

At the King's Pleasure

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The Lionheart Chronicles

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Chapter 1

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The sudden clatter of hooves on the drawbridge startled Diana and had the gate guards running as a messenger swept into the bailey. The man was filthy, his horse exhausted.

A lad took his bridle as he eased himself from the saddle. He dismounted and knelt briefly before her. 'Ma'am, I have a message from your brother.' He groped in the satchel at his waist. 'I have news too if you would hear it.'

Diana nodded, amazed and pleased that her brother Thorold, never a scholar, had written.

The messenger handed her a leather packet. 'I come straight from the battle at Tickhill, ma'am. The siege is successful at last; the castle has yielded. King Richard has moved on now to lay siege to Nottingham Castle.'

'The king landed a bare fortnight since at Sandwich, in Kent.' Diana broke the sealing wax and pulled out a missive. 'How can he be at Nottingham already?'

'Indeed he is, my lady.'

Diana took leave to doubt this last information. She straightened the folded vellum. Her brother's scrawl covered the sheet. 'Thorold, Lord Welland,' she murmured, thinking how strange and new that sounded. As she deciphered it, her pleasure evaporated and her brows snapped together. A shiver of premonition shook her.

'He has done homage to the king for' She stared at the page in shock and looked up at the messenger. 'You must have been present when my brother swore fealty to the king. Was he really granted Lord Montclaire's lands?'

'Indeed he was, my lady. He had the proper documents, ma'am. The shire reeve was most particular about them. There was no doubt they were original.'

She was stunned. What damage had her impetuous brother done now? How could Thorold have come by Montclaire's documents? Whatever his other faults, it was not like him to steal, and he was not conniving. Someone else had to be behind this folly.

The messenger was looking at her with a slight frown and his head tilted as if he were thinking. 'There may have been something odd about them, ma'am, because the king smiled and then he seemed to find them – well, he laughed aloud. He seemed delighted and then he muttered under his breath, but he wasn't speaking to Thorold.'

'Indeed?' she said. As the king had never met Thorold, whatever amused him must be to do with Montclaire. This was court politics and mischief. It sounded as if the king wanted a hold over Montclaire and would use his lands as a lever. Having stepped around the private arrangement between Lord Montclaire and their father, Thorold would find himself the grain between two millstones.

She noticed the messenger was leaning on his horse in tiredness. 'Thank you.' She waved toward the hall in invitation. 'The cook will find you a morsel to eat, and the lad here will see to your horse.'

Her seneschal approached. 'Is there news of the battle, my lady?'

'Aye, the siege was successful. The messenger's in the hall. He'll probably tell you more of the gory details.'

'Indeed, my lady, I need to know how many of our retainers were killed with your father last month. The garrison here is far smaller than I like. We urgently need the men to return. I doubt I have more than half-a-dozen trained men taking twelve-hour shifts to man the walls at night.'

'The Bishop of Durham commanded the king's forces. Doubtless, he'll send word of our losses in due course. The men with my brother are evidently at Nottingham and are probably fighting at this very moment.' Diana thought of the other news and hit her palm against her head in irritation. She wished she could thump some sense into Thorold.

'My lady?'

'Thorold has claimed the lands our father held in trust for old Lord Montclaire. – God rest both their souls.'

'That was ill-advised; Thorold is ever impetuous. What will he do when Montclaire's son comes to claim his inheritance?'

'Brazen it out and offer battle. He's sufficiently reckless.'

The seneschal gave a short mirthless laugh. 'He'd better watch out for himself. Young Montclaire has a reputation in a fight.'

'Well, we shall see Thorold soon, probably next month, and you can warn him.' Diana referred to the letter. 'The missive says the king will return south, and my brother with him.'

'Will the king come here?'

Diana closed her eyes. *Pray God, no!* The hunger of late winter had already brought the manor to its knees. Provisioning the court would be impossible. Mindful of her audience, she said, 'Not unless the hunt brings him this way.'

A week later Diana stood with the miller, watching the huge wooden-cogged wheels turning and listening with half an ear to an argument. There was always some argument over the work at the mill. It belonged to the manor and the whole district brought grain to be ground. She reflected that kings made war, and people died, but village life went on. It was now up to her to ensure it did.

She took a deep breath.

A burly peasant addressed himself to Diana. 'Down Soakley, we 'ad five extra bags of barley ready to sow, ma'am, but with the bitter weather, the village decided we needs the flour. I brought them down yesterday to be ground. Nah look!' He pointed to four bags on the floor. 'Him,' gesturing with his thumb at the miller, 'He's got a reputation for taking a tithe for himself, ma'am.'

Diana had no chance to reply.

'Listen 'ere, nodcock. When barley's ground, there's always fewer bags of flour than the bags of original grain.'

'Yes? Not that much less!'

'All right, where is it? You can't see none, 'cause there ain't none. That's all you brought me!'

A crack of a whip and a yelp from outside silenced them all. The track traversed the other side of the millpond and they could now hear the jingle of saddlery. Travellers hereabouts were so unusual that they all peered through the wooden bars of the window at the file of horsemen trotting by. They were soldiers, but not the men of the garrison returning. There was none of the usual friendly banter. In their midst, a travois, with crossed poles had one large, trussed bundle and many packs loaded on it.

It was the leader of the group who caught Diana's attention. The miller was watching him too and drew Diana back into the shadows.

'That's not a face I'd trust, ma'am.'

'No, indeed,' she agreed. 'The whole cavalcade gives me the chills. I wonder at their destination.' She peered at the backs of the soldiers. 'They've a grim air that bodes ill.' A sudden thought struck her. 'That man's not Lord Montclair is he?'

The miller shrugged, 'Can't rightly say, ma'am. Never seen 'im.' He wagged a thumb at the retreating horseman. 'Methinks he'd be a younger man than yon.'

'Oi thinks they're mercenaries, m'lady,' broke in the peasant. 'Them pennants on the sledge was from Flanders.'

'I heard the king brought mercenaries from Flanders when he returned to England,' replied Diana.

'Arrrh.' He made a ghastly noise in his throat. 'There were just such men on the crusade, my lady. Sensible folk lets them be and bars the doors o' nights.'

The miller gave him a sour look. 'Loike you'd know.'

Diana could see they were about to argue about this too. 'Returning to the flour,' she intervened, 'if there's little loss in total weight, we can assume that the quantity is correct. Next time you bring grain, both must take careful note of the weight as it arrives. And you, Master Miller, make record on the tally-stick; then there's no call for complaints.'

Diana rode the long way back to the manor, checking the condition of the ground. She had lived on this land all her life and was familiar with the turn of the seasons. The weather had been wet and it was a cool spring. Perhaps that was as well, given the lack of manpower available. Ploughing was late already.

She remembered the men as they'd marched out to war, carrying their billhooks and scythes. Fighting was far more fun in prospect than clearing stones and pulling weeds. Tcha! The manor looked like a wasteland. Land that should have been full of people preparing the ground for planting was deserted.

After all the fighting, there would be widows left struggling to feed and manage their children alone. She must make a point to speak to the hedge warden about them; perhaps he could set men to plant an extra acre. Unless the men returned soon, it would be another hard year.

She worried about Lord Montclair. It was a certainty he would descend on them upon discovering the loss of his lands. The only questions were how soon and whether the garrison would return before he arrived.

Diana's palfrey danced suddenly sideways and his ears pricked as a sudden puff of wind had the leaves skittering. The weather was changing. She rode to a small hill to where she could see the manor, partly defended by the reed-beds of the swamp and two branches of the stream. She looked down into the bailey to find it full of the strangers she had watched ride past. The travois had been unstrapped and stood empty in the middle of the yard.

She heard hoof-beats and looked around to see her garrison captain approaching. To her surprise, he did not greet her, but rode right up, dismounted and took her reins.

'I'm sorry to be the bearer of bad news, ma'am. The soldiers you see down there have brought home the body of Lord Welland, your brother.'

Diana blanched and her hand twitched; her mount started to back nervously. 'Thorold? Nay!'

The captain tightened his grip. 'You'd better dismount, my lady.' Diana stared at him. 'I'm sorry, my lady, but there is more.' He waited until she was on the ground before continuing, 'The soldiers that came outnumber us. They are polite enough now, but I don't like the look of them. We may have to deal with them later, especially if they get into the ale. I'd rather you did not return immediately to the manor.'

Diana swallowed. 'Thorold – where is he now?'

'His body is in the chapel, my lady. He died at the siege of Nottingham.'

'How did he die?' Diana was conscious of a flare of anger.

'I know not, my lady, but it was a quick death. The men that brought him were with him when it happened.'

Diana could not bring herself to believe Thorold dead. She shook her head.

'My lady, you must take thought now for yourself. You'll be in danger if you enter the manor. You are now the sole heiress. You must go to a place of safety.'

'I'll not run away! My father and brother went to fight for the king. They didn't run from their duty, and neither shall I. I'll not depart and leave my brother with strangers.'

'My lady ...'

'Nay! My father's body was never returned and he was buried in haste at the battleground with no farewell. I still feel our relationship is unfinished. I must see Thorold one final time and pray for his soul.'

'Yes, my lady, and you should, but not this day.'

'Who's in charge of these men? Has he no discipline?'

'A man called Sir Stigand; he's the sort of soldier that thinks naught of killings.' He stopped and continued more slowly. 'I can't tell you what it is, ma'am, it's a feeling I have in the pit of my stomach. He'll let them run riot if it suits his purpose. I fear that purpose may be to take the manor.'

'He can't.'

'He can, my lady. I haven't the men.'

'The sheriff would not let him keep it.'

'Possibly not, my lady, but only because others will want it. It will be too late for you and me by that time, anyway. I'll be dead, and you'll be ... No doubt they'll shed a tear over your fate, but there's little they'll do in the short term.'

'I shall not be frightened away from my own home by such a man. I shall attend my brother.'

'As you will, my lady. I shall defend you to the ...'

'I hope that won't be necessary. I shall visit my brother in the chapel and leave again before the meal this evening; the men will not be drunk so early in the day.'

The captain's face set in grim lines.

Diana took a deep breath before mounting once more and turning for home.

Diana dismounted at the gate. She didn't think she'd make much progress in the bailey, thronged as it was with men and horses.

'I'll take a fresh mount when I leave, Captain, Alouette's spent.'

'I'll deal with the horses, my lady, and be back shortly. Pray stay in the chapel, ma'am.' The captain took the reins and she passed under the entrance arch, slipping unobtrusively along the wall inside

Diana entered the chapel and rendered a silent prayer for the souls of her mother and father. She then noticed the trussed parcel from the travois had been dumped on the floor near the altar.

She looked around the deserted chapel for her brother's body. Where were the servants, the chaplain? They must have taken the body to the great hall. Why had they left their baggage here in the chapel? She approached the parcel of rags.

A blackened hand protruded from one side. Revolting. What had they done? What was wrapped in these rags? She did not dare touch the bundle, but her eyes swept over it and took in the tuft of blonde hair at one end, the boots at the other. She staggered back and grasped at the nearest pillar feeling faint. Nausea swept over her.

She stumbled to the door and took gulps of cool air. Her skin was cold and clammy. She needed water. One of the grooms saw her and came across.

'Can I help you, my lady?'

'Water,' she gasped, before turning to the darkened interior of the little chapel. She took a few steps then knelt near the door and closed her eyes. There was nothing she wanted to see.

A few minutes later, she heard the lad enter. It was an effort to stand, but she desperately needed the water he offered. She quickly finished it and took a deep breath. The boy was regarding her with concern. She held out the mazer and he refilled it.

'You look pale, ma'am. Are you feeling better, my lady?'

'Aye,' was all she could manage, but thought gradually returned. As she drank, the groom looked curiously around the chapel; servants did not usually enter such hallowed portals. She saw him recoil as he stared towards the altar then, without warning, he ran.

Diana seated herself upon the altar step. She could not bring herself to approach her brother again. She wondered where the servants were, why there was neither trestle, nor any show of respect for the body.

She stood and paced back and forth, gaining strength. Thorold was their lord; he had died fighting for the king. Anger began to burn inside her. It warmed her and gave her strength. She marched out and across the bailey. Suddenly someone stood before her, blocking her way. She stared at the badge emblazoned across the front of a dirty surplice. A large someone. She stepped sideways, but was detained by the man who took her hand and placed it on his arm.

'A wench with a pretty face! I had despaired of finding such in this backwater.' She glanced up at him and her eyes narrowed. He gave a smile that did not reach his eyes. She nodded perfunctorily at him and tugged angrily at her hand. However, as she moved to pass him, he fell in step beside her and his arm slid about her shoulders. She noticed his other hand stray to his crotch. The soldiers around watched covertly, grins were exchanged, bets laid.

'Sir Gerard Stigand at your service.' He recaptured her hand and kissed her palm. 'At your feet, my pretty.'

Diana stopped, glared at him and said, 'Unhand me, Sir! I grieve for my brother. Leave me.'

His grin broadened and his eyes lit up. 'Your brother? Thorold? He told me of your beauty. I see he did not lie.'

She started walking again, but Sir Stigand was not to be shaken off. He took her wrist, replaced her hand on his arm and this time held it there firmly with his hand. 'What could these long fingers not do for a man? Come, I'll show you something.'

They were now passing the stables. An arm locked about her waist to ensure her acquiescence, and he steered her forcibly through the door. He stopped inside and pulled her to him. 'Come wench, don't act coy with me.' He put his hand to her throat, 'Your long white neck and soft skin – ripe for the plucking.'

'Like a Christmas goose!' she said, 'Unhand me or you'll regret it!'

'Oho! A threat!' He yanked her dress off one shoulder. 'I like a fight. Pray, tell me what you will do to me, in explicit detail I beg you.' He smiled with arrogant assurance and paused to pull the door shut.

Diana used the moment to draw his dagger from the jewelled sheath at his side and plunge it swiftly into him. She was aiming for his heart, but his forearm moved across his body. He gave a cry and clutched his arm, a red stain appearing between his fingers. Diana, finding herself free, stepped quickly through the door.

Her seducer erupted from the stable and nearly fell over her, pushing her aside in his haste. 'Brazen bitch! You'll pay for ...' Diana saw him blanch as he raised his eyes and found himself face to face with her captain, two men at arms and three swords.

Silence fell in the yard. The men in the bailey looked as busy as before, but there was an unnatural quiet as each now contrived to work silently, watching and straining to hear what would ensue.

Some of Sir Stigand's men, led by a big man, his face disfigured by blackened scars, started moving towards her. The scarred man drew his dagger, the other hand sliding behind his back, detaching his axe.

The captain took a step closer, his sword pricked Sir Stigand's neck.

'Hirdman, stay!' said Sir Stigand His voice rose to a squeal as he stared at his henchman.

'It's never wise to assume that someone unarmed is defenceless,' said the captain, observing the blood now dripping freely from Sir Stigand's elbow.

More of Sir Stigand's men began to gravitate towards the scene. The ugly tension spread. The chaplain walked up, his eyes flicking back and forth, assessing the situation.

'I have come to conduct you to the chapel, my lady.' To Diana's immense relief, Sir Stigand stepped back, scowling, turned on his heel and removed himself from the scene, clutching his arm. His men retreated, and the chaplain conducted Diana to the chapel with her armed guard. It was only later she discovered that the jewelled pendant she wore on a thin chain about her neck was gone.

The chaplain finished the requiem mass as night fell. Diana and a few retainers knelt round the coffin, heads bowed. The sounds of celebration outside had given way to discord, and the chapel doors, locked since they had entered, were now barred.

Diana stood and looked at the baulk of timber. 'The bar appears sufficiently heavy, but look at the hooks it's resting on; they are all but rusted through!'

'I don't suppose anyone has ever thought to bar the chapel before, it being a place of worship, ma'am,' said the chaplain.

There was a sharp rap, followed by three quick taps.

'One of my scouts,' explained the captain.

'How can you afford men to scout when we have scarce sufficient to man the walls?' snapped Diana. 'Oh. I'm sorry.' This last as a ragged boy entered and helped to raise the bar once more.

She pressed her fingers against her forehead and took some deep breaths. Her chest felt constricted.

'A force of some two dozen men approaches, sire. They carry the sign of the wolf.'

Diana watched the captain's face as he received this news. His lips tightened.

'That's all we need. Lord Montclaire!'

Chapter 2

Lord Adhemar Montclaire reached the fortified manor house of Welland after nightfall. He stopped his men a bowshot from the walls and rode forward with his captain. The moon, approaching the full, gave good light. He was surprised that there was no challenge. He was wary as he urged his mount forward. At the drawbridge, he reined in his horse and found the gates locked against him. Shouts elicited no response.

'It's strange there's no one on watch.'

'It sounds like they're carousing, my lord.' The noise of revelry had overtones of violence.

'I'd say they're fighting-drunk. I have no desire for a drunken brawl after riding all day. Leave it an hour or two and the sots will be asleep. We'll withdraw from sight for a meal and a rest.' They rode back under cover of the forest edge and tethered the horses.

'Lord Welland must be away from home. I can't imagine he'd allow his men to behave like that, were he present,' remarked his captain.

'Aye, Waldo, as I remember him, he was strong on discipline. I imagine he's away fighting for the king. He'd be grieved at the death of my father; they fought many a battle together. This is my first opportunity to visit since his death. I know little of Lord Welland's family.

An enormous hound wandered up and flopped beside him and he shifted round to lean his head comfortably against the animal's warm flank. 'I was but ten when I went as page to Lord Baldwin.'

'How is it that Lord Welland holds your English lands, sire?'

'I was in Normandy for Lord Baldwin when my father decided to leave on crusade so he left the running of his estates with Lord Welland. When Father was murdered, his horses, chests and packs were stolen, so the documents have disappeared. However, I cannot see that Lord Welland will create any impediment to my claim.'

He gazed at the black branches above their heads, his hand idly fondling the dog's head. 'Sooth! 'Tis an age since we set out at dawn. Set a watch, Waldo, and the rest can snatch an hour's sleep. Oh! And while I remember, tell

the dog handler to keep the hounds here when we go down. If they maul half the garrison, we might be less than welcome.'

It was nearly midnight when the party once more approached the heavy wooden gates. There was still no response from the gatekeeper. Waldo shook the wicket gate hopefully and poked his dagger into the lock, but it was firmly bolted.

'Throw a grappling hook on a knotted rope over the wall.' Montclair pointed. 'There in that dark corner beyond the gatehouse.'

The hook caught and an agile man swarmed up the knobby rope. Moments later, the gate swung open, and he re-appeared, grinning. 'The guard on the gate's otherwise engaged, sire, and there's been a fight all right.'

A regular, coarse grunting could be heard from the guardhouse, accompanied by sounds of distress in a higher octave.

'Fetch him out here. Take the light.' Montclair indicated the pine-torch burning in the sconce.

Three men entered and moments later emerged with a soldier, half-clad and bellowing for help. Montclair quietened him with a rabbit punch.

'What's been going on?'

The man was doubled over, panting, trying to regain his breath. 'Just – having a bit of fun, sire.'

A wench, clad only in a torn shift, had followed the men out. She made to run off, but Montclair was too quick for her. Holding her arm, he swung her to the light. Her face was bleeding. 'Fun?'

She replied with a stream of invective, which died away when she caught sight of his face. 'My lord.'

'What's happened here?' He had not released his hold on her. She spat towards the soldier.

'Men came this afternoon. They were welcomed, but later attacked us. They hold the manor now, sire. They broke into the wine cellar and now they're drunk. Most of the garrison are dead, and he raped me.' She snatched the flaming pine-torch from the unwary man at arms with her free hand and hit the rapist with surprising accuracy between the legs.

The horrified men holding him released him as he bellowed, doubled up and clutched himself. Finding himself free, he snatched up the fallen torch and leaped at the wench, knocking her flat on her back. His hand swept back to hit her with the burning brand, but Montclair, knife in hand, pulled his head back by the hair and with one swift slice silenced him permanently.

The woman scrambled to her feet and ran off into the dark.

'Find his keys, Waldo,' said Montclaire. He wiped the dagger on the dead man's shirt and sheathed it. At a gesture, his men spread out quietly across the courtyard.

Montclaire passed the stables and looked in. It was full of snoring men. The horses shifted uneasily as the door swung open, but the men did not stir. The strong, sour smell of old sweat and alcohol wafted to him. They'd be no trouble until morning. He lifted the heavy wooden bar that lay outside the double doors, slotted it into place and wedged the doors tight shut. As he softly tapped the last wedge down, he noticed a disc at his feet, shining in the moonlight. He reached down to inspect it. A dagger thumped into the door where his head had been a moment before and stuck there, quivering.

He leapt backwards as a man tried to kick his face. He could see two more armed men coming in support of his attacker. Giving a sharp whistle to alert his men, Montclaire stepped from the moonlight into the black shadow between the stable and a shed, crouching low as he did so. Someone followed him and fell over his rounded back.

Montclaire twisted aside and flattened himself against the wall as another assailant rushed past him. A yell and gurgle were followed by grunts and scuffling noises.

Leaving them fighting each other, Montclaire stepped back out into the moonlight to engage the man who'd thrown the dagger. Beyond bellowing encouragement to the others, the latter was apparently happy to leave the fight to his henchmen. His right arm was wrapped in rags.

At Montclaire's re-appearance into the moonlight, he took a series of staggering steps backwards, muttering, 'Jesu, Jesu!'

At that moment, another man launched himself at Montclaire, who stepped nimbly aside and struck the sword from his attacker's hand as he staggered past. Montclaire's boot assisted him into the wooden wall of the stable. The man fell on his face and lay groaning.

Meanwhile, the other turned and ran as if the Devil were after him, straight through the open gate. The soldier stationed there tackled him, but failed to apprehend him and the fleeing man disappeared into the night.

Captain Waldo appeared at his commander's elbow.

'You whistled for me, my lord?'

'Aye – it matters not now. Did you see that? He looked like he'd seen an evil spirit.'

'Ran like a stoat, sire. Perhaps he recognised you – most likely thought you the ghost of your father!'

Montclaire caught the grin. 'There's another pair in there somewhere, but first fetch a pine-torch and two burly men to lug them out. They may not be

quite dead. How are we progressing here?' Montclaire's gesture took in the manor.

'We have the hall, keep and bailey, sire, though we have not yet taken the chapel as there is no entry, apart from the main door. Some few are barricaded in there. There's bodies – soldiers – near the door to the wine cellar and the remains of a meal on the table in the great hall.'

'Any sign of the family?'

'Nay, my lord, but one of the wounded on the steps confirms what the wench told us. The men in control are not of the garrison. A certain Sir Stigand is their leader.'

'I wonder why they were welcomed. Do we know who they are?'

'They're mercenaries from King Richard's army, doing some raiding on their own account. Their leader instigated the attack during the evening meal.' Waldo paused, and Montclaire looked sharply at him.

'What?'

'It's the manor's dogs, sire. They've all been poisoned.'

The chapel had a short flight of steps up to a heavy wooden door. Montclaire hammered on the latter with his sword-hilt. Nothing could be heard from those within.

Attempts at communication received no reply so he took an axe from one of his men, saying, 'I'll not wait until morning.'

He gave the cast iron lock one sharp blow; it shattered. At a gesture, he and another threw their weight against the door and it opened. A piece of heavy timber clattered down inside the chapel. Montclaire had a quick glimpse of the dark chamber beyond as he staggered forwards over the threshold, ducking as he did so.

Pine torches lit the entrance, obviously set to illuminate the attackers. Arrows flew out to greet them. One bounced harmlessly off his helmet, he felt a shaft pluck at his sleeve and two stuck in the woodwork. He caught a glimpse of someone small standing beside the door.

Montclaire gambled on having a few second's grace while the defenders knocked another arrow. He grabbed the lad and hauled him outside with him, slamming the door against the second volley, which thudded into its woodwork.

A diminutive person struggled, screaming with terror in his grasp. He waited until the boy subsided into sobs and then squatted down so he was on the same level as his prisoner.

'M'lord,' gasped the lad as he met his eyes.

'Who's within?' enquired Montclaire.

'Lady Welland, m'lord.'

Montclairé blew out a long breath. 'Who else is in there?'

The boy wiped his nose on his sleeve and swallowed. 'There's the chaplain, and three soldiers. We was scared you was Sir Stigand back again, my lord.'

'I'm Lord Adhemar Montclairé. Who's in charge in there? Where's Lord Welland?'

'Captain Gurney's in charge, my lord, but Lady Diana is there too,' said the lad.

'Lady Diana? I thought you said Lady Welland.'

'Yes, sire. Lady Diana Welland. Old Lady Welland died last month when she heard of the death of my lord.'

'Lord Welland is dead?'

'Aye, sire.'

There was a long pause as Montclairé digested this information.

'I am sorry to hear it – then where's Sir Thorold? Or – I should say, 'Lord Thorold', should I not?'

'Lord Thorold was killed at Nottingham, sire. 'Tis he who lies in the coffin before the altar.' His body was brought here by Sir Stigand and his men.

Montclairé released the lad as he stood and exchanged a glance with Waldo. 'Lord Welland and his son are both dead?' He put up a hand, stopping his men who were preparing for another assault. 'And The Lady Diana Welland has had to defend herself against the men who brought her brother's body. By the saints, what is the world coming to?'

'Aye, sire.' Waldo looked grim.

'Is there another brother?' asked Montclairé.

'No, her younger brother died of a morbid sore throat a few winters since – him and the baby o' course.'

'Where is Lady Diana's husband, then?'

'Nay, sire. She's not wed; the babe belonged to old Lady Welland.'

'Then I must speak with Lady Diana. Will she come out?'

The boy shrugged, but nay was written in fear on his face.

Montclairé put the lad to one side and bellowed, 'Sir Stigand has fled. Open for Lord Adhemar Montclairé.' He gestured to prevent his men making any noise and listened carefully.

A woman's voice floated out to them. 'Send back the lad.'

Montclairé squatted again to speak to his prisoner. 'Tell her we mean her no harm and to let us in. Tell her that Lord Montclairé is here and would speak with her.' He pulled away the splinters, kicked aside the metal shards of the smashed lock and opened the door slowly. He released his prisoner; the small shadow detached itself with a whimper of relief and hurtled into the chapel.

Montclairre stared down the dim nave, catching a glimpse of an ethereal scene. A white-shrouded coffin, a warrior's shield and arms upon it, lay before the altar. Beside it stood a slender maiden, her wide eyes staring at him in fright. Yet she held a bow and, as he continued to regard her, she loosed an arrow at him and raised her arm to pull another from the quiver over her shoulder. The fluid movement revealed the curve of her breast and dislodged the scrap of flimsy material that covered her hair. He could not tear his eyes from the tableau. He was pulled aside by Waldo.

'Whisht, sire, do you want to be killed?'

A few moments later, a woman's voice called, 'I shall keep a good distance between you and me, my lord. If you have anything to say, say it now.'

'Come out and have civilised conversation.'

'I'm staying where I'm safe.'

'I intend you no harm – at the moment,' he added under his breath, 'though given another half hour of this, I'd not vouch for it.'

'Leave me to grieve in peace. I cannot change what my brother did. What's done is done. Leave me alone!'

Montclairre looked at his captain, 'What did Thorold do?'

'Sounds like mischief to me, sire.'

He turned to the door again. 'Come out and speak with me. I've ridden two days to come here. I'll not leave like a dog with my tail between my legs.'

'I have lost my entire family in the last month and first Sir Stigand, now you, come sniffing round for what you can find. Take your tail and go.' Despite this forthright speech, there was a break in her voice that spoke of her loss.

Waldo plucked the arrow from Montclairre's jerkin. 'Don't try to deal with hysterical women – especially those with a weapon,' he advised. He pointed at the coloured threads adorning the shaft.

'That's all I needed to cap a perfect day, a perverse woman. Still, if she wishes to stand vigil beside her brother...' Montclairre raised his voice. 'Then I'll wish you an uncomfortable night.' Silence greeted this remark.

He took down a pine torch, saying softly, 'Here's one dog with a better bed.' He stepped across the bailey into the smoky fug of the great hall to be greeted by his sergeant.

'Some of the mess in this building has been sorted out, sire. Our men have sleeping pallets, as you see, and there's a watch on the walls.'

'Thank you. Lady Diana will spend the night in the chapel. Keep careful watch on it and let none leave. I'm for the most comfortable bed I can find – and I believe I know where to find it.'

Montclair marched up the stairs to the upper bedchamber and stood in the open doorway. His eyes flickered round the room and took in the opulence of the furnishings and tapestries. A cauldron boiled on a fire, an old crone tended it and a bathtub stood before it.

'Perfect.'

The woman looked at him in horror and backed away.

'Continue! A bath is most welcome.'

'But ...'

'But nothing! I said to continue.'

'The bath is for my mistress. She always bathes of an evening ...'

'I am not so fortunate, but I am willing to make a start. Continue with the bathwater. She's in the chapel and won't need it.'

The woman looked suspiciously at him, curtseyed and obeyed with ill grace. Montclair wandered round the chamber, undoing his buckles as he progressed. He observed the tapestries, coffers of clothing and the book on the travelling chest by the bed.

'How is it this chamber is not pillaged?' he enquired.

'They came up, found the brandy and left with it.'

'This is the Lady Diana's chamber is it not? Does she drink so much brandy?'

'My mistress until last month was the Lady Anne Welland and she drank brandy for the pains in her joints. Since she is scarce cold in her grave, you'll speak respectful-like of the dead, young man!'

'I see why they left. Peace, woman! It's been a long day.' He wandered over to the bed, picked up the white, woollen nightgown and held it up. 'So small a garment!' He buried his face in the soft warmth and breathed in. 'Hmmm. She smells nice.' He turned back the sheets.

'You're never going to sleep in my lady's bed!'

'I am. You may tell her she's free to join me, should she wish to leave the comfort of the chapel. Meanwhile you'll help me remove my chain mail – if you please.' His voice indicated that, whether she pleased or not, that was what she'd do.

She obliged, tutting over the many bruises and grazes on his body. Finally, he sank into the bath with a groan.

'Leave me; I'll bathe myself.'

The following morning the door flew open with a bang. Montclair opened his eyes to see the Bishop of Llandaff standing there, gazing disgustingly at the feet sticking out from the bedcovers.

'Seize him. The traitor deserves to hang.'

Montclair leapt to his feet, sweeping a naked blade from beneath the pillow in a flurry of feathers. The men eyed him and the sword warily. They hung back and the bishop stared at the empty bed.

'Montclair! What have you done with Lady Welland?'

A frown creased Montclair's brow as he tried to remember where he was, and what had transpired the previous day. It had been long and the bed ultimately comfortable. It was hard to surface to this reality.

'The maiden in the chapel?'

'In the chapel? What does she there? Did she flee your bed?'

'Nay, my Lord Bishop, I have not had the pleasure of her ... company.'

'Why is she in the chapel?'

'Her dead brother lies there. I imagine she is paying her respects. I've not met her. She was not receiving visitors when I arrived.' He permitted himself a grim smile, remembering the flurry of arrows. 'In fact, the manor was being sacked by varlets.' A frown creased his brow as he tried to remember.

'Thinking on it, there are a few locked in the stables. I dealt with the rest and, having ridden from Marlborough, was in no mood thereafter to argue with capricious maids.'

'Whose men were they?'

'I know not – oh, yes I do. Sir Stigand was mentioned, whoever that is. He escaped without introduction.'

'Your arrival seems to have been singularly devoid of the niceties, Montclair.'

The bishop suddenly seemed to become aware of the swords, bristling either side of him. 'Oh. Put up, put up!' he said testily. 'And go to discover what there is for me to eat.' He sat on the window seat as the men left them. 'I've ridden half the night. The king keeps late hours.'

'The king?' Montclair threw the sword on the bed and rummaged through his clothes. He found his hose and began to dress.

'Aye, I am the king's envoy, sent to collect his new ward, the Lady Diana Welland. Lord Thorold did homage for his father's estates and a great deal more besides. Did you know he held your father's honours too, Montclair?'

The latter stared at him. 'There was a temporary arrangement while my father and I were on Crusade.'

'Thorold presented all the documents and did homage for the Montclair honours. His sister inherits much land ...'

'What? Then it's mostly mine,' retorted Montclair, incensed. 'Where did Thorold obtain the documents?'

'... inherits much land now that her father and brother have passed on,' the bishop continued, crossing himself. 'With the family dead, there is little you

can do here, Montclaire. Make yourself scarce, lest gossip say you ... er, trespassed upon the lady's virtue, and thus make a traitor of you.'

'A traitor! I have come directly from fighting in the king's name for the keep of Marlborough. You tell me Thorold Welland, rot him, did homage for my lands – and I'm the traitor, am I?'

A man entered, bearing food and wine for the bishop. He looked askance at Montclaire and gestured to the two men on the door, who re-entered the chamber, their hands upon their sword hilts.

The bishop took the goblet, saying, 'The king now holds your lands; the Lady Diana is a ward of court. You'll have to speak with him. However, given his present mood, personally I would leave it a week. He's even begun to argue with his cousin, the King of Scotland – who wants the county of Northumberland – and he's in no sweet temper.'

The bishop reached for the platter presented to him, took a bread roll and slathered it in butter. 'The joy of battle is over, and the king's had time to remember his grievances. He blames any man of substance for the length of time it took to gather his ransom.' He took a bite of his bread roll and a sip of wine. 'Tis a bitter draught the king has been forced to swallow. He left England three years ago with a peaceful empire firmly in his grasp. Since when, Prince John took England, Leopold of Austria imprisoned him and Philippe of France dismembered his empire with John's help.' He waved what was left of the bread at Montclaire.

'Morally well for you that you did not bed the maid.' He bit, chewed thoughtfully and continued. 'However, you may live to regret your abstinence if you want your lands back. Without her to wife, I'd say they are gone.'

'I appreciate your confidence in my capabilities, but after the siege of Marlborough, two day's hard riding and the fight for this manor, I was happy for the bed without the maid.' He picked up his sword from the bed and regarded it. 'I suppose it's too late to cut her throat now?'

'The king's her guardian; the estates would revert to the crown.'

'It would relieve my feelings.'

The bishop regarded him in silence, and Montclaire felt a rising compulsion to shake the complacent bastard's tree. 'Alternatively, I could cut your throat and take her anyway,' he mused.

'Better still, persuade me to abet you and perform the wedding ceremony.' The bishop gave a tight smile. 'It's good that I know you well, Montclaire, or I might take all this seriously.'

Montclaire took a deep breath. 'The king has stripped me of my father's honours. I stand attainted like a traitor and that wench will continue to hold my lands at the king's pleasure.' He collected the scabbard from the floor and rammed his sword into it. He did not share the fact that the king wanted his

guts for garters and for a much more personal reason than taking a woman to wife without permission. He acknowledged privately that his tally of affronts to the king's dignity certainly needed no additions.

'The king's gathering funds for the fight to reclaim the empire he lost while imprisoned,' said the bishop, filling the silence. 'You're not the first to lose his lands. He's stripping men of their offices once more and selling them to the highest bidder. England's war was merely the start. He's Duke of Normandy and Aquitaine in name only.'

By this time, Montclair had his hauberk on and was strapping on his sword-belt. 'Well then, I'm for the road. The best of luck persuading the virtuous lady to leave her chapel.'

'Do you not wish to meet her?'

'Nay, I'd probably strangle her,' retorted Montclair, still coming to terms with the legalised theft of his lands.

His curiosity later cursed his pride.