortunately made the mistake of letting your feelings take over. My contact in your time gave me the impression that they had selected a person of strong will who would not allow their emotions to dictate."

"Oh, that will be Philip" Henry responded, with a touch of sarcasm. "But we are all human and, faced with such a beautiful and lovely woman, what would you have done?" He immediately regretted his response; after all, monks were supposed to be celibate – not always the case as Henry knew from having read books containing extracts from medieval chronicles. "Sorry, I shouldn't have said that."

The abbot waved the comment aside. "I understand that you wish to know how soon you must decide on whether to return to your own time?"

Henry nodded. "As a point of interest, yes."

"Of course" he continued "you have certainly complicated things by wedding Anna Trellian and thus put yourself in a very difficult situation."

"Yes, I realize that but I think I have decided what I must do."

"You should have returned once the Lady Anna was subject to no further threat but now we have your marriage to add to the equation. I suggest that you need to weigh up the two options available to you before you make your final decision which is now obviously biased towards remaining; but, because you are from the future, you will always have to be most careful about what you say or what you do. These are dangerous times and I believe that you will always be in danger."

There was an extended pause as the three of them took a sip of wine. Henry placed his goblet on the table.

"I understand what you are saying and have already given it much thought. I also discussed my situation, albeit in general terms and without mentioning where I came from, with a close friend. After much consideration, I believe I can make a life here. My greatest regret, should I return to my own time, would be my betraying and abandoning Anna. If only I could be honest with her and tell her everything."

Brother Hubert's face took on a look of strong disapproval. "That would put her in great danger and who knows how she would cope mentally with such a revelation. It goes against all religious teaching."

"I agree" added Father Bernard. "You might even say that Brother Hubert and I are using the order as a cover for covert activities. You must appreciate that the fewer that know about the transference technology the less the danger. Currently, only the three of us possess the knowledge and if you return, it will revert to just Brother Hubert and me."

Henry suddenly remembered the Spanish doubloon that the Abbot of Montraie Abbey had shown him. "Are you sure that no one else knows about the crystal?"

The two of them exchanged glances.

"Why do you question us?" Asked Brother Hubert.

"Because I was shown a Spanish gold coin from the sixteenth century by the abbot of Montraie Abbey."

Father Bernard coughed. "That was an unfortunate incident of which I will spare you the detail. Suffice to say that a man was brought here from that century and disappeared not long after he arrived. We never knew what happened to him but the abbot came across the gold coin and showed it to me. I told him either to destroy it or hide it someplace where it could never be discovered." He now looked very concerned. "The fact that the abbot still has it and showed it to you, means that he suspects your origin and puts us all in great danger, should it be discovered."

"Sadly, I believe that the abbot is no longer with us. I heard that he had been arrested for harbouring us during our journey to Lord de Champ's estate. That is why I think I must somehow go and retrieve it" Henry responded.

"That is a great risk as you are no doubt aware."

"I realize that, but it has to be done for the very reason you have already stated."

"That is true, but at least only Brother Hubert and I know where the crystal is kept."

"So where do you keep it and what happens when you two die?" Henry asked.

"The crystal's location generally dies with its discoverer. That is how it has always been and should remain so. Its powers are such that men will fight to the death for its possession."

Henry thought back to how Philip had discovered the crystal whilst caving with his friend.

"How did you come across the crystal?"

"Strange really" he said. "When Roger le Poer commissioned work to enlarge the cathedral at Old Sarum an old cave was discovered. Before it was sealed off I took the opportunity of exploring it with Brother Hubert. The cave eventually opened out into a cavern lit by a blinding light from the crystal. It possessed a strong attractive force but at the same time felt threatening but we managed to secure it and secrete it away until we could identify a suitable secure location."

"And where might that be?"

‘
“That, I will not say.” He paused whilst Henry was trying to sort out all the information being thrown at him. “In answer to your question about how soon you have to make a decision, Henry, I am afraid that I am unable to answer that at the present time.”

Father Bernard was about to get up from his seat but Henry raised one more question.

“So do you know how the abbot came to have the Spanish doubloon in his possession, since it was presumably you who brought the man here?”

“We did have an incident where we needed the help of someone much like yourself who was completely untraceable. All I remember is that this man arrived here in his own clothes, unlike you, with various personal possessions such as silver and weapons. I also know that at some point he must have visited the Monastery of Montraie and inadvertently left it there.”

“Hm” muttered Henry.

Father Bernard now raised himself from his seat. “But I think we have discussed this issue enough Henry. The decision is yours to make. You are aware of the dangers to yourself and us but remember that if anything happens to you we will not be around to help you. We have our own lives to protect.”

“I fully understand and thank you for listening and for your advice.”

“I think it best that we don’t meet very often, unless ...”

“Unless I decide to return” Henry finished the sentence.

Father Bernard walked to the door. “Goodbye Henry. I wish you well in whatever you decide and, if I don’t hear from you soon, I will presume the obvious.”

“Goodbye Father and thank you again.”

After Father Bernard had left, Brother Hubert spoke. “As the resident God’s servant I will remain your contact should you change your mind; but do not leave it too long.”

“Thank you Brother. I appreciate it.”

Brother Hubert left Henry alone contemplating what had just taken place and feeling comfortable with the decision he had taken. However, the situation was soon to change, leaving Henry having to rethink his future.

Lord Montgomery was shouting angrily whilst pacing up and down his room. Guy stood quietly, determined not to be intimidated.

“I trusted and had faith in you to win Anna for me and you bungled it and humiliated me. Why should I continue to employ and pay you for services you have failed to provide? Your efforts over the past weeks have just resulted in you losing her not just once but three times.”

“Things are not that simple” Guy replied. “I have spent a lot of time analyzing the events surrounding the incidents involving the Lady Anna and have been making

discrete enquiries. I know that this Henry Longford had help in spiriting her out of the castle from your former woodsman, Alfred. It's only a pity that we couldn't get anything out of him. I am also convinced that he had help in finding the pieces of veil. How did he work out so quickly where the pieces were hidden and where did those two archers Harold and Llewellyn come from who intervened in our attempt to relieve him of the two pieces that he had. And as for those two bunglers who were supposed to bring her from Lord de Champ's castle; well, you won't be hearing from them again."

"What about the incident at the inn, where she was supposed to have been collected by your men? Who actually is this Henry Longford, the supposed lodger, who turned up from nowhere, without the landlord's knowledge you tell me, and took her? Not against her wishes I might add; and those two monks – they had something to do with it I'm sure. My specific instructions were that no one else should have been allowed to stay there. That inn keeper ..."

"In his defense my Lord, when faced with two of God's servants he didn't feel that he could turn them away; but we now know the two monks had an ulterior motive and must have let this Henry Longford in during the night. It is interesting that they left before dawn, so couldn't be implicated in the abduction."

"So what do we know about this Henry Longford? He is a skilled swordsman and appears to be well educated. Where did he come from? Where did he study? And where did he learn his swordsmanship? These are the questions to which we need answers. The man must have a weakness. We must find out as much about him as we can."

"There, we may be in luck my lord."

"Go on."

"Prior to the man's wedding, two of my spies overheard him talking in a tavern with Lord Trellian's Master of Arms. Although we know nothing about his background we now know that he claims to have been educated at The Abbey of Valmagne in Languedoc; but where he learnt his swordsmanship and when he arrived in England we do not know."

"It certainly has the appearance of a planned abduction but where did this Father Bernard find Longford and persuade him to abduct Lady Anna. These things we must find out."

"It is all in progress my lord. I have already sent two men to France to make enquiries at this Abbey of Valmagne and also at the ports to try and find out who might have brought him over to England. There is also the question his dialect and manner of speaking, which is strange in itself, but there is no hint of a French accent."

"Well, whatever you find out, we need to build up a case against this philanderer and expose him for what he is. We will get our own back and I will get my revenge."

"Ideally" added Guy "I would like to face him alone so that I can recover my reputation and respect, which has been somewhat dented."

Lord Montgomery nodded his agreement. "Well Guy, it seems that you may have redeemed yourself. Maybe I will retain your services after all."

“Thank you my Lord; most generous of you. I will not let you down again.”

Henry was busy in the library working through some figures when John Stanford entered and approached him with an expression of grave concern. Henry looked up as he approached.

“Good day, John. You are in good health?”

John spoke hurriedly. “Fine thank you Henry, but I need to speak with you urgently.”

“Certainly. It looks serious. When do you want to talk?”

“Now.”

A feeling of consternation came over Henry and he sensed that what John was about to tell him was something to do with him. John looked about, checking that there was no one else in the library but then had second thoughts.

“Let us take a walk.”

Henry had a premonition that the news was not going to be good. He closed the books he was working with and got up. “Let’s go.”

They left the castle and started walking along one of the tracks leading into the surrounding countryside.

“What is the problem, John? You are worrying me.”

“I think you need to be or at least very concerned. I don’t exactly know what’s going on but I have heard that someone is making enquiries about your background.”

Henry brushed it off but started to feel a little nervous. “Everyone knows my background. After all, I have related it to so many people now. Do you know who is instigating this and what is being said?”

“No, but I can guess. A rumour is going around that someone has been sent to France to confirm that you were educated at the Abbey of Valmagne in Languedoc and to try and find out when you arrived in England.”

Henry didn’t reply but was feeling uncomfortable.

“There are other things being said about you and plans to expose you as a philanderer and opportunist.”

Henry tried to brush off the comments. “Sounds like envy on someone’s part.”

“Be that as it may, Henry, but do take care. Someone is after your blood and it could be dangerous for you.” John put his arm around Henry’s shoulder. “But don’t worry too much Henry. We are all behind you and once it has been confirmed that you are telling the truth you will be vindicated; but do take care.”

“Thank you, John, for your concern and letting me know. I will take care as you suggest. I certainly have a lot to lose so I will not treat the threat lightly.”

John took hold of Henry’s arm. “You are not hiding anything are you, Henry?”

“I am trying to hide from my past, John. That’s all I wish to say” Henry responded to reassure John’s faith in him. To

John accepted Henry's response with a nod and returned to the castle, as Henry indicated that he wished to spend some time alone to consider his response to the accusations.

He returned to the castle filled with foreboding. Things were going so well it seemed too good to be true. However, the next warning came from Brother Hubert. He called Henry aside one day.

"Henry, I need to speak with you urgently."

Once again Henry had to interrupt his work to speak with Brother Hubert. On this occasion he joined the monk in his room.

"I met up with Father Bernard recently" he said, "and he informed me that there are people who are asking questions about you."

"Interesting" Henry replied. "My good friend John Stanford gave me similar warnings recently. What have you heard?"

"For a start, some are trying to find out where you come from and questioning how you came to be in the inn where Lady Anna was waiting. The same people are also trying to link you to me and Father Bernard."

Henry was now beginning to regret making up that story about his education but knew that he was obliged to provide some story, however fictitious, about his past. It was on the spur of the moment and certainly appeared to satisfy the listeners. *Who had he told? He started to list them in his mind. Anna; Alfred; The Abbot of Montraie; Lord de Champ; John Stanford ... in the tavern!* That's it. He trusted John, so someone must have overheard him. Why did he open his big mouth in a public place? He had been told so many times to be careful. How was he going to extricate himself from this self-made mess?

"Henry?" Brother Hubert was staring at him. "There is something on your mind and you have me worried. What's wrong? You need to tell me?"

"I need to analyze the situation and work out what I need to do."

"Just tell me. If you are in trouble, maybe I can help. The truth Henry."

Henry sat down and stroked his beard. "When we stayed at the Abbey of Montraie, I was asked about my background, particularly where I was educated. I was obliged to provide an answer, so I told the abbot it was at the Abbey of Valmagne in Languedoc; it being so remote that no one would ever question it ... until now."

Brother Hubert went quiet, thinking over what Henry had said. "What else have you told anyone?"

Henry thought about his transportation and swordsmanship. "Nothing that can't be explained with some forethought."

"Have you told anyone else?"

"Yes, but only people I trust and probably wouldn't pass on the information."

"You can't be sure of that; but somehow the information has reached Lord Montmery who has initiated enquiries." They were both silent for several seconds. "Maybe we can preempt any queries that might be raised at Valmagne."

‘
“Unfortunately, John Stanford told me that someone or some people have already left for the abbey.”

Brother Hubert rose from his seat. In that case we have no time to lose. I will leave immediately to confer with Father Bernard to devise a course of action. Leave it with me.”

“What if we are too late?”

“Unfortunately there is a high risk of that” replied Brother Hubert. “Maybe you should seriously consider returning to your own time after all.”

“I don’t think that’s an option now. I am devoted to Anna and am making a life here. I can’t just abandon her.”

Brother Hubert looked at Henry thoughtfully. “I fully understand that but if there is a real threat to your life, I would strongly recommend going back while it is still possible. It also puts both myself and Father Bernard in danger.”

Henry left Brother Hubert’s room to make his way to back to his and Anna’s rooms where he found her sewing.

“Where have you been, Henry? Someone told me that they saw you going to Brother Hubert’s room; is anything wrong?”

“No, no” he replied. “Just seeking spiritual guidance.”

“I don’t believe that for one instant” she responded, smiling. “So what was the real reason?”

Henry had to quickly conjure up a believable answer

“I ... er ... understand that Brother Hubert is a chronologist for your family, so thought I would try to find out about your ancestors.”

“To check that that I am worthy of you?” she laughed,

“On the contrary; the question is am I worthy of such a beautiful and lovely woman as you, Anna?”

She put her sewing down and came up to him, throwing her arms around his neck. “You shouldn’t put me on a pedestal, Henry. I am not worthy of that.”

“So what do you think kept me here?”

“Kept you here? So what were you planning to do if we hadn’t fallen in love? In fact” she continued, before he could think of an answer “it still puzzles me how you came to be approached by Father Bernard and willingly agreed to help me at risk to your life, without payment and only a vague idea of what our destination should be. I would really like to know how you two met.”

“It is a long story” Henry replied. “I will tell you sometime.” He planted a long kiss on her lips hoping that she wouldn’t continue to pursue the line of discussion any further. Fortunately, she didn’t.

Henry found it difficult to concentrate, thinking how stupid he had been to tell anyone, other than the abbot of Montraie, where he was supposedly educated. Although the abbot had wanted to know exactly where he was educated, he needn’t have been so specific when telling others. What if Father Bernard or Brother Hubert failed to

forestall any enquiries being made about his education? What was he to do? If he couldn't come up with a convincing answer, he was doomed or he would have to abandon Anna and his life here and return to the 21st century.

His busy schedule and his marriage to Anna helped him to avoid rethinking his decision to remain with her but once again the problem resurfaced when, on returning from a hunting trip with Anna, he was told that Brother Hubert wanted to speak with him again.

"More guidance necessary?" she asked, jokingly.

"Maybe he has found something interesting" Henry suggested. "I think he quite enjoys our one-to-one chats."

"What do you talk about?"

"Oh, life experiences, God, the state of the country; anything that comes to mind in fact."

"Perhaps I could join you both to share your thoughts. I would find that interesting."

"Yes. I will mention it to him."

The atmosphere had an ominous feel about it as soon as Henry entered Brother Hubert's room and sat on the chair that was offered him.

"What's happened now?" Henry asked, with trepidation.

"There have been further developments."

Henry closed the door and sat facing the monk. "Tell me." His first feelings were more of annoyance than agitation.

"You have been accused of three murders and one violent assault."

"What!" Henry exclaimed, angry and confused. "Who of? When?"

"Lord Montgomery claims that you murdered his woodsman, the abbot of Montraie Abbey and one of his soldiers. He also claims that you also assaulted the landlord where the Lady Anna was staying and would have killed him, had it not been for the man's wife intervening."

"Well, the first accusation is a lie, as we know, so Lord Montgomery is obviously unaware that he is alive. As for the abbot, he was in good health when we departed from the abbey. They must have found out that Anna and I had stayed at the abbey, arrested the abbot and killed him. The third death was when I was attacked by Guy's men who were trying to take the pieces of Anna's veil from me. He was killed by an arrow from Harold's bow when he was about to attack me from behind." Henry got up from his chair and walked about the room. "There must be a way to refute all these accusations. The abbot dead and Alfred nearly killed; the two men who helped us most." He paused. "Alfred turned out to be one of my closest friends, even though we only met on our way to the abbey. He told me that he was a spy for Anna's father and gave me the reason, so I did warn him not to stay around. With regard to the abbot someone must have known that he was sympathetic to our plight and hid us when the

monastery was searched by Montmery's men. I should be refuting these accusations and seeking justice for all that has happened rather than running away."

Brother Hubert was shaking his head slowly.

"The accusations have already been forwarded to a higher authority with demands that you be arrested and face justice. That could be your downfall."

"Do you have any further information regarding these incidents?"

"In the woodsman's case it is said that his body was never found, eaten by wolves it is claimed, near the cabin where you and Lady Anna stayed. It is also claimed that there are witnesses who claim to have heard you and him arguing over Lady Anna."

"Preposterous" Henry said. "The so called witnesses have obviously been coerced into lying. What about the abbot?"

"His body was found on the road from the abbey leading to Lord de Champ's estate, apparently taken as a hostage and killed. The abbot died from sword wounds. You are right, in that we can refute the first charge but not the other two."

Henry was dumbstruck. His world, happiness and blissful lifestyle were falling apart; and then there was Anna, his beautiful beloved wife. What was he to do? He sat back down deep in thought with his head in his hands whilst Brother Hubert returned to his writings, allowing Henry to think things through. Finally he raised himself up.

"We have to tell Anna. I must now be completely open with her. I can no longer hide behind this false identity."

Brother Hubert nodded slowly in agreement. "I am tempted to agree with you. I will consult with Father Bernard as a matter of urgency and arrange a meeting for the four of us."

"What about Anna's father? Surely we can't leave him out of it?"

"No, out of the question. It is much too dangerous to have any more than absolutely necessary knowing where you come from. It will even be a risk telling Lady Anna."

"Yes, as has been pointed out by Father Bernard" Henry reminded himself. "Arrange the meeting."

Brother Hubert stood up. "I believe we can come up with a solution of sorts that we can discuss, but whatever is decided it seems inevitable that you and Anna will have to part ... maybe forever."

Henry left the room downcast with feelings of trepidation and fearful of how Anna would cope with the knowledge she may be about to face.

24. Old Sarum

Henry had informed Anna about the meeting with Father Bernard and when she asked what it was about he had to claim ignorance. She had noticed his changed mood but he just responded that he had a premonition that their blissful life was about to be interrupted but she told him not to be silly. Now he was sitting alone in the castle gardens, head in his hands dreading the meeting that was about to take place and was unaware of her approach until she spoke.

“Are you coming, Henry?”

He looked up and felt even worse at the sight of her standing there. He didn’t want to hurt her but he knew he just couldn’t carry on hiding the truth from her. She took his arm and held it tightly.

“You are worrying unnecessarily, Henry. I am sure that meeting will prove to be quite innocuous.”

He didn’t reply as he got up off the seat but just walked with her to Brother Hubert’s room where the meeting was to take place. Her grip slackened slightly as they walked.

“You do still love me don’t you Henry? Only you have seemed a bit distant lately”

Henry turned and pulled her towards him. “Yes Anna. I do love you more than you will ever know. I want to be with you always and would never wish to hurt you.”

She stopped, releasing his hand. “Now you are really worrying me. Tell me what is going on.”

“Nothing is going on, Anna, that affects my love for you but I am hoping that our meeting with Father Bernard will at last answer a lot of your questions and concerns.”

He took hold of her hand again, squeezed it and led her quickly to their meeting with Father Bernard and Brother Hubert. She didn’t say any more and soon, to his relief, they reached Brother Hubert’s room. Henry knocked on the door.

“Please come in Henry and Anna.”

Henry opened the door and let Anna enter, following behind her.

“How did you know it was us?” Henry asked.

“I requested strict privacy so that we could talk together” he replied.

Anna looked puzzled. “Sounds a bit ominous” she chuckled, trying to make light of it.

“Please sit” Father Bernard said, offering two chairs in front of a table with books in a stack on the right.

“Where is Brother ...?” Henry started to say.

“I am here” a voice answered, as Brother Hubert emerged from the shadows and sat next to Anna.

Henry and Anna sat holding hands as Father Bernard pulled up a chair to face them. He didn't seem to know how to start but eventually spoke.

"Anna my dear" he began.

"Yes Father?" She replied.

"Have you ever wondered how Henry came into your life?"

Anna was puzzled by the question and it showed in her expression. "I suppose the answer must be 'yes', many times. I don't really know where he was born or anything about his parentage. He told me that he doesn't really like to talk about it other than that he was born in England but was taken to and brought up in France where he received his education. When he returned to England recently, I understand that he was contacted by you to help avoid my falling into the hands of Lord Montgomery and thus allow time for investigations into Lord Montgomery's treachery. During our time together he gave me the impression that he is a very learned and well-travelled man." She looked across at Henry. "What I do know though is that he is very honorable, brave and chivalrous." She smiled. "And we love each other deeply. The only strange thing about him is that he speaks with a strange accent and, for a learned man, had difficulty reading the written word."

Father Bernard nodded as Anna continued.

"I have wondered many times how you two met up and how you managed to persuade Henry to help me." She paused, thinking back to her arrival at the inn and the subsequent events. "In fact I have so many questions about the involvement of all of you in helping me that I don't know where to start." She turned to face Henry. "Maybe it's time to be frank with me, Henry. Up until now I have pushed any thoughts about your background to the back of my mind as they seemed unimportant but maybe now is the time to tell me everything."

Henry didn't know where to start. He was still reluctant to reveal how he arrived, knowing that the truth could put her at risk. He started off using a different approach, even though it was a lie. "I was contacted by Father Bernard, whom I knew many years ago, on my way to the crusades. He knew I would be passing by and asked me to help you."

She shook her head violently as both monks sat with blank expressions. "No Henry, don't take me for a fool. You are not really like other men around here. You are a very intelligent man and not a natural fighter, even after your training by Lord Geoffrey's men, and it is too much of a coincidence that you were, as you say, passing by at the time. Also, if you were on your way to the crusades, you would have told me that." She stared at him intently. "There must be no more secrets between us, Henry, otherwise there will always be questions in my mind."

Henry was in a quandary but, noticing Father Bernard's nod and expression of approval, turned to Anna and took her soft hands in his own. She seemed hesitant, seemingly dreading what he might be about to tell her. Finally, he said "Anna, I respect and love you too much to hide the truth from you but you are not going to believe or comprehend what I am about to tell you."

A frightened look came over her face. "What do you mean Henry? Is it that bad that all this time you have hidden the truth from me?"

Father Bernard now thought it best to help Henry out. "Anna" he said, "we have thought long and hard about whether Henry should reveal his true origin to you. You will now understand his reluctance."

Anna noticed the exchanged glances and stared directly into Henry's eyes. "Before you begin, I ask you again: do you really love me Henry? Do you really want to spend the rest of your life me?"

Henry pulled her close to him and embraced her warm body with intense feelings rising within him. "Yes Anna and what I am about to tell you is so ... fantastic and probably incomprehensible to you that you probably won't believe it or even your mind accept it."

"Nothing you say will alter my opinion of you or my love for you" she said. "So tell me."

"I am not from this era."

There was a stunned silence.

"What do you mean?" She asked, in barely a whisper.

"I am from the future."

She moved away from him and stared at him and then the two monks in turn. "The future? What are you saying? Is this some kind of joke?"

She turned back to Father Bernard seeking an answer that might be more believable but he merely shook his head and said "It is not a joke, Anna."

She looked back at Henry but Father Bernard thought it better that he continue.

"We don't expect you to understand what you have just been told, Anna, but before we say any more we must insist that you swear to the utmost secrecy and never reveal this conversation to anyone. It is extremely dangerous knowledge and will be interpreted as heretical thinking, and you know what that means. What you are about to hear is known only to Henry, myself and Brother Hubert. We would rather that you would not have to be told but Henry is in great danger and I accept full responsibility for all that has happened. My aims were, I believe, noble in that we couldn't allow you to fall into the hands of Lord Montgomery. I was under the misconception that seeking the help of someone completely untraceable and who would, let's say, disappear once you were safe would be the answer to your dilemma."

"So how did you hope to find this individual?"

"By contacting a superior being ..."

"Superior being?" She interrupted. "Isn't God the superior being?"

"Yes .. e .. s" he responded slowly. "Let's just say we asked for God's help and were sent this man, Henry, to help us."

"And God sent this man from the future; another era? I don't really understand what you are talking about."

"We had to find a man of exceptional qualities, honesty and ingenuity but completely unknown to anyone and, as I said, untraceable. With God's help we

consulted an oracle that delivered to us, this man Henry.” He paused. “We had a simple plan that this man would come to take you to a place of safety and then return to his own time. We didn’t foresee that you two would fall in love. It has thus resulted in many complications and Henry is now in great danger.”

Anna looked worried. “What sort of danger?”

“He has been accused of two murders and attempted murder.”

“Two murders! That is a lie and a preposterous accusation.”

“His background is already being investigated, so what he has told everybody about his past and education will be found out to be untrue. It has now become imperative that he ‘disappears’ for a while until we can glean further details of the crimes and demonstrate that he is innocent, which might be difficult as many witnesses will have been bribed or coerced into testifying against him. I also need to try and shore up his background story, but that will take some time as I will no doubt have to travel to Languedoc myself. A warrant has already been issued for his arrest which may well end in his incarceration and prosecution. He will stand no chance, particularly if he is found out to have lied about his background.”

Anna was becoming distressed. “Disappear? For how long? Can’t I go with him? We can go away into hiding somewhere; maybe stay with someone we can trust.”

“We truly wish there was another way but it always comes back to the same solution – use the oracle to help us once again.”

“What is this oracle? What does it do?”

“For your own sake it is best not to know what the oracle is but just accept that it can transfer a person to another place and time.”

“So why can’t I go with him?”

“As far as we know, it is not possible to transfer a person to the future unless they originally came from the future.”

“So why not just transport us both to ... another country or a place where we can never be found?”

“It is too dangerous and unpredictable.”

Anna was showing frustration. “So what is this future you speak of? Where is it?”

“The 21st Century” Henry replied.

“The 21st Century!” Anna exclaimed. “That’s nearly a thousand years from now. It’s impossible.”

“We thought so too” Brother Hubert added, until Father Bernard discovered the oracle.”

“Oracle, future, transfer – you are confusing me and not making any sense.”

“We knew this would be difficult to comprehend but, please, just accept what we have told you.”

“And what if I don’t believe you and cannot accept what you have just told me?”

“Then we do have a problem. We had considered suggesting that Henry should leave England with you, on the pretense of joining the crusades. However, even then

you would not be safe and we believe you would both end up as fugitives and vulnerable to anyone who could benefit from your apprehension.”

Anna appeared to be slowly comprehending what she was hearing.

“If Henry does return to his own era, will he be able to return to me when it is safe? Apart from questions from my father and others, there is our lives together and our greatest wish for ... a family.”

There was a subtle pause before she said the last two words, which did not appear to be noticed by the three men.

“Regrettably we are unable to provide an answer to your question. All we can suggest is that the message we should give is that Henry has undertaken a crusade to the Holy Land alone. You may never see him again but that is a sacrifice you must both be prepared to accept. Remaining here would be a great threat to his life. You have to decide between you the best course of action. Brother Hubert and I, unfortunately, are not in a position to advise or predict what might happen if Henry remains in the twelfth century.”

“When do we have to decide?” Anna asked, with tears in her eyes.

“The sooner the better; I don’t think we have much time.”

“Can you both leave us a moment please?” Henry said.

Father Bernard rose from his seat, followed by Brother Hubert. “Of course.”

They both left the room leaving Henry and Anna together, holding hands tightly.

Henry had always been a very positive and decisive person, but now for the first time in his life he faced the decision of his life and didn’t know what to do. Then again, he had never been so much in love; and with such a beautiful, caring woman as Anna. His emotions were all awry and he was aching inside. After a long silence he turned to face her.

“Anna, I know I have said this before many, many times but when I first met you, I immediately fell in love with you. No, when I first saw your picture was when I said to myself ‘*This woman I must have and I need to be with.*’ That love has deepened so much that I was determined to spend the rest of my life with you. I have never been happier.”

“Me neither.”

Henry looked into her eyes and stroked her face gently, frightened of making the wrong decision as he studied her beautiful features, feeling the warmth of her body next to his and perceiving a knowing look in her eyes. “I want to stay with you, face my accusers and deal with any problems that we might face; but I also must heed the words and advice of Father Bernard. I know Lord Montgomery and Guy are baying for my blood and will do anything to bring me down. My heart tells me to stay and support you but my head tells me to go away, for a while at least. If I just disappear, then the wolves will stop circling and you at least will be safe.”

Anna nodded in comprehension. “Somehow I feel that I knew that this was going to happen. Ever since we first declared our love for each other, something in my heart

told me that this brave man, who appeared out of nowhere to help me would one day have to go as quickly as he appeared. It's just like having a wonderful dream and waking up to reality."

"And you went along with everything that has happened. You allowed me to make love to you and agreed to marry me?"

"Yes" she replied "because you are someone special and I will always treasure the times we have spent together."

Henry released her hands and embraced her tightly. "Oh God, Anna. You are such a wonderful woman and I certainly don't deserve you."

"No Henry, I don't deserve you and it would be selfish of me to make you stay and possibly lose you forever. You must go."

They kissed passionately for a long time before their lips parted.

"When do you have to go?"

"Soon I suspect."

"I will wait for you ... forever. There will be no other man to take your place."

Henry got up to go and open the door. He found the two monks standing outside talking.

"We have decided" Henry said, with tears in his eyes.

The three of them re-entered room to see Anna in a similar state.

"You have decided to return, Henry?" Father Bernard said with a sad and solemn expression.

"Yes" replied Henry, "but let me ask this: is it possible that I could return in the future?"

"Regrettably I am unable to answer that question."

Henry half choked when he asked the next question as Anna quickly grasped his hand.

"When will it happen?"

"Before I answer that question" Father Bernard said, looking down at Henry's hands, "Ah, I see you are still wearing the ring; good. Then we must leave for Old Sarum in two days."

An image of the site of Old Sarum flashed through Henry's mind as he thought to himself *'That site will forever harbor bad memories if I can't rejoin Anna.'*

The thought quickly evaporated when he heard Anna say "My father?"

"You will tell him that Henry is to join the crusades to give thanks for the Lord's help in all that has happened."

"I will come with you when you return to your own era" Anna said insistently.

Henry knew that he wouldn't be able to dissuade her.

"Then it is settled" Father Bernard said. "I will leave tomorrow morning and Brother Hubert will bring you to me the following day. I am truly sorry that it has to be this way, but I can see no alternative."

The two monks left, leaving the two lovers alone.

For the next two nights, and when other opportunities arose, Henry and Anna made love savouring every moment of their passion. She had already informed her father of the news of Henry's undertaking without informing him that they may never see him again.

"I must admit, I was completely wrong about you" he had said to Henry. You are a very honorable man and have been so chivalrous towards my daughter. I couldn't have wished for a better son-in-law." He grasped Henry's shoulders and pulled him close. "I understand your need to depart for this Christian undertaking and may God protect you on your journey and safe return."

"It's something I must do, Lord Trellian"

"Yes, and I must admit that compared to many other men I know you are certainly an enigma."

Henry was excused all duties so that he and Ann could spend as much time together as possible before his departure, both believing that their time together was finally coming to an end. Too soon it was time to leave for Old Sarum.

The court all bid Henry farewell with ladies-in-waiting and other woman folk sobbing as he left the castle with Anna and Brother Hubert. John Stanford and Alfred offered to accompany them as far as the cathedral where Henry was supposedly going to receive a blessing for his journey. Henry and Anna were left to ride ahead on their own, to make the most of the precious moments that were left to them. The time passed very quickly and they soon arrived on the outskirts of Old Sarum with the cathedral in view.

Henry couldn't believe his eyes when he saw the walled city of Old Sarum with its castle and magnificent cathedral. He only remembered it as a mound outside the city of Salisbury and had only ever seen a model replica, of what it was thought to look like, in a museum. Anna was also impressed.

"What a large city!" she exclaimed.

Henry found the remark a little humorous, thinking what she would say if she saw the massive cities of the 21st century. They passed through the west gate into the outer ward with the castle mound ahead of them and the cathedral on their left, observing both peasants and nobles entering and leaving, and made their way through the busy narrow streets with their various smells of human activities. Children ran about playing medieval games, their playful voices mixing with those of adults talking, shouting, and some singing, whilst they went about their daily routines.

Finally they stood before the west doors of the cathedral itself. Unlike the castles Henry had entered over the past weeks, which still existed, albeit as ruins, nothing much of this city had survived into the 21st century. Henry and Anna bid farewell to John and Alfred and waved as the two men turned to return to Lord Trellian's. As they entered

through the central doorway with Brother Hubert, Henry marveled at how pristine the building looked and found it difficult to believe that he was actually in the 12th century.

"Henry, it is so immense!" Anna exclaimed, marveling at the size and grandeur of the building.

"That it is."

Brother Hubert beckoned them to follow him along the nave to a door in the North Transept. He knocked lightly and the door was opened by an unseen hand. As they passed through the doorway they found themselves in the cloisters. They heard the door being closed behind them and turned to face an elderly monk in his sixties standing there.

"Ah, Brother Edmund" Hubert said. "We have an appointment with Father Bernard. Would you be so kind as to let him know that we are here?"

Brother Edmund nodded. "Wait here please." He walked off towards the chapter house, ascended a short staircase to enter the building for a moment before emerging and beckoning the three of them to come forward."

They walked across the cloisters and entered the room where they saw Father Bernard talking with a group of monks. As they stepped through the door, he turned and beckoned them forward, at the same time dismissing the monks, who dispersed to attend to their daily chores. He slowly walked towards them.

"Welcome to God's house" he said, nodding to each in turn. "Henry, Anna and Brother Hubert." He then turned his attention to Henry and Anna. "You have decided?"

"Yes, we have" they both replied.

"And?"

"Henry has decided to return to his own century" Anna said, with tears in her eyes.

"Maybe it is for the best as I doubt that the messenger I sent to the Abbey of Valmagne will have arrived before Lord Montgomery's man, which does not bode well for Henry here; but I do intend to travel there myself to put the record straight, if you know what I mean."

Henry and Anna both nodded, understanding his meaning.

He continued. "Have you both accepted the meaning of your decision?"

Anna replied. "We accept that we may not see each other ever again but we will pray to God for a miracle that one day we will be reunited."

The two of them looked at each other, holding hands with tears in their eyes.

Although Henry had already passed through the gateway he was interested in Father Bernard's understanding of how it functioned, partly for Anna's benefit. "Father; you have told us how you discovered the crystal and the gateway but who or what controls the transfer process?"

Father Bernard hesitated for a moment then beckoned for them to join him on the seating around the wall. "Please take a seat." He coughed. "Where shall I start."

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“When Brother Hubert and I discovered the crystal we had no idea what it was or of its powers, but something told us that it had to be handled with extreme caution, hence the reason we hid it away. Over time, its discovery began to fade in my mind until a few years ago when I sensed that the crystal was trying to contact me, so hurried to the place where I had hidden it. To my astonishment and disbelief a strange man, or apparition you might say, appeared who claimed he was the guardian of the gateway. At first I thought it was the devil’s work but he calmed me down and explained to me the purpose of the gateway, how it was a force for peace and justice and how it could facilitate the transportation of people through time. Think of it as a bridge between the centuries. He showed me how to summon the gateway, but emphasized it was dangerous and always a risk for anyone passing through it.”

‘Now he tells me.’ Henry thought.

“Have you been through?” Anna asked.

“No. I never thought it wise to travel through time and, as far as I am aware, it is not possible for anyone from our time to travel into the future because to us the future is an unknown; does not exist.”

Henry now took over, for Anna’s understanding. “Which means that travel in both directions is possible for someone born in the future, like me, but not for someone, like Anna, who would be unable to come with me.”

“That is correct.”

“I don’t suppose the guardian told you where the crystal originated.”

“No. He merely stated that the crystal has always existed and always will. But with your advanced technology perhaps you would know the answer.”

“I am afraid that we are none the wiser. It was discovered by accident by my boss Philip.”

“Boss?” Father Bernard queried.

“... my Lord” Henry corrected.

Anna was still struggling to understand all that was being said and even Henry was still perplexed trying to figure out how an experiment in virtual reality could end up opening a gateway to the past with the same people, but mainly Anna, apparently being present in both centuries. He concluded that somehow an image or hologram of Anna must have been transferred across the centuries to present to Henry in the form of a painting or via the virtual reality experiment. However, Anna was a very intelligent woman and felt assured by Henry’s presence and knowledge that she must accept that what she was hearing from both him and the abbot was the truth.

Father Bernard switched his attention to Anna. “Anna?”

“Yes, Father?”

“You are now aware of the complete background to the plan to help you and the decisions we took to minimize any problems that might have arisen from your ‘abduction’ from the inn. I repeat: it is regrettable that the result was not what we

expected but that is the way of our Lord. Now, we have to deal with the consequences and face those decisions we must make in order to protect all four of us.”

Anna nodded in understanding.

Father Bernard took hold of each of their hands. “You are both making a great sacrifice more than anyone could know and I earnestly hope that with God’s help you will eventually be reunited.” He released their hands. “We will leave you for a few moments to say your farewells to each other. Meanwhile, I will go and summon the gateway and Brother Hubert will come to collect Henry.”

The two monks left Henry and Anna holding each other tightly, both trying to hold back the tears running down their faces.

“I love you so much, Anna. I will always be thinking of you and ... I will find a way to return so that we can spend the rest of our lives together.”

“Oh Henry, do find a way. Only you can. I will be constantly waiting for your return however long it takes.”

After several minutes, Brother Hubert returned to take Henry to Father Bernard.

“I’m coming with you” Anna said, with determination.

“If you wish” Brother Hubert replied.

He led them back through the cloisters to the outside of the chapter house and to a small door in the wall. They passed through the door, which Brother Hubert closed and locked behind them, and descended some steps into a corridor where they found Father Bernard sitting on a stool. He rose up as they approached.

“You are ready?”

“We are ready” Henry replied.

Something made Alice decide to remain at the inn when Alan packed his bag to leave.

“Are you sure you want to stay here, Alice? He’s obviously decided not to return. He’s made his bed so let him sleep in it.”

“I don’t think it’s as clear cut as that. I still have my doubts as to whether he will really want to remain in the 12th century. You know he’s a techie geek and, well, I just can’t see him divorcing himself from his current lifestyle.”

“But he’s getting married for God’s sake! What does that tell you?”

“It’s my gut instinct, Alan. I think we should hang on a while longer.”

“Well I’m sorry but I disagree with you, so you’re on your own with this one.”

“That’s fine. Just leave all kit set up. I am convinced contact will be made again.”

Alan wasn’t too happy about leaving Alice alone at the inn. He hesitated as he pulled his jacket on. “Are you sure you’ll be alright.”

“Yes.”

“I’ll let Philip know that you will be holding the fort. He certainly wasn’t very happy to learn that he might not return. In fact he said it was imperative that he return and that we should make him. Huh! As if we could.” Alan pulled a chair up and sat down. “I think Philip has a hidden agenda which is why he agreed to send someone back to the Middle Ages.”

“Oh, and what might that be?”

“Well, I know that he is a bit of a history buff, particularly of the Middle Ages. I believe he is considering writing a book or novel about the period and what better way than to send someone back to receive first-hand experience and then report back. Think how authentic the result would sound, be, even.”

“Oh, come on. That’s going a bit too far.”

“You don’t know Philip. When he has an idea or objective in his mind, he will pull out all the stops to achieve it. Whatever it takes.” Alan slowly shook his head. “He’s ruthless Alice.”

“Okay. I won’t argue with you Alan but at the moment I don’t really care what Philip thinks; my main concern is for Henry. If he suddenly had a change of mind and we were unable to help him back then we’d be letting him down.”

Alan got up and picked his bag up. “Okay. I’ll give Philip an update. Ring me if you hear anything or have any problems.”

“Will do.” Alice made her way to the kitchen as she heard the inn door close. She opened the larder door. *‘Must go and do some shopping’* she thought. *‘I’ll go to the village first thing tomorrow morning.’* She never heard from Philip or Alan.

After three weeks had elapsed, Alice began to think that perhaps Alan had been right and that Henry had decided to remain loyal to his medieval wife Anna. She was certainly surprised and disappointed that Philip had not deemed it necessary to contact her but was more surprised that Philip was willing to take the risk of leaving just her to look after the crystal, after what Alan had told her. The only contact she had was to receive some project work via the internet and told ‘work from home’. *‘So much for being valued!’* she thought.

Then one evening, sitting with a glass of wine and reading another book she had picked up from a charity shop in the village, she heard that familiar beep. She immediately sent Alan a text and rushed upstairs to the familiar room with all the equipment in place. As on the previous occasion, the hologram-like monk appeared and informed her that Henry had decided to return to his own time. Feeling justified in her assessment of Henry’s psychology she checked that all was ready to receive Henry and was about to call Alan when her phone rang.

“He’s coming back?” Alan stated excitedly.

“Yes, I have just spoken with the monk.”

“He contacted you?”

“Yes.”

“When will the transfer take place?”

‘
“I don’t know. Just get here, now.”

“I’m leaving right away.”

The phone went dead and Alice sat there in anticipation, too excited to read or do anything much, and waited.

“Follow me please” Father Bernard said. Walking ahead of them.

Anna squeezed Henry’s hand tightly as they made their way along the corridor towards a door at the end. Several feet before the door Father Bernard stopped them, stepped up to the door, took a large key out of his pocket and unlocked it. He turned around to face Henry and Anna; Brother Hubert was standing back just behind them.

“I must remind you for the last time that you may never see each other again. Are you both willing to accept that?”

Anna spoke first. “Yes, we are. I love Henry too much for him to put his life in jeopardy for my own selfish reasons. I would rather spend the rest of my life remembering what a wonderful person he is than for him to perish on my account.”

Henry hugged her tightly with tears in his eyes.

“Whatever the future brings” he said “my time with you has been the happiest in my life and I will treasure those moments forever.”

“Maybe we will meet again” she added, hopefully.

“Yes, maybe we will.”

“We must hurry now” Father Bernard interrupted. “The gateway will only remain open for a short time.” He indicated the door with a flick of his head. “The gateway is through that door” he said. “You will see a crystal enveloped in light set upon a table; under no circumstances touch it. You still have the ring you were wearing when you arrived?

Henry held out his hand to show the ring on his finger.

“Good. When you enter the room you will see a cot. Just lie down on it and close your eyes. You should wake up in your own century where your former colleagues will welcome you back.” He gave Henry a final embrace. “God be with you my son and my prayers go with you.” He then stepped back to join Brother Hubert.

Henry grasped Anna for the last time and felt the love emanating from her deep brown eyes. “Goodbye my love. We will meet again.”

Anna grabbed him, sobbing on his shoulder. “Goodbye my Henry. Safe journey.”

They took their last passionate kiss and then released hands. Henry approached the door whilst Anna joined Brother Hubert and Father Bernard to stand between them. Each of them took one of her hands. Henry turned the door handle and started to open the door to reveal a blinding white light streaking through the opening.

As he was about to enter, he took one last look at Anna who released her hand holding Brother Hubert’s and stretched it out before her. “I love you Henry” she called out.

‘
“I love you too Anna.”

He stood there for a moment to take his last look at the most beautiful and wonderful woman he had ever met, thinking to himself *‘I will remember you forever’*.

“Go now Henry” Anna called out. “God will look after us.” Then she did a strange thing and placed her hand subconsciously onto her stomach.

Then it struck him. *‘What were her last words?’* He thought to himself. *‘God will look after us.’* He now knew what that meant. *‘She is pregnant!’*

Now another parameter had entered the equation and added to his already burdensome dilemma. Could he now abandon an adorable wife and their child, whom he might never see. Anna would have the memory of him but he would never enjoy a life with Anna and their baby. She and their child would also be at the mercy of any wealthy landowner or lord anxious to increase his landholdings. Her father might even encourage it in order to protect his daughter’s inheritance, especially if their child turned out to be a daughter.

Henry had the impression that the light from the crystal was flickering. *‘Maybe it is better for me to go for everyone’s sake’*. He turned to push the door to the cell open and then looked back for one last look at his beautiful Anna who will be delivering their baby in less than nine months. The stark choice now loomed large in his mind: remain to support and protect his wife Anna and their child and take his chances in this dangerous world or return to a life of comfort, technology, countless opportunities and challenges, free of threats and with the hope of being able to return with a vastly increased knowledge of the period. He made his decision.

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