

ROBIN OF
SHERWOOD
F O R E V E R
KNIGHT

Choices

by Laura Chevening

P art One: Spring 1208

As the small party of warmly dressed and well armed noblemen rounded the bend in the muddy, rut corroded road, the horses' hooves sent up a spray of viscous liquid which coated finery and faces alike. Wiping the mud from his bearded cheek, the leader of the party, a tall fair-haired knight wearing a hooded woolen cloak, but no mail, turned to the youngster who rode at his right side. "It's a late spring, Nicholas. How are you bearing up, lad?"

The boy peered upwards from beneath a fringe of damp, thick hair, as golden in hue as that of the knight. "I am fine, uncle," he said bravely, denying the blue tinge to his lips and the chills which coursed up and down his arms and legs.

"Liar!" The older man shot back affectionately. "I'm fast frozen myself. Good it is that Huntingdon is not far. I'm wet and weary and eager for a taste of the earl's mulled wine."

Nicholas grinned at his uncle. "It is colder than at home," he admitted. "Does it always rain this much in England?"

"Rain?" Andrew of Kilmartin raised his thick eyebrows in mock astonishment. "Do you call this rain, boy? In Scotland we call days such as this 'fine days'."

"Then it is no wonder that my mother left Scotland for France," responded the child. "She was smart enough to look for the sun."

"The sun was it?" Andrew smiled. "And I always thought it was your father's poetry!"

Nicholas shrugged his young shoulders, causing his hood to slip backwards and revealing his face. Although still rounded by childhood, the face was regular with a finely shaped mouth and a straight nose above and to either side of which two eyes of changeable hue, sometimes green, sometimes gray, twinkled with mirth. "That too," he allowed. Only seven years old, the boy was not impressed by his father, Garin d'Aucassin's, reputation as a poet and troubadour. Although he had been told many times the story of how his mother, Nichola of Kilmartin, serving as a lady-in-waiting to the old queen, Eleanor, had been first entranced by and then enamored of the young poet from Languedoc, he found it much less interesting than the kennel master's account of a new litter or a sergeant's dissertation on a new sword stroke. "*Il est une chevalier bon aussi!*"

"That he is, lad," Kilmartin replied. "I only pray he will not have to prove it soon," he thought to himself. Kilmartin's thoughts then travelled away from the sodden fields of southeastern England, across the choppy waves of the channel, over the fruitful orchards of Normandy and farms of the

Loire valley to the sun-drenched lands of Languedoc where his sister and her husband had settled after their marriage.

Garin's father had been vassal to Count Raymond of Toulouse, and the young couple had returned to his ancestral lands to make their life together. The d'Aucassin lands were fertile, the Toulouse region prosperous. The future had looked very bright for Andrew's beloved younger sister and her husband.

But a young couple in love had paid little attention to the wider world around them. The courts of love, celebrated in the old queen's heyday, were more real to them than were the law courts of lord and prelate. To the tension that had been steadily building up between their liege lord Raymond and the Pope, they had been completely oblivious. Even when the count had quarreled with Innocent's legate, Garin and Nichola had paid no attention.

"The Pope cannot be serious!" Garin was incredulous. "Who cares about a few heretics? The misguided fools will surely return to the Church when the error of their ways is pointed out to them. There is no need for Raymond to persecute them. They are his people, after all!"

"Innocent is in earnest," Andrew replied. "And you would do well, my brother, to take him seriously."

"Nonsense, Andrew!" Nichola smiled indulgently. "You are far too solemn yourself. The count and the Pope will resolve their quarrel. You'll see — and you'll laugh at yourself for being so worried. Come, it is a lovely evening, and Garin has written a new song."

But Raymond and Innocent had not resolved their quarrel, and the murder of the Pope's legate had given the pontiff excuse for excommunicating the count and, when that punishment did not bring about the desired result, proclaiming crusade against the Cathari heretics of Languedoc and the lords who were perceived as protecting them.

"I am no heretic, Andrew," d'Aucassin's face was unwontedly serious, "but I am the count's man. I will fight for him against those who invade our lands."

"Then you will be excommunicated as well," above his fair beard, the Scottish knight's face was lined with concern. "As will be your wife and child — my sister and nephew. Will you consign them to hell?"

"If Innocent's God would send innocents," Garin could not repress a smile at his own word play, "to hell over a political quarrel, then perhaps these poor Cathari have the right of it."

"Garin! This is no jest. If you must fight for the count — and I do not fault you for your loyalty — take some care for Nichola and the boy. Let me take them to safety, to Scotland, until this war is over."

His brother-in-law had agreed, Kilmartin recalled, but Nichola had not. She had refused to leave her husband, but she had consented to sending her son away. They had always talked of fostering Nicholas with him anyway, of letting the lad serve his years as a page in his uncle's household. The decision to send him home with Andrew would not alarm the child. And it would not, the knight told himself, cause his sister or her husband any pain either. The two had always lived for each other. Nicholas had been a tolerated, but often ignored child.

"Things will be different in Kilmartin," Andrew resolved to himself. He and his wife had three children, and there was ample room in both their castle and their hearts for one more. Above all, Nicholas would be safe, removed from the battlefield that the knight was convinced Languedoc would soon become.

"How much farther, uncle?"

Nicholas's question recalled Andrew to his surroundings. Gazing over the open, flat fields in which barley and wheat were already pushing their way through the rich, black soil, he spied the towers of a castle looming over a distant stretch of woodland. "Not far, boy," he answered. "See?" He pointed. "There is Huntingdon."

"Then may we ride faster? I'm wet and tired, too!" Nicholas grinned as he echoed his uncle's earlier words.

Looking down at the muddy track on which they were riding and checking its firmness with a few quick steps of his horse, Kilmartin nodded. Smiling at the boy next to him, he offered cheerfully, "Race you to the gatehouse, Nicholas!" With a gentle pressure, he put his spurs to his horse's side and urged the animal on. A second later his nephew did the same.



As his horse approached the wide moat surrounding Huntingdon Castle, Andrew pulled on the reins, bringing his mount to a halt only seconds before its hooves would have struck the wooden drawbridge which lay open before him. Just behind him Nicholas, whose smaller, but fleetier horse had been bred from a Saracen strain, did likewise.

"A bit farther and Roland would have beaten you!" the child crowed triumphantly.

Pleased by his nephew's skilled handling of his horse and secure enough in his own abilities not to be threatened by another's accomplishments, the man nodded. "He's a brave animal — and he has a fine rider. You'll be teaching us some tricks, Nicholas."

The boy's face glowed at the praise. Patting his mount affectionately, he said, "Roland is the best horse, aren't you boy?"

"A good mount indeed," a new voice broke in.

Looking in its direction, Andrew saw a tall, well-dressed man whose erect carriage denied the age betrayed by his short clipped white hair coming toward them from the gatehouse. Slipping from his horse, the Scottish knight knelt quickly on one knee as he addressed the newcomer. "My lord earl."

David of Huntingdon's attractive, aristocratic face broke into a broad smile. Holding his arms out, he spoke with an unaffected warmth. "What's this? Titles between old comrades? Come, Andrew, you are well come to Huntingdon."

Beneath his silvering beard, Kilmartin's face brightened into a smile of equal warmth. "Thank you, David, for your hospitality. It is good to see you, my friend." Turning his gaze to the boy, he gestured for him to dismount. "My lord," he said, reverting to formality, "this is my nephew, Nicholas d'Aucassin. He will be fostering with us."

The earl nodded, his brown eyes lit with understanding, as he smiled at the child. "You are well come as well, Nicholas. I remember your mother well, and you have the look of her."

"Thank you, my lord," responded Nicholas shyly. Although not easily intimidated, the child had been brought up in an isolated household, meeting few strangers. The grandeur of Huntingdon which rose above him and the noble bearing of the earl, of whose high lineage his uncle had informed him, temporarily overawed him.

Sensitive to his nephew's discomfort, Kilmartin sought to ease it. Scanning the drawbridge and the gatehouse beyond, he said quietly, "The earl has a son, Nicholas. Where is Robert, my lord? I had hoped to see him."

An unfathomable look passed swiftly over Huntingdon's narrow face. Whatever emotions it had expressed were quickly repressed as the earl replied briskly, "Robert is busy with an errand which I set him. He should be here for the evening meal." Turning his attention to his guests, David said, "But before then, I'll warrant you could use with a warm drink and a change of clothing — as could your men."

Looking in the direction of the earl's gaze, Andrew saw his escort of four guards, who had lagged behind him and Nicholas, approaching the gatehouse. "Yes, we could. England seems very wet and cold after Languedoc, David!"

"Then we must do all we can to make you warm and dry," Huntingdon responded. "Come, my guards will direct your men to their quarters."

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short while later, Andrew, now clad in a long, woolen tunic which fell nearly to his ankles, stood in front of the narrow window in the chamber which had been assigned to him and Nicholas. Sipping from the goblet which he held, he sighed in appreciation of the warm, spiced drink. The earl's wine was as fine as he remembered. As he turned to comment on it to his nephew, he smiled indulgently at the sight of the golden-haired child, curled fast asleep in the center of the carved, wooden bed. The journey had been long and arduous, with new sights, new people and even a new language, for the Norman French spoken by Huntingdon was as different from Nicholas's native tongue as it was from the English spoken by the earl's servants. Small wonder that the boy was tired out. Well, mused Kilmartin, let him sleep. It was yet some hours before the evening meal, and David had excused himself from his guests' company, pleading work that had to be done, but in fact giving his friend time to rest from his travels. Grateful for the quiet time, Andrew turned his gaze once more to the window and the courtyard beyond it.

A gray horse, ridden by a fair-haired youth, was just coming into the bailey. Judging by the mud-splattered condition of both mount and rider, they had ridden far and hard that day. As the young man slipped wearily off the horse, a groom ran up to take the reins. With a shake of his head, the rider rejected the offer and started to walk toward the stables, leading the animal himself. Before he had taken two steps, however, he halted at the sound of his name.

"Robert!" The anger in the earl's voice reached Andrew high up in his tower room. Robert's response was softer, inaudible to the Scottish knight. Below him, played out as if it were a mime show, David confronted his son. Although Andrew could hear nothing of their conversation, it was clear that Huntingdon was incensed by the youth's behavior. Kilmartin could see nothing of Robert's face, as his back was turned to him, but he could sense from the lowered head and sagging shoulders that the young man was repentant, making no attempt to defend his actions.

That surprised Andrew. On the numerous occasions on which he had served as emissary from King William to first Richard and then John of England, the bearded knight had often halted his journey at the home of his old friend. He had seen Robert grow from an affectionate, outgoing child into the serious minded, strong-willed, but equally warm-hearted youth who had served in the king's court as squire and kinsman alike. Robert had never struck him as one who would endure reprimands quietly. But then, despite his tendency to question certain things, he had never been one to invite serious reprimand either. What had happened to change the lad in the two scant years since he had returned to his father's castle?

Whatever it was, Andrew doubted that he would learn of it. David was an old friend, the closeness between them going back to their youth when each had been hostage at the court of King Henry, but the earl was an intensely private man, not one to expose his feelings lightly. If there was tension between him and his son — and Kilmartin did not doubt that such was the case — he would not willingly discuss it.

Still, it was intriguing. As the Scottish knight watched, David turned abruptly and reentered the hall while his son continued on to the stables, Robert's slow pace, lowered head, and tight grip on the reins giving evidence to the distress which still gripped him.

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Whatever had taken place between father and son earlier, there was little evidence of tension when Andrew and Nicholas joined David and Robert for the evening meal. The earl's son greeted Kilmartin warmly, his gray eyes shining with pleasure at this reunion with a man who had been friend to him during his years in William's court.

Upon being introduced to Nicholas, Robert had taken the boy under his wing, speaking to him as if they were of equal age, without condescension turning the conversation between them to topics of interest to a seven year old.

Observing Robert's polished manners and overt kindness toward Nicholas throughout the meal, which was intimate, served in the earl's own solar rather than the great hall, Andrew saw once again the accomplished, confident young man he remembered so well. Had he misinterpreted what he'd seen in the courtyard, he wondered.

When the meal was over and Nicholas could no longer restrain the yawns which came ever more frequently, the earl gestured for a servant to take the boy to his quarters. As he took his leave of David and Robert, Kilmartin's nephew looked hopefully at the earl's son. "You won't forget to show me the puppies tomorrow?"

Robert laughed. "No, Nicholas. Right after breakfast."

The child nodded happily. "Then good night, Robert. Good night, my lord earl."

As the servant disappeared through the doorway, leading Nicholas to his room, Robert addressed his father. "I ask your pardon, Father, and yours, Sir Andrew, but I, too, am tired and would like to retire. Have I your permission, Father?"

As Kilmartin looked at him, he noticed for the first time the shadows beneath Robert's eyes and the faint lines of tension which etched his handsome face. The distress which Andrew had glimpsed earlier had not vanished, but only been hidden behind what the Scottish knight now recognized as a very successful mask. Something was seriously wrong here, but, like his father, Robert would not lightly reveal it before others.

Neither would David. Without verbal reply, the earl nodded, granting permission. As Robert reached the door, however, David called out to him, halting his departure. "Andrew and I have matters to attend to tomorrow, Robert. I expect you to look after Nicholas while we do so. See to it."

The harshness to the earl's tone seemed excessive to Andrew, but Robert did not bristle under it. With a quiet, "Yes, Father," he lowered his head once more politely to Kilmartin and then exited the room.

When the son had vanished into the darkness of the corridor, the father swore softly under his breath.

"David," Andrew began.

The earl raised his right hand wearily. "I know, Andrew. You are puzzled. You want to know what is happening here. I would to God that I knew, as well!" For a moment David's voice was unguarded, the concern, fear even, within it apparent. "But I am as confounded as you are."

"Something is amiss with Robert," said Kilmartin, "and you have no idea what it is?"

The earl shrugged, looking for a moment like a helpless, aging man rather than one of the most powerful barons in England.

Eager to relieve, if possible, his friend's sorrow, Andrew phrased another question. "When did this begin?"

Huntingdon smiled grimly. "Who can say? Robert has always been dutiful, but he has always had a mind of his own as well. He has always seen things ... differently. When he returned from Scotland I began to involve him in the affairs of the earldom, to train him for the duties which will one day be his. He was eager to please and took them on willingly. He did well, but more and more he questioned things that cannot be changed. He became impatient, unwilling to tolerate what he sees as injustice. And he sees injustice everywhere, Andrew." David paused, his dark eyes somber as he reflected on his son's excessive concern with the rights and welfare of serfs and yeomen, people who were nothing to him.

"We quarreled," the earl continued. "When I told him that I understood how he felt, that I, too, did not approve of all that I had to do, he asked me why I did it! I could not make him understand that we are not free — no one's free — and that there are limits to what we can do. He asked why we had power at all if not to do what is right. He knows too well our duty to protect those below us, but nothing, I fear, of our obligation to serve those above us." David's tone took on some of the anger and frustration which his strife with his son had occasioned. "He simply will not see that we cannot change the world, only do the best that we can within it."

Andrew nodded gravely. Rebelliousness was rare among the nobility — and dangerous. If one began to challenge the basis of authority, society would disintegrate. Such questioning threatened the social order just as much as the heretical ravings of the Cathari threatened the Church. God had created institutions to guide men to salvation and lead them in orderly lives. For one man to question their rightness was rank presumption as well as a danger to those around him. Robert's inability to see that was bound to cause trouble and was clearly the source of the tension between him and the earl. But *why* was Robert unable to accept what everyone else of his class accepted?

While Kilmartin had pondered the conundrum, David had remained silent, but, as the silence lengthened in the candle-lit room, the earl spoke again. "Robert has always questioned, but matters became much worse a year ago." As Andrew looked inquiringly at him, encouraging him to continue, the earl stood and walked over to the elaborately carved stone fireplace. As the firelight flickered across his bleak features, he took up his narrative again. "About a year ago Robert rode out without telling anyone where he was going. He was gone for nearly a week. I was frantic." Huntingdon's face reflected the fear he had felt. His only child, his heir, missing. "I didn't know if he were dead or alive. We could find no trace of him — and no one whom we questioned had seen or heard anything of him. Then, in the middle of the night, he came back. He was exhausted and filthy. Obviously he'd not washed in days; the peasant's clothing he wore was caked with dirt as were his hair and face.

"But that was not the worst of it." David's voice lowered. "His mind seemed to be affected as well. When I spoke to him, he stared right through me, as if I were not there at all. His eyes were blank, empty. I feared that he had been bewitched, his mind stolen by some demon. I shook him then, hard, and at last his eyes began to focus, as if he were returning from a very great distance. 'Father?' he asked as if surprised at seeing me. 'What is wrong?'

"'What's wrong!' I bellowed at him, unable to contain my fear and anger. 'You disappear for a week and you ask what's wrong!'"

David paused, the pain of recalling the incident etched on his face. "Robert looked at me in shock, as if I were speaking nonsense. 'Disappeared? A week?' His eyes went wide and then he crumpled, falling to the ground before I could catch him. When I knelt beside him and felt his

forehead, I found that it was burning with fever. I called for servants and the physician, and we carried Robert to his room.

"He was fevered, out of his mind for three days, and then suddenly it was over. The fever broke and he slept peacefully through the night and half of the next day and then awakened. But he remembered nothing of leaving Huntingdon or the week that had followed his disappearance." Once again the earl halted, his face somber. "Or so he told me."

"You doubt him?"

David shook his head. "No, Robert has never lied to me. But I think he does not want to remember. Something happened which frightened him — which still haunts him. He has nightmares, Andrew, and at times his mind wanders. He is frequently distracted. I have found him standing on the battlements gazing out at nothing, or I have sent for him only to be informed that he is nowhere in the castle. He knew that you were arriving today," the earl looked directly at his friend. "He knew that I wanted him to be here, to welcome you. Yet sometime this morning he rode off as he has often done this past year, with no word to anyone. When he returned, he was apologetic, but could or would offer no explanation. He had none. I fear he has gone mad," David whispered the last words apprehensively as if afraid that the mere speaking of them would make them true.

Kilmartin was aghast. Robert's behavior as described by the earl was not normal. Was it possible that something had happened to him during the week he had gone missing that had frightened him so much that it had shattered his mind? Or had something worse transpired? David had used the word 'bewitched'. Everyone knew that the forest was inhabited by dark creatures, demons and other evil beings. Had such a creature taken hold of Robert and was he, even now, tormenting the earl's son?

Seeing the terror in his old friend's eyes, Andrew sought to relive it — and to repress his own fears. "You have said," he offered, "that Robert has always seen things differently. Now that he is a man, he must accept that the world will not conform to his ideals. It is a difficult time for him. Perhaps he is simply working through his feelings. The young are often moody. Has he been ill since or are these spells of distraction the only signs of his distress?"

Huntingdon smiled at the knight's attempt to relieve his anxiety. "Perhaps you are right, my friend. No, he has not been ill since then. Mayhap he is distracted because he is trying to master his emotions. I know that he wishes to please me." The earl's voice softened, the love he felt for his errant son clear.

Andrew returned the smile. "He is a good lad, David, and the young have to find their own way. He loves and respects you. I do not think that he will fail you."

"No, not of his own volition," David whispered. Then, seeing the renewed concern in his friend's eyes, he shook his head to clear it of dark thoughts. "But dwelling on the worst will do no good," he said vigorously. "It has been a long day, Andrew, and you must be ready for bed as well."

Kilmartin looked frankly at him. "You are distressed, David. I would stay with you if you wish to talk or merely to have company."

Huntingdon gestured, brushing aside his friend's concern. "No need, Andrew, although I do thank you for your thoughtfulness. Everything looks darker at night, does it not? I fear I have rambled on with my private worries and disturbed you unnecessarily. Go to bed, my friend. We have much to discuss tomorrow."

Accepting the dismissal, Kilmartin nodded and left the earl to his solitary thoughts.

Exhausted as he was by his journey, Andrew found that sleep eluded him once he had checked on Nicholas and taken to his bed. After tossing and turning for hours, he rose and, slipping on a warm robe over his sleeping garment, made his way to the battlements stretching between the north tower in which his room lay and the west tower. The rain which had fallen all day had ceased at last, leaving a partially clear sky in which tattered clouds played hide and seek with the moon. Leaning against the stone merlons, he luxuriated in the fresh breeze which ruffled his hair and cooled his cheeks. Looking out across the open space which separated Huntingdon from the village fields and the forest beyond them, he found everything quiet and peaceful. Slowly his muscles untensed and the whirling thoughts which had kept his mind spinning began to slow. Surely David was worrying over nothing. Robert had always been a good son and would continue to be so. Fathers, he admitted, acknowledging his own fears for his sons, always worried, and Robert was heir to so great a heritage that it was only natural that David would worry more than most.

Pleased with his reasoning and made sleepy once again by the fresh air, Kilmartin turned to go back to his room and then froze as something moved in the shadows shrouding the west tower. As he watched, the indistinct blur took shape. It was Robert. He was just about to hail the lad when something in Robert's stance halted him. David's son was stiff, every muscle in his body tense. When he moved, it was as if it were not of his own volition. Slowly he walked in Andrew's direction, but then halted halfway along the battlement. The moon, coming out from behind a cloud, illuminated his young face, and Kilmartin had to cover his mouth to repress a cry at the sight of it. Beneath the fringe of wheaten hair, Robert's features were twisted in agony.

"Why?" The question seemed torn from his very soul. For a long moment there was silence, as if he were listening to some reply, although Andrew could hear or see nothing. "Will you not let me be?" Robert spoke again, staring out into the empty air beyond the wall.

Once more silence answered him. Or was there something else? The hair on Andrew's neck rose as he sensed, for a moment, a presence. Not evil, but alien, not of Huntingdon or Huntingdon's world.

"I cannot!" Robert's tormented voice spoke once more. "My father ... my duty. Will you not let me be?" he pleaded once again. The wind, blowing in from the forest, picked up, ruffling the young man's shoulder length hair. The youth's pale face took on a stubborn look. "No. I will not." With an effort he turned his back on the world beyond the castle walls and started back toward the west tower. The wind rose again, its unexpected strength forcing a stunned Kilmartin back against the tower wall. Leaves and twigs, which could not have reached the castle from the distant woodland, swirled over his and Robert's heads.

Halted by the force of the unnatural gale, Robert stumbled. As he turned to face the forest once more, his face was anguished. "Let be," he begged. "Please." As a horrified Andrew watched, the earl's son collapsed, falling toward the hard stone walkway.

Swiftly Kilmartin moved to his side, catching him just before his head made contact. Grasping him by the shoulders, he pulled the youth back into a standing position. As he did so, the wind ceased abruptly and Robert's eyes opened, staring at him in shock.

"It's all right, Robert," Andrew sought to soothe him. "You're all right now."

His eyes filled with shame, fear and something else (Was it rejection?), Robert shook his head and broke free of the older man's grasp. For a moment he looked wild, feral, unaware of where or even who he was. Then, sanity returning to his eyes, he spoke intensely. "Please," he whispered, his voice rough, "say nothing of this to my father." Then he turned and ran to the west tower, slamming the door behind him in his haste to be away.

Shaken, Andrew stared at the now empty battlement. Had David been right after all? Had his son gone mad or was Robert bewitched? Something unnatural had been here on the battlements with them, and the earl's heir had clearly been affected by it. Crossing himself with trembling fingers, Kilmartin prayed for Huntingdon and his son before retiring once more to his own chamber.



At breakfast the next morning Andrew carefully scrutinized Robert, searching for some sign of the night terrors he had experienced, but found nothing. In the bright sunlight which poured through the glass windows (An extravagance demonstrating Huntingdon's wealth, the Scottish knight thought irrelevantly.), the young man's face was unlined and his eyes clear. The mask once more in place.

When Nicholas, refreshed by his sleep and filled with childish energy, threw himself on Robert, asking excitedly, "The puppies, Robert, can we see them now?", the earl's son smiled warmly. "Yes, of course we can, but do you not wish to eat first?"

Blushing the child retreated a step, looking shamefacedly at Andrew. When his uncle gestured that he was free to speak for himself, Nicholas recovered his equanimity and grinned up at his new friend. "Yes, I am hungry. Can we take some scraps to the puppies?"

Robert laughed easily. "We can, Nicholas, but we shall have to ask the kennel master if the pups are old enough for them." Indicating the same chair that the boy had occupied the night before, he urged Nicholas to sit. Eager to finish his meal and see the much discussed hounds, the child scrambled to his seat. As Robert gestured for Andrew to seat himself as well, David, still conferring with his steward, entered the solar. Handing a sheaf of parchments back to his companion, the earl dismissed the man and then joined his son and guests at the table.

Greeting his visitors, David covertly examined his son and, apparently satisfied that, at this moment, all was well, addressed him affectionately. "You will have your hands full today, I fear, Robert." Glancing briefly at Nicholas' eager face, he turned back to his heir. "This young one will run you ragged."

"I don't doubt that." Robert winked at the boy. "But I shall try to keep up with him — as Sir Andrew once kept up with me."

Kilmartin laughed then, his tensions eroded by Robert's ease of manner, by the commonplace activities of a castle morning, and the sunlight which banished the previous night's fears in its brilliance. Most likely Robert had experienced one of his nightmares last night, and he, Andrew, keyed up by David's anxieties had imagined something that did not exist. "And you were a hard laddie to keep up with," he chastised Robert fondly. "Always one step ahead of us you were."

"Ah," said David, "more tales of your misspent youth, Robert? I thought your Uncle William was protecting you!" The earl smiled at his son. Childish pranks and rash behavior in the past could be tolerated — as long as they remained there.

This time Robert blushed, the red spreading to the roots of his sun-colored hair. "Sir Andrew, be merciful. Remember, whatever pranks you disclose, Nicholas will hear them!"

Glancing at his nephew whose indeterminate eyes were alight with interest, Andrew laughed again. "You always were a bright lad, Robert. I can't seem to recall a one at this moment." "Not one?" Nicholas feigned a pout. "Can't you remember, Robert?" he turned to the young man who was sitting down next to him.

"Sorry, Nicholas, but it seems as if I've lost my memory as well. Perhaps later?" He raised his right eyebrow, silently promising the child a host of stories when they were free from their elders' presence.

"*C'est bon*," replied Nicholas, turning his interest to the bread and cheese which the servants were laying out on the long trestle table.

The others turned their attention to the food as well. After a filling meal of wheat and barley pottage, sweetened by nuts, currants and honey, fine wheat bread and strong yellow cheese — all washed down by a clear white wine — watered in Nicholas' case — , the small group parted. Robert, with Nicholas straining at the leash, took the boy at last to the promised kennels while David and Andrew remained in the earl's solar, dealing with Huntingdon's messages for his brother.



ou must impress upon William the need for caution." Huntingdon looked earnestly at his friend. "I know my brother. He hopes to take advantage of John's difficulties with the Pope, to reopen the issue of Northumbria." The earl shook his head. "It was such foolishness that cost us the Treaty of Falaise! John is not his father, it is true, but he holds to what is his — all the more so now that the war in Normandy has turned against him. He'll not give up one inch of English land without a fight-and this land does not need another war."

"He might wish to fight, but will he be able to? Has not the interdict undermined his power?"

David smiled grimly. "Not noticeably. Oh, the churches are closed tight and most of the bishops have fled, but no one seems to care very much. The clergy are permitted to baptize and perform last rites. Many of them preach from the churchyard and continue to perform their duties. What hurts them most, I fear, is the loss of revenues. The king has found a way of benefiting from this punishment." The earl, whose piety was well known, frowned as he related John's arrest of the clergy's mistresses and housekeepers. "Many of our fine priests have rushed to ransom their women as well as their lands, and it is the king's treasury that benefits!"

Kilmartin, who was somewhat more tolerant of human weakness than was his friend, laughed briefly and then turned serious. "But what of the barons? Has not the Pope's action eroded their loyalty?"

Huntingdon shook his head. "Many of them, as you know, distrust the king. Fitzwalter and my own kinsman, de Vesci, hate him. As you also are aware, I have never been a close friend of John's. But the Pope's action has brought most men to John's side. The king has always had a voice in choosing bishops. It has always been one of the crown's rights. For Innocent to deny that is to infringe upon the king's prerogatives. The Pope went too far, most of the barons believe, when he wrote to us, encouraging us to pressure John into obeying him. If the quarrel be spiritual, it should be resolved by spiritual means. But most feel Innocent is too quick to use political means to gain his ends — means that harm only those who are unoffending. And, for all my problems with the king, I share that belief."

"And I," concurred Andrew. "Look at what he is doing in Languedoc! It is true that there are many heretics there, but Raymond is not one of them. Because the count hesitates to turn the sword against his own people, Innocent has declared crusade against him. War, which you fear in England, is coming to Languedoc, and the blood will be on the Pope's head."

David's dark eyes were somber. "The Pope is Christ's vicar. We are bound to obey him, but I would that Innocent were less inclined to use force." He looked at his finely boned, aristocratic hands. "These hands are not free of bloodshed," he said quietly, "but for the Pope to unleash war so lightly is, I fear, a sin for which he must be answerable." Shaking his head to clear the dark thoughts, he returned to the initial topic of their conversation. "And so, I ask you again to impress upon William that now is not the time to contemplate pressuring John. Like an animal backed into a corner, the king will respond with force."

Andrew nodded. Although a warrior — or perhaps because he was a warrior, he was not fond of war. He'd seen too much of it in his life, and the thought of seeing the borders once more aflame distressed him. "I will do as you ask, David."

Huntingdon smiled. "I know that, my friend." Gesturing toward the door, he added, "We have talked long and hard, Andrew. Let us take some air and clear our heads."

Kilmartin agreed and followed the earl out of the solar, down a corridor and out onto the battlements. As they walked the east wall, they heard the clang of weapons and excited shouts from the bailey beneath them. Looking down, they saw the earl's captain of the guard instructing a group of squires. As two young men sparred with one another, their friends urged them on, laughing and making wagers.

"We talk of peace," said Andrew dryly, "but we prepare always for war."

David's only answer was a solemn nod.

Below them a loud cry went up. One of the squires, lunging recklessly, had left himself open and was knocked down by his opponent. While his friends ragged the unfortunate one, the captain looked at the spectators. "My lord Robert," he called. "Will you demonstrate how it should be done?"

Robert, who Andrew now spied standing next to Nicholas among the spectators, demurred, citing his charge to look after the boy. But Nicholas joined his voice to those urging the earl's son on and, at last, Robert agreed. As he stepped forward, pulling a fine sword from its sheathe, his father leaned against the sun-warmed merlon. "Stay and watch, Andrew," he said. "I would have your valuation of Robert's ability."

Kilmartin nodded. He'd had a hand in the youth's training in Scotland and been impressed by Robert's skill. He would be interested in seeing how far the lad had progressed.

Stepping into the open area before his opponent, a large, strapping lad who had inches and pounds over him, Robert held his sword up before him and bowed politely to the squire. When the dark-haired lad had done the same, they both crouched, searching for an opening as they circled one another warily.

The squire struck first and Robert parried the blow, stepping backwards as he did so. His opponent danced backwards as well, circling once more as he looked for an opening. When he attacked again, the earl's son halted his blow, again escaping injury. The pattern held for three more assaults by the squire, with Robert fighting merely a defensive battle.

Through all of this, Andrew followed closely the squire's stance, delivery and tactics. "He aims too high," he murmured to David, "seeking the killing blow." David, unperturbed by his son's lack of aggressiveness, grunted in agreement.

Suddenly, with no warning, Robert struck, moving swiftly and bringing his sword up from below and knocking the squire's weapon from his hands. As it flew across the courtyard and fell, clanging to the paving stones, the spectators broke into a cheer.

While Andrew turned to his friend, complimenting Robert on his graceful and yet powerful move, the captain of the guard spoke up, loudly enough for all his students to hear. "What did you learn from this demonstration?" he asked.

"Not to spar with Lord Robert!" answered one wit.

Laughter spread through the courtyard as Robert flushed at the attention. Reaching out to grasp the squire's hand in acknowledgement of a worthy opponent, he answered the captain's query. "Watch your opponent," he said, his voice firm and confident. "Do not be so eager for a fight that you rush in blindly. Observe him, look for his weaknesses — we all have them — and when you have found it, devise a stratagem to make use of it. Size and strength are not everything — wit and cunning are equally important." He looked to the captain.

"Lord Robert is correct," he said. "Now, who wants to go next?"

As the squires looked at one another, Nicholas stepped forward. "I do!"

Amusement once more rang through the courtyard. "A bit young, aren't you?" questioned one of the taller squires.

"I can do it," insisted the child stubbornly.

On the battlements above, Andrew stood straighter, preparing to go down and retrieve the forward boy, but David put out his hand, halting him. "Wait," he whispered.

"Nicholas shall spar," Robert's voice floated up to the men on the castle wall. "And I shall stand with him."

The tall squire nodded agreement and took his place. Across from him Robert knelt and gestured for Nicholas to join him. When the boy was standing in front of him, Robert placed his sword in the child's hands. "Hold it there," he placed Nicholas' hands on the hilt. "Now, follow my movement." He guided the sword upwards in a defensive move. His small arms following Robert's, Nicholas held on. "Good, now remember to follow what I do — and don't be afraid."

Nicholas turned his head, pulling a face. "I'm not afraid," he said stoutly.

"Of course you're not," Robert said quickly. "Now, get ready. Roger is eager for a fight." The two of them looked at the squire who nodded and came forward, kneeling just in front of his opponents.

Roger raised his sword, and Nicholas and Robert raised theirs, the blades striking one another and sending sparks into the crisp, spring air. Both swords were withdrawn and the fighters regarded one another briefly before striking again. Once more the weapons clashed, neither side being able to disarm the other.

"Well done, Nicholas," Robert praised. "Roger is one of the best and you have parried him twice. You will be a great knight one day."

"Sir Nicholas, knight," concurred Roger generously.

The boy flushed with pleasure. "Do you really think so? My father is a knight," he said, the homesickness he'd not given much evidence of earlier filling his voice, "and I want to be just like him."

Above them, Andrew felt his eyes dampen as he thought of Garin and the dangers that threatened him. Would Nicholas ever see his parents again, he wondered. As if sensing his friend's sorrow, David put a comforting hand on his shoulder. "They are in God's care now, Andrew. All that you can do for them is to protect and care for Nicholas."

The Scottish knight smiled weakly. "You are right, my friend. And *that* is what I intend to do."

The remainder of the day passed pleasantly and without incident. Business having been attended to, David arranged for an afternoon of hunting. The rains which had fallen for days had nurtured forest and field alike, drawing forth vegetation in that particular shade of emerald green that was unique to an English spring. Leaf and branch sparkled in the bright sunlight as Huntingdon, his son and guests raced across the fields, following the soaring falcons who winged their way beneath the robin's egg blue sky. Returning home physically exhausted, but refreshed from a day in the open air, they ate a simple meal and retired early to their beds.

As he bent over to give his nephew's tousled curls a good night kiss, Andrew felt a wave of protectiveness sweep over him. This child, yet so young and innocent seemed more vulnerable than Kilmartin's own sturdy children. The knight had never doubted his ability to raise his own progeny, but now, inexplicably, he saw the process as lengthy and fraught with difficulties. David's anxieties concerning Robert had roused his own fears for Nicholas. Huntingdon was a good father; Robert, a good son. Yet the youth's path to manhood appeared painful. How could a man protect those dependent upon him, ease the way for those he loved? Sighing as he poured himself a goblet of wine and moved over to gaze out the window cut into the solid stone wall of the tower room, he concluded that one could not guarantee his children a life free of trials. All a father could do was to train them as best as possible to face the world — and do that within a framework of loving concern.

Turning his thoughts to the view which stretched before him, he found that all was calm and peaceful, fields and forest alike silvered by the light of the nearly full moon. As his eyes strayed to the distant woodland, he started when something moved in the shadow of the trees. Remembrance of the previous night's unnatural wind momentarily froze him as he stared, heart pounding, at the horned figure which emerged from the dark forest. Then the moon struck the figure, and Andrew sagged with relief, laughing at his own terror. A large stag, his broad antlers shining in the silvery light, stood in the fields between Huntingdon castle and the greenwood. For a long moment it remained still, seeming to stare at the stone walls which rose from the soil, separating the castle and its inhabitants from the forest, and then it turned and bounded away, back into the wildwood from which it had come.

In the morning Andrew and Nicholas prepared to resume their journey. Kilmartin was eager to return to his lands and family, and, there being no more business to complete, he saw no reason to linger. As servants bustled in the courtyard saddling and loading the horses, Andrew and his nephew stood on the steps to the great hall, waiting to make their farewells to their host.

David was the first to appear. His face lined with displeasure, he held a parchment in his balled fist as he exited the hall and approached his two guests.

"My lord, what is it? What's wrong?" asked Kilmartin, alarmed by Huntingdon's expression.

The earl forced a smile, trying to exude a calm he obviously did not feel. Holding up the parchment, he said stiffly, "It's from the king. He's preparing another campaign against Llewellyn, and he demands my assistance."

"He wants soldiers?" guessed Andrew.

Huntingdon shook his head, smiling grimly. "No — that I would do and with little hesitation. As his vassal, I owe him as much. No, he wants my aid in winning Owen of Clun to his support." The earl almost spat the marcher baron's name.

"Owen of Clun?" Kilmartin had to think a moment before the name clicked in his memory. "That madman?" he asked when the image of a dark haired, savage border lord came to him.

"The same." David nodded. "I'm to host him, fete him, flatter him into joining the king. Failure," he once again held up the king's message, "is not acceptable to John. If I fail to win Owen over, the king will see it as due to unwillingness to serve my liege."

The Scottish knight felt his loyalties dividing. He wanted to go back to Scotland, Nicholas needed a home and a family — and there was the matter of Huntingdon's own messages for King William. But he knew the earl well. David was being forced to court and win a man whom he despised, and threatened none too subtly with punishment if he failed. He would need a friend to support him. "David," he began.

Huntingdon's face broke into a genuine smile. "No, my friend. You have been away from home too long already. Janet will have both our heads if you delay."

"It is no matter — if you have need ..."

David shook his head. "No. It galls me to do this, but," he grimaced, "it must be done. Did I not say that none of us is truly free? And there are others to stand by me. Perhaps Richard would come," he mused to himself. "But that is my problem, not yours, Andrew. Godspeed to you and Nicholas. May you come safely home."

"Thank you, David." Kilmartin looked meaningfully at his nephew who had stood quietly through all of this.

"Thank you, my lord, for guesting us," said Nicholas. Although he spoke to the earl, his hopeful eyes scanned the courtyard, searching for someone.

Abruptly Andrew realized that Robert was, once again, absent. He turned, his worried eyes looking into David's. "Robert ..." he began.

At that moment the earl's son appeared, stepping around the corner of the great hall. In his arms, squirming for release and yipping excitedly was a bundle of gray fur which resolved itself into a long legged puppy as Robert came closer.

Nicholas's eyes widened at the sight. When Robert stopped in front of him and knelt, still holding on to the excited animal, the small boy looked up at him questioningly. "It's the one with the black spot on his stomach," he said hesitantly.

"Yes," answered Robert.

Nicholas's eyes lit. As if fearing a negative answer, he asked, "For me?"

Huntingdon's heir nodded. "He chose you, Nicholas."

The boy reached out, and the earl's son released the squirming animal to him. With short, excited yelps, the dog raised his head to Nicholas and began happily licking his face with a wide, pink tongue. "Thank you, Robert," murmured the child. "I'll take good care of him."

"I know you will," replied Robert. "He chose you, remember, but it is *your choice* to accept him." Robert's voice was distant, and for a moment his eyes clouded over. "Someone may choose you," he murmured, "but the decision to accept — and the responsibility for that decision — are yours. Remember that Nicholas, the choice will always be yours."

At the seriousness in his friend's voice, Nicholas looked up once more from his wonderful present. Pale green eyes locked with gray. "I'll remember, Robert — and thank you!"

"I thank you as well," said Andrew. "This one," he put an affectionate arm around his nephew's shoulders, "has been asking for a puppy since before we left France. I know that your dogs are a fine breed and I'll see that he takes care of it."

With that, the visitors once more made their farewells, while a servant from the kennels carefully affixed a large, sturdy basket to the side of Nicholas's saddle. As the boy reluctantly surrendered his treasure, Andrew told him, "You may carry the pup yourself, but do not open it or tease him while you are riding."

Nicholas gave his uncle a disgusted look. "I wouldn't do that!" he said indignantly.

"Of course not." Andrew smiled and turned away, giving his host one last farewell. With Robert and David's wishes echoing in their ears, Andrew of Kilmartin and his nephew, Nicholas d'Aucassin, departed Huntingdon Castle. Eager as he was to return to his own life, Andrew could not help wondering, as he paused to look back before entering the forest, what lay in store for his old friend and his heir. The next few weeks with their unpleasant obligation to win over Owen of Clun would not be easy. God grant, he prayed, that David's fears are baseless. He will need a strong son beside him. That invocation uttered, he looked down at the boy riding happily next to him and smiled broadly. "We'll be home by the feast of St. Hugh, Nicholas."

The fair-haired child grinned. Making use of an expression he'd heard one of the kennelmen use, he said cheerfully, "That's all right then."



Part Two: Fall 1233

Beneath a towering oak tree, its foliage glorious in autumn coloring, Robert, once of Huntingdon, sat peacefully repairing a hole in the sole of one of his boots.

Twenty-five years in Sherwood had lightly silvered the shoulder length hair so similar in hue to that of the leaves stretching above him, and etched lines in his now bearded face, but had not otherwise altered his appearance. Half a lifetime of outlawry and its attendant hardships had not taken away his noble bearing or dimmed the brilliance of his smile as he gazed across the small clearing, his gray eyes lighting upon the intent figure of his wife who was muttering to herself as she sorted through a hodgepodge of herbs and medicaments.

The years had been kind to Marion as well. Her hair, no longer a fiery red, but dimmed to a deep rose, highlighted by strands of purest white, was thick and luxurious, framing an oval face whose beauty had only been enhanced by the passage of years, the fine bone structure and deep green eyes more prominent than in her youth. Sensing her husband's gaze upon her, she looked up and flashed him a smile. "Finished already?"

"What?" Robert had been so lost in his wonder at the beauty of her, undiminished by twenty years of marriage, in the never ending joy that she had returned to him after her self-imposed exile in Halstead, that he had quite forgotten the task in which he had been engaged. "Oh," his sun-browned face flushed slightly with embarrassment at having been caught wool-gathering, but his eyes danced with merriment. "It is bootless for me to think of work, my lady," he said, his words teasing, but not concealing his genuine emotion, "with your visage before me. Contemplation of my soul's delight leaves room for no other thoughts."

His lady pulled a face, but her eyes glowed with the love she felt for this man who had loved her so long and so patiently, waiting for the day when she would come to him of her own volition, free from the shadows of the past. She would never forget her first husband, Robin of Loxley, nor the passion they had shared, but that did not subtract from the love which had grown between her and Herne's second son. Their time together had bound them in uncounted ways, and twenty years of intimacy had only deepened, not eroded, the warmth she felt growing within her when he looked at her as he was doing now. His lips quirked, telling her that his feelings mirrored hers. For one of the few times in their married life, they were alone in the camp, the other outlaws

having gone off on various missions. There was no reason not to act upon the invitation each saw in the other's eyes.

"You've been listening too much to Alan," she teased him back. "You're beginning to sound like a minstrel."

Mock horror crossed Huntingdon's face at the comparison. Alan a Dale, Mildred de Bracy's hapless — and tuneless — husband, had passed through Sherwood on a number of occasions, most of them requiring not only the outlaws' aid, but their forbearance as well. "Nay, my lady," he began, continuing the courtship game between them, "say not ..." He broke off, his head tilting to one side.

"What is it?" Marion fell silent, straining to hear what had alerted Robert.

"Someone's coming," he said. Pulling on the partially repaired boot, he stood and reached for Albion which lay nearby. Marion scrambled upwards as well, grabbing her bow and quiver. Long before the crackling of twigs and broken brush became loud, heralding the newcomer's approach, husband and wife were hidden in deep cover.

"Robin!" The male voice was strained, frightened. "Robin, are you here?"

"It's Matthew," Robert mouthed to Marion. As she nodded in recognition of the young man from Wickham, the two of them stepped out from their hiding places, causing the chestnut-haired villager to start momentarily.

Noting the tension on Matthew's pale face, Robert asked quickly, "What's wrong? Is it Edward or your mother?"

The villager shook his head, the long hair falling across his broad forehead. "No, they're all right, but Edgar's been killed — just like Tom of Ollerton and Jack in Bilsthorpe." Matthew's dark eyes were filled with fear.

The outlaw couple looked at one another, their own faces paling. Two weeks ago Tom of Ollerton's body had been found in Sherwood. The peasant's throat had been viciously torn apart, the corpse drained of all blood. Consensus had been that a diseased animal, cornered by Tom, had gone mad and attacked him. The kindly serf had been mourned by his fellow villagers and by the outlaws to whom he had been a staunch friend, but no one had been greatly alarmed by the death. Such things happened in Sherwood. It was the way of things. The wheel of life turned, and everyone knew that one day each would make his or her final circuit.

Then, less than a week later, Jack had been discovered, his throat likewise savaged, his body equally bloodless. If a diseased animal were mad enough to kill twice, it would kill again. After attending the burial and comforting the widow and children, the outlaws of Sherwood had taken it upon themselves to seek out and kill the beast before it struck again. Even now, Will, Nas, John and Much were scouring the eastern fringes of Sherwood, searching for the animal. Robert and Marion, who had searched long and hard the day before, had been given the pleasant task of guarding the camp and resting up before undertaking another day of searching on the morrow.

"Where was he found?" Robert addressed Matthew.

"By the track that leads to the Nottingham Road," answered the young man. "Meg and Bess were looking for hazel nuts and they stumbled over the body. Bess were real upset, but Meg's all right. She said we should send for you right away, and Father agreed."

"Right." Huntingdon smiled briefly at the thought of the diminutive Meg, still John's wife in all but name, taking charge and calming down the large, but excitable Bess after their horrific discovery.

Though she was small in stature, Meg of Wickham was large in heart and in courage — and had proven it countless times.

"We're coming," said Marion.

"We have to wait for Tuck," inserted her husband. "He'll worry if he doesn't find us here when he comes back."

Matthew nodded in understanding, but his anxiety did not decrease. "They'll be worried 'bout me," he said. "I'd better start back now."

"Matthew, no!" Marion put out her arm to restrain him. "If there's a mad animal out there, he could attack you as well. You're lucky to have gotten here in one piece. We'll go together." She looked to her husband for support.

"Marion's right," replied Robert. "You can't risk traveling alone again. If anything were to happen to you, your mother would have my head." He smiled to lighten his words, but could not hide the deep affection which he, and all of the band, felt for the young man. He was almost as dear to them as Robert and Marion's own children, distantly fostered for their own safety in the security of King Alexander's sanctuary in Scotland.

Reluctantly the villager acquiesced. Despite his mother's opposition, Matthew had spent as much of his time in Sherwood as he had in Wickham, and he had learned the ways of forest survival from his wolfshead friends.

"You must be tired, Matthew," Marion offered. "Come, sit down and have something to drink." He nodded gratefully, and she went to one of the wooden buckets, filled only that morning with fresh water from the stream which ran nearby, and measured out a mug of clear, cool liquid.

"Thank you, Marion," said the younger man. Brushing back his sweat dampened hair, he sat gracefully on of the logs set about the fire pit in the center of the camp. "It's been a warm fall," he said. "Good for the crops, though."

Robert nodded. "Good for Wickham, too, now that the sheriff's keeping his nose clean — and away from the villages."

Matthew smiled. "Haven't seen anything of him since the last hundred court — and he couldn't wait to get that over with and get safely back to Nottingham!"

"He's lucky he's still sheriff," said Marion.

Robert nodded in agreement. The great storms of King John's day had passed — along with the king himself, dead of a stomach ailment at age forty. The new king, Henry, had been a boy of nine, and the universally desired regent had been David of Huntingdon's old friend, William Marshall. Eager to reunite a land torn apart by civil war and to expel the French invaders, the Marshall had agreed to the terms of the Great Charter, expanding them even in the Forest Charter of 1217, and offered an open hand to those rebels who would reaffirm their loyalty to the House of Plantagenet. Many barons had fought merely out of hatred for King John. With the old king dead, their insular prejudices and loyalties had come once more into play, and all but a few of the great barons had come to the young Henry's support.

Although he lived for only a short time afterwards, the Marshall, along with Stephen Langton and the loyal barons and prelates of England, had reinstated royal government and order in the realm. In the years following his death, his successors, including the much hated Hubert de Burgh, had worked to solidify that order and royal control. And one aspect of strengthening royal power had been the clipping of the sheriffs' wings. No longer virtual laws unto themselves, the

king's sheriffs were now considered to be royal agents living on clearly allotted salaries and not on the extras they could extort from the villages under their jurisdiction. Since anything collected above and beyond the legal tax went straight to Henry's treasury and not to de Rainault's coffers, and the penalty for malfeasance was extremely unpleasant, the old sheriff had drawn inward, performing only those tasks absolutely necessary for the administration of his duties and spending much of his time enjoying what fruits of his rank still remained. When, that was, he was not haranguing the still ineffective Gisburne and fulminating against Robin Hood. His inability to capture the renegade nobleman was, the sheriff was convinced, the chief reason for his present, powerless state.

With the sheriff's activities diminished, Huntingdon could almost feel sorry for him. De Rainault had outlived his time and could not adjust to the new methods of England's rulers. New methods did not mean new aims, however! Though the sheriff's power to exploit the villagers had been curtailed, and many of the abuses of the forest law now corrected, the nobles were still nobles, and the serfs and freemen of England were still an underclass with few sympathizers among their rulers. The outlaw leader had made this point firmly to his father when David, only weeks before his death, had begged Robert once again to accept the pardon offered by the Marshall. His regret at causing his father further pain clear in his voice and face, he'd rejected the offer. "My place is in Sherwood, Father, and it will remain here until there's justice for everyone."

His aristocratic face lined with age and sorrow, the earl had smiled ruefully at his son. Ten years in the greenwood had only strengthened Robert's rebelliousness. "Still hot-headed, I see," he'd said, echoing the words he had spoken to Robert at their first meeting after the boy had been outlawed.

"Still your son," the wolfshhead had responded, likewise repeating what had become a traditional farewell speech between the two of them.

"How long before Tuck gets back?" Matthew's question broke into Robert's reverie.

"By noon, I should think. He's just gone to Edwinstowe to see how Old Roger's doing. He promised to be back in plenty of time to make dinner."

"Doesn't want to eat your cooking, does he?" The villager grinned wickedly. Robert had adjusted remarkably to forest life, but the talent for cooking had somehow eluded him.

The outlaw leader laughed. "Neither do I, Matthew! Neither do I." Their mood lightened, the three friends sat talking quietly until rapid and heavy footsteps, careless of the noise they made as someone moved swiftly through the forest brush around them announced the arrival of the portly friar moments before his large frame appeared in the clearing.

Always rotund, Tuck's girth had not increased noticeably over the years, although his hair had gone completely gray around his tonsure and his bones ached more painfully with every winter. Right now, his usually cheerful face was bright red and anxious, as he huffed his way into the camp.

"Robin," he began, then halted as he noticed Matthew's presence. Curious, he looked first to Robert, then Marion, and finally to the villager himself. Seeing the serious looks on their faces, he asked, "What's wrong?"

"We could ask you that ourselves," replied Robert. "What's happened, Tuck?"

"Another murder — near Edwinstowe."

Marion gasped as Huntingdon's face tightened at the news.

"Another!" Matthew exclaimed.

Tuck looked at him. Comprehension dawning in his kindly brown eyes, he queried softly, "Wickham?"

"Edgar," said Marion.

"God in heaven," the friar murmured, crossing himself as he lowered his bulky form onto a log. "What's going on?"

"I don't know," said Robert grimly, "but I intend to find out."

A short time later, Marion and Robert stood with Edward, Allison and the other villagers of Wickham, viewing the ravaged remains of what had once been a man — and their friend. As Matthew had told them, Edgar's throat had been savagely ripped apart, exposing windpipe, tendons and crushed bones. The neck had been almost severed, the head dangling at an unnatural angle. With his stark white face, drained of all blood and shadowed by the dark smudges beneath his eyes, reverently closed by his friends, Edgar looked like nothing less than a broken skeleton, something dragged up from a charnel house.

Marion's face blanched even as her stomach lurched at the sight. Next to her, Robert felt his own insides twist, and his face grew taut. Both outlaws had seen death many times in their lives, but neither had ever seen a body so violated. Never that was, until they had gazed upon Tom and Jack's despoiled corpses. Stifling the urge to gag, an impulse only strengthened by the sickening smell of the corpse, Huntingdon laid a hand on his wife's shoulder in a supportive gesture and turned to Meg who had been standing, unusually quietly, next to Edward.

"Matthew said you found him, Meg."
The slender, brown-haired woman nodded, her face solemn.

"Can you take us to where you found the body?"

Meg's dark eyes widened with fear, but she answered evenly, "Yes, Robin."

Robert smiled warmly. "Thank you, Meg. I knew we could count on you." Shifting his gaze to Edward, he asked, "Will you come?"

The village headman, still vigorous of mind and body despite the pure white of his hair and beard, nodded. "Course I will, Robin."

"Good. We'll bury Edgar and then we'll go."

"Is Brother Tuck coming?"

The outlaw leader looked in the direction of the speaker. A thin woman, her black hair woven in thick plaits, stared pleadingly at him. Aelflaed, Edgar's wife. Compassion softened Robert's voice. "He'll be here as soon as he can be, Aelflaed. He's just waiting for the others." Followers of Herne, practitioners of the old ways the villagers might be, but faced with a case of sudden, horrific death, they were as eager for the comfort of the Church as were their more orthodox countrymen. Robert looked at Marion, and she nodded in understanding. Taking the smaller woman under her wing, she guided her toward the small hut that had housed the peasant couple. Allison, Meg and the other women of Wickham followed them.

"Might as well have something to drink while we're waiting," said Edward. "Edgar would have wanted us to."

Huntingdon nodded. A friend had been violently murdered, his life precipitously ended. It was right and fitting that his life and memory be honored by those who had cared for him. And Edgar had been as fond of a good stoup of ale as any of them. As Edward and his son vanished in the direction of their hut to fetch the drink, Robert settled on a low bench outside of the village barn into which the body had been carried. Lost in his contemplation of the terrible death, he paid little attention at first to the conversation of the villagers around him.

"Ain't natural," Tom's voice was high with fear. "Never seen no animal drain all the blood outta its victim."

"And the body weren't torn anywheres else," said Dickon. "If it were a mad animal, it woulda ripped 'im apart and fed on 'im."

Low murmurs of agreement answered him.

"It's a demon," whispered Edwin, his eyes wide with horror. "A fiend from hell."

The villagers' eyes turned to the Hooded Man who sat silently amongst them. If evil were at work in Sherwood, it was his task to deal with it.

Robert wanted to reassure them, to tell them that it was not a demon, but simply some poor, mad animal, but he could not. From the very beginning of his time as Herne's Son, he had seen evil and sorcery at work in the world. Although most of Robin Hood's famous battles had been fought with the Sheriff of Nottingham and his steward, Sir Guy of Gisburne, many of them had been fought with perverted servants of evil such as Gulnar, a vengeful Baron de Belleme, and the Sisterhood of Arianrhod.¹ He knew that demons such as Azael existed, always seeking entrance back into the world of men. Much as he wished to relieve his friends' fears, he knew that it would be false comfort. Only when the perpetrator of the crimes had been found and dealt with would the people of Sherwood be safe. Still, panic would serve no purpose. "We don't know that," he began.

"Robin!" Much's voice, deepened by maturity, provided a thankful interruption.

Looking up, Huntingdon and the villagers saw the missing outlaws of Sherwood hastening across the newly-mown fields toward them. In the lead, John, his shaggy gray hair and beard giving him the look of a biblical prophet, and Will, his short, powerful body denying the passage of years, strode purposefully. Behind them Nasir, dark and quiet as ever although silver touched his temples and threaded his closely cropped beard, and Much, now a broad shouldered man of thirty some years, looked grimly toward their leader. Huffing as he strove to keep up, Tuck, his cloth bag flapping against him as he half-walked, half-ran, made up the rear.

Robert felt a wave of relief that his men had arrived. For more than half a lifetime, they had been his friends, his support, his family. The sight of Edgar's violated body had stirred up fears within him as well, fear that one of these men who were more than brothers to him, might meet with a similar death. "You're safe," he said unnecessarily.

Little John, who had always been quick to sense others' emotions and was not hesitant to display his own, reached out and enveloped his leader in a silent hug, while Will snarled and replied grimly, "Ain't no mad beast gonna mess with us, Robin."

"It's not a beast," said Edwin, his voice growing shrill, "it's a demon!"

"Demon?" Much had grown older, wiser and fully competent to take care of himself in the forest, but he had never eradicated his childhood fear of demons.

"We don't know that," said Robert once again. "Go with Tuck, Much. He could use your help." Huntingdon pointed to the interior of the barn. "Edgar's in there."

The friar nodded and tugged on the younger man's sleeve. A definite task would occupy the curly-haired outlaw and keep his fears at bay.

While Tuck and Much attended to the body, preparing it for burial, Robert told the others what he had learned from the villagers. The outlaws reacted, each in his own way, Will by clenching his teeth and slamming his fist against the doorpost in impotent anger, John, his brown eyes filling with tears at the needless death, by moving to his friend's side and enveloping him in his huge arms. The Saracen was silent, but the look in his dark eyes said clearly, "Whoever or whatever did this, we will find him. Edgar will have justice."

As if sensing the purpose within the wolfshead band, Wickham's inhabitants calmed. Catching sight of Matthew lugging a keg of ale, and Edward, his arms filled with clay mugs, Dickon nudged Tom, and the two men hastened to help them.

While the men sat, quietly drinking and reminiscing, recalling events from Edgar's cruelly aborted life, Marion and Allison, shepherding Aelflaed between them, rejoined them. With a few whispered words, Robert told Marion that Tuck was inside the barn. His wife smiled wearily and led Aelflaed inside to take what comfort she could from the kindly friar. A moment later, Much in tow, she reappeared, leaving the grieving widow and cleric to their privacy. Sitting down next to her husband, the female outlaw reached for his hand and squeezed it gratefully when he covered her slender fingers with his own strong and forest roughened ones. Unspoken the words passed between them: What if it had been you? The dangers that had driven Marion to Halstead so long ago had never disappeared from their lives. The possibility that either of them could lose the other was always with them. As he brushed aside the soft curls framing her tense face, Robert prayed for the courage to face such a loss even while he unreasonably beseeched both God and Herne that it might never happen.

"Here, Robin," Much handed him a mug, and he drank deeply of the cool, strong beverage. As he set the mug down next to his booted feet, he tensed, sensing a tingling in the air. Looking up, he saw gossamer mists forming in the village center, only a few feet away. "Herne," he said quietly.

Villagers and outlaws alike fell silent, forming an awestruck audience for the forest lord. The mists thickened and then vanished, revealing the antlered figure of the Lord of the Trees.

"The children of darkness have come. They bring a choice. Death offers life. On the Hooded Man's decision all depends."

As always, Herne's words were few, his meaning unclear. Before Robert could question him, he faded into the resurgent mist and disappeared.

"Well that was a lot of help," muttered Will. Although he'd come to accept and respect Herne's powers, the former soldier had never been impressed with the forest spirit's communication skills.

Accustomed to Scarlet's grousing, the others ignored him, focusing instead on Herne's message.

"The children of darkness? Who might they be?" John wondered out loud.

"Those who killed Edgar and the others," replied Nasir simply.

"Choice," murmured Marion, looking anxiously at Robert. The one clear thing in Herne's statement had been the importance of her husband's response to the choice brought by the dark ones. *Death offers life* struck too closely to the woman's deepest wounds. Loxley had offered his

death for her life. Was the Lord of the Trees indicating that Robert, also, was to sacrifice his life? The uncertainty and sorrow in Huntingdon's eyes showed that he, too, was considering the possibility.

"Robert," Much queried, "what d'we do?"

The bearded outlaw leader shook his head to clear it of gloomy thoughts. Putting a hand on Much's shoulder, he smiled and said, "We bury Edgar."

A

fter the burial, the outlaws of Sherwood, accompanied by Matthew, Edward and Meg made their way to the place where Edgar had met his untimely end. Following the rutted, dirt track that led from Wickham to the Nottingham Road, they came at last to a curve in the path, overhung by a stand of hazel trees and lined with prickly briars.

"In there," said Meg, pointing to a break in the brush. "We were looking for nuts when Bess saw a bit of cloth. It was Edgar's shirt." Her round face paled at the memory, and John put a comforting arm around her.

Robert nodded and knelt, crawling through the break in the briars to discover a small cleared space. With a shock, he recognized it as one of the watching posts he and the others had made years ago. Apparently they had cleared the brush away so well that it had not grown back even though they had neither used nor tended to it for years. Making use of what sunlight still existed so close to evening, he scanned the mossy ground, looking for any clue as to how Edgar had died.

The first thing that struck him was the lack of any sign of a struggle. None of the thick growing bushes lining the minuscule clearing were broken; no branches lay on the green, mossy ground, and the few leaves which lay upon it looked as if they had fallen naturally from the trees towering above. The only sign of destruction was the break through which he had crawled, and Edward assured him when he asked that it was the villagers themselves who had made the hole, dragging their friend from his place of death.

It made no sense. If an animal had attacked Edgar, branches and leaves would be spread all over the clearing. Even if a cutthroat had surprised him and dragged him into the hidden spot, there would have been some sign of conflict. But there was none. The lonely cry of a whip-poor-will accentuated the emptiness of the spot. How could Edgar have been pulled into the clearing and there murdered without leaving a trace of struggle?

Perplexed, Robert examined every bush and tree once again. This second survey revealed an even more puzzling fact. Nowhere in the clearing was there a drop of blood. Leaf, branch, moss alike were free of the telltale smudges that should have given evidence to violent death.

"Ain't natural," Tom's words came back to Robert. "Never seen no animal drain all the blood outta its victim."

The outlaw leader did not believe that it was natural either. The evidence — or rather, lack of it — along with Herne's words had convinced him that something supernatural, and evil, was at work in Sherwood. Crawling out of the desecrated clearing, Robert faced his men and the people from Wickham.

"Edgar's death — and those of Tom, Jack and Martin," the last name referred to the man killed near Edwinstowe two days ago, his death only reported by Tuck this day, "was not natural. There is something evil at work here." Recalling what he could about all the deaths, Huntingdon fixed on the fact that all of them had occurred in the evening or nighttime. Children of darkness indeed. "Whatever it is, it kills by night. Go home and stay inside until dawn. Tell the others and spread the word throughout the villages. No one is to go out alone or at night." Edward, Matthew and Meg nodded in understanding.

Turning to his fellow outlaws, Robert said quietly, "There's nothing more we can do here. In the morning we'll go to Ollerton, Bilsthorpe and Edwinstowe. Perhaps we can learn something more there." With silent assents, his friends made their farewells to the villagers, cautioning them to be careful, and began the trek back toward their camp. Robert and Marion waited until the three villagers' figures had disappeared into the now darkening forest before turning to follow the other wolfsheads.

The walk back to camp was quiet, each of the outlaws engrossed in his own thoughts yet subconsciously scanning his surroundings, watching for trouble. When it came, it was not at all what they had expected. Nearing the intersection of the track and the Nottingham Road, they heard the excited whinnying of horses, the whir of crossbow bolts, and the all too familiar voice of Guy of Gisburne, demanding that an unseen party or parties halt.

Certain that anyone that the sheriff's steward was harassing deserved to be rescued, the outlaws slipped quietly through the trees, years of experience sending each to his place with no need of spoken commands. Nas, Will and Marion made their way to the far side of the road, blocking the exit toward Nottingham. Much, Tuck and John took up positions behind trees, guarding the road in the direction of Lincoln. Just ahead of them, Robert peered through the foliage.

In the center of the road, a mounted Gisburne, escorted by four Nottingham guards, glowered at three figures also on horseback. In the fading light Huntingdon could see that the strangers were well mounted and richly dressed. Not the sort of people whom Gisburne usually bothered.

Times were tense, however. Only last year disturbances against imposition of foreign prelates in English benefices had spread across the midlands. Led by one William Wither, they had involved burning of church barns, robbing of clerical granaries and threatening of foreign persons, clerical or otherwise. King Henry, fonder of his papal overlord than were most of his subjects, had been incensed at this threat to the order of his realm. A law had been pushed through council, ordering every district to maintain a night watch and empowering the sheriffs to arrest any strangers who could not make a good account of themselves. Apparently, de Rainault had decided to make Gisburne's life miserable by sending him out on night watch, and Guy was taking it out on the first party he encountered.

"Who are you?" the steward barked.

Before the captives could answer, Robert whistled, the clear notes echoing in the still evening air. Immediately, Nas, Will and Marion stepped out from their hiding places, bows aimed at Gisburne's men. A split second later, John, Tuck and Much did the same. While the Nottingham soldiers pulled on their reins, their horses dancing uneasily beneath them, and shouted excitedly that it was Robin Hood, Robert stepped forward, grabbing Guy's bridle with one hand while holding Albion defensively in the other.

"Good evening, Guy," he said pleasantly. "What brings you to Sherwood so late?"

The steward, whose short fair hair had long since turned completely gray, uncomfortably reminding Robert of their father, growled back at him. "Wolfshead! This has nothing to do with you."

"But it does," answered Robert, striving to maintain an easy, teasing tone in his voice. In more than twenty years, he had never found the right occasion to tell Guy of their blood relationship. Now, with his father dead and the earldom passed to his young half-brother, John, there seemed to be little purpose. The injustice that had been done to Guy because of his birth could not be undone, and telling him the truth promised only to increase Guy's hatred of the Hooded Man.

Still, the stress of fighting an enemy who was also his brother was wearing on Robert. "You're in our forest now, and everything that happens in Sherwood is our business," he replied.

"Your forest!" Gisburne spat the words. "It's the king's forest, wolfshead, and you are interfering with his justice."

Robert smiled then, aware from long experience that his slow grin could infuriate his brother more than anything else could. "And what business of the king brings you out tonight, Guy? What crime have your prisoners committed?"

"They're strangers," snapped Guy. "Traveling by night. Decent people are at home and in bed at this hour."

"What's that make ya then?" Scarlet whispered loudly, guffawing as he nudged John's side. The other outlaws chuckled in response as Gisburne's face flushed with anger and humiliation.

"*C'est vraiment lui? Robin Hood?*" The query came from Gisburne's female captive and was addressed to the younger of her male companions.

The man, of medium height with thick, dark blond hair that was combed straight back from a broad forehead, answered her succinctly, his gray green eyes twinkling with barely repressed mirth. "*Oui.*"

Ignoring both question and answer, Robert kept his gaze on the steward. "It's dangerous in Sherwood at night, Guy. Or haven't you heard about the deaths?"

Gisburne looked down at the outlaw leader. "That scum in Ollerton and Bilsthorpe?" he drawled. "A wild animal, two dead serfs. What's that to me?"

"Four dead *men*," replied Robert, anger suffusing his words. "And it wasn't an animal."

Guy paled. "Four?" He forced the word out through a tightening throat. "What do mean, it wasn't an animal?"

"No animal kills the way these men were killed," said Huntingdon. "But then, I don't suppose you bothered to inspect their corpses? If you had looked at them, you would have seen for yourself. There's a creature of darkness on the prowl in Sherwood, Guy. If I were you, I'd hasten back to Nottingham where it's safe — and leave Sherwood to us."

During this exchange the Nottingham guards had looked at one another, the fear in their faces undisguised. Gisburne might pretend that the mysterious and brutal deaths meant nothing to him, but the soldiers were more honest. Their fright affected their horses, who once more began to dance uneasily beneath them.

Aware that his men were close to panic, Guy made the only intelligent decision. Smarting at the defeat, he snarled at his perennial enemy, "Next time, wolfshead!" Turning to his guards, he barked, "Back to Nottingham!"

His men needed no encouragement. As they sped off into the gloomy distance, the younger of their erstwhile prisoners applauded and laughed merrily. "*Bien! Merci, Robert.*"

At the sound of his name, Huntingdon spun to face the strangers for the first time. "Do you know me?" he asked the fair haired nobleman. Neither the speaker nor his friends looked familiar.

The young knight smiled, a wide engaging grin spreading across his handsome face. "*Il y avait longtemps!*"

"You know them, Robin?" John stepped forward, his huge bulk offering his leader a shield if necessary.

Robert shook his head. "I don't think so," he answered.

The nobleman spoke again. "*Bien sur, vous ne me connaissez! J'etais enfant terrible quand vous m'avez vu la dernier fois! Je suis Nicholas, Nicholas d'Aucassin.*"

Much nudged Tuck in the ribs. "What's he sayin'?"

The cleric hushed him. "He said that he was just a child when Robert last saw him. That's why he doesn't recognize him."

Huntingdon frowned, a line forming across his forehead. The stranger seemed certain of their prior acquaintance. Searching his memories, he perused the younger man's face. D'Aucassin waited patiently, and something about that patience stimulated the outlaw's remembrance. A small boy, away from home for the first time, gazing with longing upon a squirming litter of black and gray puppies. "Nicholas," he smiled back, his lined face lighting up. "It *has* been a long time."

"Oh gawd," muttered Will melodramatically. "It's another of 'is soddin' noble friends." The former soldier's broad smile and the evident humor in his voice took any sting out of the words.

"Is he a friend?" Marion asked, stepping next to her husband. Although she sensed nothing disquieting about the young knight, she felt distinctly uncomfortable in the presence of his two companions.

"*Mais oui, ma dame Marian!*" Nicholas began. "*Robert et moi ...*"

"*Parlez vous Anglais?*" Robert interrupted him.

With a surprised look, d'Aucassin answered, "Yes."

"Then speak it."

The Frenchman shrugged. "*Mais l'anglais — c'est une langue por les paysans.*"

Tuck and Will, who had picked up a smattering of French when serving in the old King Henry's army, bristled at the insult. "Le'me show 'im what peasants can do," Scarlet muttered under his breath.

"It is my language," Herne's Son responded simply, not giving the former soldier a chance to act on his offer, "and that of my friends."

Nicholas shrugged again and looked at his own friends. "It would appear," he said lightly, "that we speak English. Robert of Huntingdon, may I introduce the Chevalier LaCroix and his ward, la dame Janette." The older man, his face hard beneath his bristly white hair, and the woman, her dark hair and sparkling eyes only a part of her exotic beauty, bowed their heads minisculely in acknowledgement of their names.

In response, Robert introduced his band. "*Marion*, my wife," he corrected d'Aucassin's pronunciation mildly, "John Little, Will Scarlet, Brother Tuck, Much and Nasir."

"A Saracen! Then the stories are true," said Nicholas. "Why did I go to the Holy Land, LaCroix, when there were infidels closer to home?" Nasir did not respond to the gibe, but merely gazed impassively at the Frenchman.

"You've heard stories of us?" Since the newcomer appeared to be an old friend of Robert's, Much approached him as a friend of his own. "Even in France?"

Nicholas laughed again. "Even in France, Much, but first I heard them in Scotland."

"But now is not the time to hear more of them," said Huntingdon. "I told Gisburne the truth. It is not safe to be out at night in Sherwood. For your uncle's sake — and the memory of a day spent at Huntingdon — you are welcome to stay the night with us. I would not wish harm to befall you on your way to Nottingham or wherever you're going." The last words contained a direct question.

"King Henri," LaCroix's accent was strong, his disdain for the language apparent, "has kindly invited us to stay at his lodge in Clipstone for as long as we desire."

"Another Frenchie feeding off English lands," muttered John. "The King's worse than his father! At least John fought the French!"

"Ssssh," chided Tuck. "Nicholas is a friend of Robert's. We don't know that he's one of the King's Poitevins."

"Of that I can assure you," d'Aucassin replied. "I am no Poitevin. My father was vassal to Count Raymond of Toulouse — and I spent my childhood in Scotland. And I have no love for the King of France or his minions."

At the mention of Raymond, Tuck frowned. "Then your father ...," he began.

"Not now, Tuck," said Robert, irritation edging his words. The friar blushed and nodded, understanding the urgency behind his leader's words.

"You *are* welcome," Huntingdon assured his guests, "but we must take precautions." With a gesture, he signaled Tuck, and the cleric pulled several large cloths from the scrip which hung from his shoulder. "You understand?" Robert looked at the French nobles.

They nodded and acquiesced silently as John, the tallest of the outlaws, blindfolded each of them, tying the knots tightly, while Scarlet and Nasir neatly bound the foreigners' hands together. When that had been accomplished, Much, Tuck and John each took one of the horse's bridles and led the animals deeper into Sherwood. Will hurried in front of them to inspect the lay of the land, and Nas trailed behind to make certain that no one followed them. Grasping Marion's hand warmly in his own, Robert walked quietly with his wife behind their guests.

"W

hat brings you to England?" Robert sat before the fire, its flickering flames turning his beard and hair to red gold. The outlaws and their guests had passed swiftly, if circuitously, through Sherwood and arrived at their camp some time ago. While Marion took Janette into the cave to clean and freshen herself in privacy, Much and John had helped LaCroix and d'Aucassin tether and bed down their horses. Nasir had taken up his post as night guard while Will, with a wary glance at the newcomers, had gone to the stream for water. In the center of all this activity, Robert had seated himself, supposedly helping Tuck with the meal preparations, but not slicing a single root or vegetable. The friar, knowing his friend, had simply bustled around him, allowing Huntingdon time to think.

Now, the meal finished, the camp's inhabitants and their guests sat around the fire, enjoying its warmth in the chill evening air of early fall. Above them the moon silvered the leafy branches

which parted to reveal the dozens of stars which pierced the night sky like diamonds lining a velvet cloak. Despite the horrors of the day, it was a perfect night in Sherwood.

Nicholas and his companions had not eaten, claiming that they had dined earlier. But perhaps, Huntingdon told himself, their noble palates had not been tempted by Tuck's standard rabbit stew. Perusing the newcomers' faces, the outlaw leader wondered if he had done right in asking them to the camp. LaCroix and Janette, their elegant clothing proclaiming their aristocratic background as much as did their disdainful looks around the campsite, had spoken little, replying as briefly as possible to direct questions and initiating no exchanges of their own. Nicholas, however, had been voluble, cheerfully telling the band everything he could remember about his long ago visit to Huntingdon. Since Sir Andrew of Kilmartin and his nephew's stay had coincided with the most difficult period in Robert's life, he had no desire to rake over old memories and had not contributed much to the tale. More important to him than the boy d'Aucassin had been twenty-five years ago was the issue of what sort of man the Frenchman was today. The Hooded Man had learned much since he had welcomed Edgar of Huntingdon to Sherwood so many years ago. *Any one* from his previous life could be the harbinger of betrayal. What did he really know about Nicholas? Had he been wrong to bring him here instead of sending him and his, frankly, unlikable companions on their way? He needed to know more about them. D'Aucassin and his friends were evidently on good terms with the king. What, if anything, had they promised Henry in return for that invitation to Clipstone?

Nicholas grinned, the boyish face beneath the thick, gold hair lighting up. "Nothing," he admitted. "We're on our way to Scotland, actually. My cousin has invited us to stay awhile, and, as my friends had not yet seen England, we decided to journey at leisure — new lands, new people. I admit," the French knight's eyes twinkled, "that I hoped we might encounter you. That is why we came to Nottinghamshire. The chevalier and my lady," he looked at LaCroix and Janette, "did not believe me when I said that I had known Robin Hood."

"Your cousin?" asked Robert, still in pursuit of information. "Then Sir Andrew is dead?"

D'Aucassin sobered, the gray-green eyes darkening, the barest trace of sorrow flitting across his handsome face. "Yes, he died five years ago — while I was on Crusade."

"*You* were a crusader?" Will's question was skeptical. Forty years had passed since the Lionheart's campaign to win Jerusalem — an endeavor that, despite the best efforts of the minstrels, could not be termed successful save by comparing it to the travesties and disasters that had seen Constantinople plundered, the soil of France ravaged and the Emperor Frederick II excommunicated even as he led an army into the Holy Land. Judging by Nicholas's age, it could only have been the last of these campaigns on which he had served. If he were telling the truth, that was.

"Yes, I fought with the Emperor," d'Aucassin said, confirming Scarlet's guess.

"Must have been unpleasant," inserted Tuck, who had heard much about the trouble ridden campaign from a young monk at Thornton who had retreated to the cloister after experiencing the disillusioning blend of religion and politics.

D'Aucassin's face went hard. "It was," he said shortly. Turning from the friar back to Robert, he said, "Uncle Andrew was quite fond of you, Robert. He could not believe it when he heard that you had turned wolfshhead — not even when the earl himself confirmed it. He always insisted you'd been bewitched — that you would never have abandoned your father otherwise."

Around him, the outlaws stiffened. The old accusation of betrayal of his family was not something that their leader needed to hear. Robert had been twenty-five years in the forest, his passion for justice and commitment to serving Sherwood's people proven beyond any doubt. That the coming had been difficult, each of his friends knew. But he'd come — and never doubted the

rightness of his doing so. Even David had ultimately accepted Robert's decision and, save for a father's natural desire to have his son by his side, had made no recriminations, only requests that his heir return. Despite that, each of the Hooded Man's band knew that although he felt no regrets for his decision, Robert still felt guilt for leaving his father so long ago.

"My father and I understood one another," Huntingdon said calmly, relieving his friends' anxiety, "but I believe that it was easier for him to let others believe that I was bewitched. Certainly it was less threatening to them to believe that than to question whether I might be right! Sir Andrew was a good man — and a friend to me. I am sorry that he is dead. You must miss him."

Nicholas's eyes darkened once more. "I do," he whispered, his eyes fixed on the fire. "He was all the father I can remember. He raised me as page and squire, then sent me to the king to be knighted."

"King Henry?" asked John.

Nicholas laughed. "No, King Henry is younger than I by seven years. King Alexander knighted me."

"And you served him?" Robert was pleased that the discussion was turning back to d'Aucassin's life.

"No," Nicholas shook his head. "He asked me to — and I was tempted, but I'd been in Scotland since I was seven. I wanted to return home, to Languedoc." He broke off, his face becoming closed.

"Languedoc is not a pleasant place to be," said Tuck quietly. "De Montfort's war ..."

D'Aucassin looked up sharply, his eyes flashing an unholy green. "Pardon me, Brother Tuck, but I do not wish to discuss the Pope's henchman or his war upon my homeland."

Taken aback by the knight's sudden fury, the compassionate cleric nodded, willing to let the matter drop.

Robert, however, was not. He needed to discover Nicholas's character, and what the knight had discovered on his journey home had clearly had much to do with shaping it. "Nicholas," he asked softly, "what happened to your parents? I remember Andrew telling my father that they had stayed in Languedoc when he brought you here."

Controlling his emotions with a visible effort, d'Aucassin looked at the bearded outlaw leader. "They died," he said tightly. "They were at Beziers." He stood abruptly and walked to the trees lining the camp's perimeter. Janette leapt up and followed him. The two exchanged quiet words and then walked further into the trees.

LaCroix looked at the outlaws whose faces displayed various degrees of embarrassment, sadness, or, in Much's case, confusion. "*Nicholas, mon ami,*" he said with an depraved grin, "does not forgive easily. *Excusez moi,* but I will go to him." He stood and followed his friends into the darkness.

"What happened at Beziers?" asked Much.

"The entire city was slaughtered," answered Tuck. "Every man, woman and child, heretic and orthodox alike. De Montfort, father to Earl Simon of Leicester, wanted to make an example, to encourage other towns not to resist."

"Poor Nicholas," murmured Marion. "he must have been very young when it happened."

Robert nodded. "It was early in the war. I remember hearing of the massacre from Abbot Martin. He was incensed that the Pope had given sanction to such a crime."

"Martin never had much respect for the Pope after that," chimed in the sheriff's former chaplain. "He decided that he would follow the example of our lord, serve those in need and not worry about the decrees of those who called themselves his superiors. Fortunately for Croxden — and for Sherwood — his soul was nearer to Brother Francis's than to Dominic's."

The outlaws nodded, remembering the iron-willed abbot whose soul had burned for justice as strongly as did their own. Martin had been dead for more than ten years, but his legacy lived on at Croxden Abbey, still a center for pilgrimage and a refuge for all those in need.

"Well," said Scarlet, bringing his friends back to the present, "what're we gonna do with our guests?"

John shook his head, his face grim. "There's sommat wrong with that LaCroix. I can't put me finger on it, but he feels wrong — like the baron."

Marion supported him, her face paling at the mention of Belleme who had come for her yet again in an attempt to trap Herne's second son. "John's right. He's ... cold. And so is Janette, though not so deeply."

"She's right 'andsome," said Will regretfully, "but I know what you mean. Wouldn't want 'er in me bed! She'd freeze it before she'd warm it."

"Since when have you been so particular?" The tall shepherd teased his friend, hoping to lighten the conversation.

Will glared, but did not respond to the gibe. "She's cold," he repeated.

"What about Nicholas?" asked Robert. "Can we trust him?" He looked at his wife and friends, knowing that if he had made a bad decision, their lives could well be in danger.

"I think we can trust him," the woman answered slowly. "He's bitter," she looked at her husband, "and he's carrying a lot of anger, but it's not directed toward us. And he is fond of you," she added, reaching out to take his hand into her own.

John nodded. "Wouldn't trust the other two as far as I could throw 'em," he said, "but Nicholas feels different. 'Sides, they'll only be here a few days and then they're off. We can keep on eye on Clipstone just to be sure," he concluded.

Robert smiled. "My idea exactly." Then, his mind returning to the horrific deaths which had taken place in the past few weeks, he shifted the discussion. "Tomorrow," he said, looking at each of his friends, "John, Marion and I are going to Edwinstowe to see what we can find out about Martin. Will, you and Nas go to Ollerton, Tuck and Much, Bilsthorpe. Ask to see where the bodies were found, when Jack and Tom left the village — anything you can think of that might help. Then get back here before dark." His gray eyes commanding, he added, "The one thing we do know is that whatever it is, it strikes at night. Remember to warn the villagers to stay inside after dark."

The outlaws nodded in agreement. "If we're to be off tomorrow," said Tuck, "we'd best get some rest now." Standing, he went to bank the fire, while his friends unrolled their sleeping furs and prepared the camp for the night.

"What about them?" asked Much, pointing in the direction into which Nicholas and his companions had vanished.

"I'll wait up for them," said his leader. "Get some sleep, Much. It's been a long day."

"For you, too," replied the red-haired man. As he'd grown older, the miller's son had grown wise in reading his friends, and he sensed that Huntingdon was stretched thin, drawn out with worry as well as exhausted physically.

"I'll be fine," Robert assured him, flashing him a brief, weary smile that told the younger man he recognized and appreciated his empathy.

"That's all right then," said Much lightly, poking gentle fun at his own youthful simplicity.

Robert smiled again and then turned to Marion. As her eyes searched his, not missing a trace of the weariness, anxiety and stress which he did not attempt to hide from her, she sighed. "What can it be, Robert? What could be so vicious? To kill those poor men so savagely?"

"I don't know," he said, "but we'll find it — and then, we'll deal with it. Together."

Her brow uncreased although her green eyes were still anxious. "Together," she repeated the word that had become a talisman between them. As Robert enfolded her in his arms, she lifted her face to kiss him. "Don't stay up all night," she chided. "You need your rest as well."

Within a few moments, the outlaws, save for Nasir and Robert, had settled in their places and fallen into much needed slumber. As he peered across the camp, Huntingdon took comfort at the sight of Nasir's sturdy figure, keeping watch. Whatever was on the loose in Sherwood this night, his family was together and safe. Staring into the forest, he prayed that his children, sent so far away for their own security, were safe as well. Clandestine visits once a year were not enough to ease the ache of separation felt by the Hooded Man and his lady, but both knew that the children were better off in Scotland than in Sherwood. Especially now. His thoughts returning to the problem at hand, Huntingdon hoped that their unexpected guests had encountered no trouble in their night ramble. Nicholas and his companions had not seemed overly concerned by the outlaws' tale of a killer on the prowl, but Robert had put that down to aristocratic arrogance — and ignorance of the forest — two qualities which, in Sherwood, often led to disaster.

Despite his determination to stay awake until the French travelers returned, Huntingdon found himself nodding off. It was not until a low whistle from the Saracen alerted him that he came fully awake to see Nicholas, LaCroix and Janette reentering the camp. Carefully scrutinizing them for any signs of trouble or injury, he found that they were fine. More than fine, they seemed refreshed, rested even, their eyes bright, their faces flushed. The walk in Sherwood had obviously done them good.

"My apologies, Robert," Nicholas sat down next to the outlaw leader. "I fear that some matters touch me too deeply for politeness."

Well understanding that, Robert nodded sympathetically. "It's all right, Nicholas. But you should be careful about venturing alone in the forest. It is never safe — and is even less so now."

"Ah yes," the changeable eyes lit with a strange kind of mirth, "your mysterious killer. I can take care of myself, Robert. Have no fear."

Something in d'Aucassin's eyes told Robert that the knight was merely speaking the truth. "I believe you," he said simply, "but take care anyway. You have been our guest. For that and for Sir Andrew's sake, I wish you no harm. In the morning Will and Nas are going to Ollerton. Clipstone is on the way, so they can guide you safely there."

"No need," replied Nicholas. "My friends and I like to get an early start. We stumbled across a track that led to the road. We'll be away long before dawn." At Robert's look of surprise, he added, "It's an old habit, learned on crusade. The Holy Land is very hot. One travels in the cool of early morning whenever possible. Thank you for guesting us, Robert — and for rescuing us from that fool of a steward! No disrespect to you, but if all the sheriff's men are such as he, it is no wonder that Robin Hood rules Sherwood!"

Robert's lips quirked. "Guy has his good points," he came to his brother's defense. "Not many, but he does have them. Besides, I'm not certain that we did you a favor. If we had not come along, you would surely have spent the night in Nottingham Castle, on a good feather bed, not the hard ground."

D'Aucassin looked at the peaceful scene around them, his eyes lingering on the sheltering trees, the wind sighing gently through their branches, and the cheerful red glow of the banked fire as he sensed the invisible but tangible bonds which linked the outlaws to one another. He smiled wistfully. "I think that Sherwood is a far happier resting place than de Rainault's castle. *Bon soir, Robert, et au revoir.*"

The Frenchman stood and walked over to his two friends. Quietly they made their beds in the sleeping furs provided by the outlaws and settled in for what was left of the night. Robert did likewise, lying down next to Marion and brushing her forehead with a gentle kiss. She stirred and eased her body next to his, the two of them fitting together as if carved out of the same piece of wood. Carefully pulling up the fur cover, Robert closed his eyes and was soon asleep.

As the bearded Saracen stood guard, the outlaws and their visitors slumbered peacefully in the security of their forest haven.

T

he next morning, true to d'Aucassin's word, the French knight and his noble companions were gone from the camp. The absence of their horses and baggage testified to the definitiveness of their departure.

"Good riddance," muttered Will. "Din't need them 'angin' around while we was lookin' for the killer. Bleedin' nobles 'ud just get in our way."

Truth be told, Robert agreed with him. With Nicholas out of the way, he could concentrate on finding the evil in Sherwood and combatting it.

Their plans set the night before, the outlaws made a hasty breakfast and then scattered to their appointed tasks. In Edwinstowe, Robert, Marion and John were able to learn little more that aided them in their search. Crossing the tiny River Maun at the ford, they rounded the bend in the track and entered the village from the south. In front of the lovely stone church which rested like a jewel upon the low hill in the center of the settlement, they encountered Father James, the parish priest, and his flock. Despite the kindly, white-haired cleric's best efforts to calm his people, the villagers were tense and excitable.

"What you gonna do, Robin?" asked a skinny, dark-haired man whose blue eyes were bright with fear.

"You will find out who did this, won't you?" His wife, as thin as he, looked anxiously at the wolfshhead leader.

"Brothers and sisters," pleaded James, "stand back. Give them space — and time, my children." Looking at Robert, the elderly man said quietly, "I suppose you want to see the body. We carried it into the Church. Seemed more fitting as well as safer there."

Robert nodded and, followed by John and Marion, with the rest of the village trailing behind them, entered the beautifully carved church. The church would always be special to him and his wife as it had been here that Tuck had married them.

In the fresh morning light which passed through the plain, clear windows, Martin's bier stood out starkly. Moving to its side, Huntingdon saw once again the violated neck, the exposed throat, the utter vulnerability of death which he had seen on each of the other victims. As he gazed at the corpse, the anger within him building at the cruelty which had brought about this death, he heard James begin, quietly, a prayer for the repose of Martin's soul. Although it had been half a lifetime since he had recited Latin prayers for his mother's peace in the chapel at Huntingdon, Robert found his lips moving in unison with the priest's. Next to him, Marion did the same while John, his expressive face lined with compassion, prayed silently in English.

When they had retreated outdoors once again, Robert questioned first James and then the villagers, but learned only that Martin had been seeing a girl in Warsop. The last time anyone had seen him alive had been early four nights ago when he had waved jauntily to his brother, John, promising to be back in plenty of time to help clear the post-harvest stubble from the field in the morning.

"'e stayed with Alice all night," his brother supplied. "I went to see 'er after we found 'im. 'e got up early — told 'er 'e 'ad to be back 'ere 'fore dawn or I'd 'ave 'is 'ide." The man's voice broke and his shoulders shook as his eyes filled with tears. "It's my fault 'e's dead!" he wailed. "If I 'adn'ta made such a fuss 'bout the field, 'e'd still be alive!"

"John! I'll have none of that!" Father James broke in sternly. "It is not your fault. Some wild beast took your brother's life. We all grieve for him — and for you. We'll miss him. But he would not want you to blame yourself."

"James is right," Robert said. "Something or someone is loose in Sherwood. It kills." Praying that he was not erring in telling the villagers the truth and possibly risking a panic, he quickly related the stories of the other deaths. If the people of Edwinstowe were frightened enough to be cautious, but not panicked, perhaps more deaths could be avoided.

A murmur spread through the crowd as he finished, but, strengthened by Father James's stalwart demeanor, they listened patiently to the outlaws' warnings. They promised to travel always in the company of at least one other person and not to go outside at all after nightfall until Robert gave them the word that it was safe to do so.

They viewed the stretch of woodland between the two villages in which Martin's body had been discovered, but found no more clues than they had found earlier outside of Wickham. The three outlaws made their farewells and returned to their camp deep in the heart of Sherwood.

The other wolfsheads had found no new information either. Frustrated but determined, Robert kept himself and his band on roving patrols that scoured the forest irregularly over the next few days, hoping to surprise the creature whatever it might be. Despite their efforts, two more deaths took place — in Papplewick and on the Mansfield Road. As before, there were no clues. Spurred by the new attacks, the band intensified its efforts. Late one night as Huntingdon — contrary to his own instructions — tarried beside the Nottingham Road, he spied a lone soldier, trudging unhappily along the rutted by-way.

"Guy must not have taken my warning seriously," he thought. "More likely," Earl David's younger son mused, "he doesn't give a damn about the life of a lowly guard." Preparing to warn the man and escort him, if need be, to the very gates of Nottingham, he slipped soundlessly from his perch in a thick, lichen-encrusted birch.

Before he could utter a sound, however, a shadow came between him and the soldier. Sweeping out of nowhere like a gigantic bat, it enveloped the blue-cloaked man who emitted a single, sharp shriek of terror and then collapsed, falling to the ground. The deeper darkness that was the shadow sank to the earth along with him. In an obscene parody of a lover's embrace, it lifted the guard's head, bending its own head tenderly over it.

For a long moment nothing moved as Robert stood, paralyzed. Breaking free of his horror, he stepped forward, drawing Albion from its sheathe. In the dim light of the ebbing moon, the blade glistened, throwing light upon the deadly shadow. "Stop!" ordered Herne's son. "You have no leave to kill in Sherwood, and that man has done you no harm. Let him be!"

For seconds, everything was still, even the horrible sucking noise which had chilled Huntingdon's blood ceasing. Then, slowly, the creature raised its head. As it did so, the black hood which had shrouded its features fell back, revealing a recently familiar golden mane. The hair was Nicholas d'Aucassin's, but as the outlaw stared in shock, for a moment he doubted that the face belonged to the man who had spent an evening with the outlaws so short a time ago, so altered was it. The handsome features which had so easily broken into an engaging smile, charming all of them against their better judgment, were twisted with rage and lust. Beneath the glassy eyes, which glowed a hellish yellow-green, the mouth formed a vicious snarl. Blood coated it and dripped from the long, dagger-shaped teeth which had penetrated the guard's throat, and flowed down the man's — if he could still be called that — chin.

"Nicholas!" The word was torn from Huntingdon in a horrified whisper.

Growling like a maddened animal, d'Aucassin shoved the soldier aside as if the body were no more substantial than a leaf and leapt to his feet with a sensuous, feline grace. Without seeming to move at all, he was inches away from his next victim before Robert, responding to an insistent voice in his head, raised Albion, hilt upwards, before him. As the moon, coming out from behind a cloud, struck Wayland's seventh sword, the weapon burst into a blinding illumination, a shining white cross in the darkness.

Howling as if he'd been thrown into the fires of hell, the French knight fell backwards, hiding his blood-smeared face with his hands. "Put it down, Robert," Nicholas cried out in agony. "For the love of God, put it down!"

"What can *you* know of God?" asked the wolfshead leader coldly, his revulsion at what he had just witnessed making his voice unyielding.

D'Aucassin retreated from the circle of light thrown by the sword and, as if revived by the darkness which seemed to enfold him in its arms, glared haughtily at Robert. "As much as you can, *Herne's Son!*"

Absurdly, Huntingdon felt the urge to laugh at the insanity of it. Nicholas, some how, some way, had been transformed into a fiend who fed on and then murdered his own kind. (Or were they? Just what was the Frenchman now? Could he even be termed human any more?). And he was taunting *him* with the hoary accusation of demon worship. Recognizing it for the diversionary tactic it was, he ignored it.

"Nicholas," still holding Albion as a talisman before him, he stepped toward the *thing* he had once known as a child. "What has happened to you? What have you become?"

"What does it matter?" The Frenchman shrugged, the movement and the bleak look in his now normal-appearing eyes expressing a cynicism far beyond any Huntingdon had ever witnessed. "What is it to you? *He,*" d'Aucassin shifted his gaze to the guard who, still stunned but thankfully breathing, lay in the middle of the road, "cannot possibly matter to you!"

"He matters," said Robert tightly.

Nicholas looked at him with undisguised scorn. "He's the sheriff's soldier. Your enemy."

"He's a man," replied Huntingdon.

"That hasn't stopped you and your cutthroats from killing his kind whenever you feel like it. Your hands are as bloody as mine, *wolfshead!*"

The accusation stung, but Robert would not allow its validity. "Yes," he admitted, "I do kill. We," he referred to the members of his band, "kill when we have to, to defend ourselves or others who cannot do it for themselves. But we do not do it lightly — or with pleasure."

"I am sure that it is very comforting to the grieving widows that their men were cut down by the *noble* Robin Hood, who killed them unwillingly, but oh-so-effectively." As the outlaw leader winced, Nicholas continued his verbal assault. "He's your enemy," he repeated. "He'd have killed you without a second thought."

"Most likely," Robert granted the supposition, "but that was no reason to kill him — or the others." He stared at the knight, waiting for a response to his unspoken accusation.

"They were scum, Robert. *Paysans*. They mean nothing to such as we!"

Huntingdon's face was livid with rage, his eyes two gray chips, as hard and implacable as the granite they resembled. "It was to fight that belief that I came to Sherwood," he said through clenched teeth. "Will thinks that all nobles are blood-sucking leeches. Are you intent upon proving him right?"

D'Aucassin laughed coldly. "The high-minded people's hero!" he taunted. "Are you so sure of yourself? Do you always do the right thing, Robert? The king would not say so, nor," he launched a verbal dart, "would your family. You are a *wolfshead*, a traitor, a thief — and a killer just like me."

Honesty compelled Robert to admit the partial truth in Nicholas's accusation. He *was* a killer, the blood of many a man who was guilty of no more than doing his duty as the sheriff's man on his hands. He too had known rage, the urge to utterly annihilate his enemies. If Tuck and John had not forcibly held him back, he recalled, he would have cold-bloodedly taken the lives of every one of the Sisters of Arianrhod who had stolen Marion from him, bewitching her into becoming their high priestess in recompense for the death of Owen of Clun.¹ It was only by the grace of his friends — and the small voice of compassion which dwelled within him — that he had been able to see the twisted women for what they were — victims of an evil which was slowly destroying them more surely than any death he could administer was capable of doing.

Light and darkness. He knew them both. Huntingdon was a righteous man, but he had never been self-righteous. A healthy awareness of his own shortcomings — and thus an understanding of those of others — was innate to him. Recalling a phrase from a German romance Father Gilbert had once translated for him, he quoted softly, "'If inconstancy is the heart's neighbor, the soul will not fail to find it bitter. Blame and praise alike befall when a dauntless man's spirit is black and white — mixed like the magpie's plumage. Yet he may see blessedness after all, for both colors have a share in him, the color of heaven and the color of hell. Inconstancy's companion is all black and takes on the hue of darkness, while he of steadfast thoughts clings to white.'"²

Both colors had their share in him, but he had chosen to balance them, to serve the light as best an imperfect man could. What had happened to Nicholas to make him choose the dark?

"Yes," he said at length, "there is darkness in me — as there is in all of us. But I am not like you."

"Just like me!" Nicholas insisted, eerily echoing the words of Adam Bell, a good man now long dead.

"No," Huntingdon was suddenly calm. The certainty that, whatever sins stained his soul (and he knew that they were many), he found no pleasure in taking life gave him strength. "We are not alike, but once," his eyes bored into d'Aucassin's, "we were. Once you were a loving, generous child who wanted only to be a great knight. What happened to that child, Nicholas? What happened to you?"

The Frenchman laughed again, bitterly this time. "You wish to know, Robert? To know how the color of hell has taken me? Then sit beside me," he grinned wickedly at the outlaw's hesitation, "and I will tell you. I promise," he added with macabre humor, "I won't bite."

Again Huntingdon hesitated. Whatever d'Aucassin had once been, he was a killer now, a servant of evil who took life randomly and without thought. The Frenchman should be destroyed before he killed again. Yet, in spite of his revulsion against Nicholas's actions, the outlaw leader *felt* the presence of good within the knight as clearly as if he were viewing the white feathers among the dark in a magpie's plumage. There was something in him capable of redemption. Trusting his instincts, Robert lowered Albion. "Help me see to him," he pointed at the guard.

"He'll be all right," Nicholas said matter-of-factly. "You came upon us before I could do more than taste of him. He'll have a sore throat in the morning, but nothing more. Not even a memory of how narrowly he escaped death."

Once again the outlaw scanned his companion's face. Satisfied that the knight was telling the truth, he nodded. After pulling the guard to a grassy spot off the road, he gestured to Nicholas to follow him deeper into the security of Sherwood's trees. Coming to rest beside a small stream, whose low waters sparkled in the faint light of the moon, he sat on the mossy bank and waited for d'Aucassin to join him.

At the water's side, Nicholas bent to clean the blood from his face and then stood, demonstrating once again that catlike grace which Robert, whose joints ached more with each year spent in the damp of a forest winter, could only envy. His face clear of the carmine stains, d'Aucassin looked completely human as he came to sit beside the Hooded Man.

"W

hen we left Huntingdon," Nicholas began with a point of common reference, "we went directly to Kilmartin. My uncle was eager to see his wife and children again, and they welcomed us warmly." The French knight's voice softened as he recalled his happy childhood spent in the western lands of Scotland. "I have told you that I was first my uncle's page and then his squire. His training was strict, but fair — and always given with love."

Robert nodded. "He was master of pages for King William when I was a boy. He worked us hard, but looked after us like a mother hen!" Affection tinged his voice. "He was a good man and he taught us well."

"Too good perhaps," d'Aucassin replied. "He believed in right and wrong, that the just man would be rewarded, that God actually cares what happens to us." Nicholas coated his words with sarcasm, but could not hide the pain which underlay them.

"And *you* believed *him*," offered Huntingdon quietly. "You wanted to be just like him."

"I was a fool!"

"No," Robert demurred, "you were — are — a good man, too."

The knight's face darkened, the set of his mouth hardening. "The man who believes that it is possible to be pure is a deluded imbecile, a danger to himself and others. Even Lancelot could not escape corruption!"

"But purity is not demanded," said Robert suddenly recognizing the source of d'Aucassin's bitterness. David of Huntingdon would have been pleased to see that, without abandoning his hatred of injustice, his son had come to recognize the limits of human nature. A man did what he could do. Though others might condemn him for not achieving the impossible, God would not. "Lancelot was granted the grail," he said softly.

"A glimpse only!" Nicholas's voice was raw with pain. "Not to touch, not to be healed!"

"And you want to be healed, Nicholas? To be the best knight in the world? "

"No!" The denial was swift, angry — and ineffective. "That was a child's fantasy, Robert. Men do not care about the good, *mon bandit hardi*, only about their goods, what is theirs — power, wealth, influence. That is what men crave, those without desiring them and those who possess them wanting more. Surely you are not cretinous enough to deny this!"

The outlaw leader considered his words carefully before replying. Armored in his cynicism, d'Aucassin would only pour scorn upon any denial of his assessment. Moreover, Robert did not doubt that Nicholas's analysis was true for many people. Given a choice between what was right and two pennies added to his coffers, Robert de Rainault would choose the pennies every time. Yet even he accorded the lives of the villagers some value — if only to fill those very coffers by their labor. And as for his steward! Anger had corroded Guy of Gisburne's soul, staining it, warping it, leaving little trace of human decency in his brother. But Guy, maddened as he'd been by the sheriff's betrayal and Gulnar's sorcery, had still refused to kill de Rainault like an abattoir animal. "I am not a butcher," he had said, knowing at the time that the words were his own death sentence. Throughout their years of conflict, Robert had clung to that memory, believing against all evidence — and Scarlet's absolute conviction — that even Gisburne was redeemable.

"I do not deny that there is truth in what you are saying. Men are greedy, self-seeking and power hungry." His eyes thoughtful as he attempted to counter the knight's pessimism, he continued. "But we are much more than that."

Nicholas snorted in contempt. "There you are right, Robert! We are venal, lying, ungrateful hypocrites! Those who prate most loudly of the good, certain to be the greatest criminals of all." As Huntingdon made to protest, he interrupted him. "Life has taught me this. Shall I tell you how?"

Having asked the Frenchman to reveal the origins of his transformation, Huntingdon nodded and waited for him to recommence his tale.

"After I was knighted, King Alexander asked me to serve in his household guard, but I refused. I was innocent then. I did believe in the justice that Andrew had taught me. I thought that if I returned to Languedoc, I could regain my father's lands. It would not restore him or my mother to life, but it would be something. I could honor them by restoring their reputation and continuing their line upon the lands that had belonged to my forefathers.

"I did not believe that it would be difficult. Although they were slaughtered at Beziers," Nicholas's face darkened once again, "my parents were no heretics. There were numerous witnesses to their orthodoxy. If I appealed to the papal legate, to the Pope's secular arm, de Montfort, surely they would give me justice.

"But when I arrived in Avignon, just after Louis of France had taken the city, I discovered otherwise. Nearly twenty years had passed since Innocent first declared war on my homeland." D'Aucassin's eyes were hard, angry. "Do you know what twenty years of crusade can do to a land? The *holy*," he spat the word, "knights and soldiers who came to fight the Cathari evil made no distinction between heretic and orthodox. The men of the north saw only enemies to kill — and lands to steal. Cities and villages once prosperous, castle halls in which my father's songs had once been sung — all were burned or devastated. And what was left was given to de Montfort's minions.

"When I appealed to Humbert de Beaujeu, the king's vicar, he first fobbed me off with insincere promises and excuses that there was no time to deal with such a small issue while the war against Count Raymond's son was still unsettled. Angered by his arrogance and disinterest, I turned to the papal legate, but he, engrossed in the task of rooting out heresy, sent me back to Humbert. For nearly a year I waited, living as little more than a beggar while others, with less right, took whatever they could grab.

"At length I demanded an audience, demanded justice. Beaujeu was still at war with Raymond VII, eager to gratify those who supported him in the fight — especially Amalric de Montfort. And *he* had given my father's land — my land — to one of his knights. Humbert did not wish to offend the strongest man in Languedoc, to lose his support. So my parents were declared heretic, my inheritance forfeit. What was truth set against the needs of the powerful?"

Anger at the injustice filled Huntingdon. Similar instances of the proclivity of those in power to ignore justice, truth and even commonly known facts if their needs could thereby be served had filled a youthful earl's son with rage, driving him to renounce his heritage in order to oppose them. That men were capable of the vilest acts, he well knew. Had not Edgar of Huntingdon lied outright, accusing David of witchcraft and treason? All to gain his brother's earldom. Still young at the time and but newly come to the greenwood, Robert had been deeply shaken by his uncle's perfidy — and his own blindness to it. If not for the understanding of his friends, he might well have become as cynical as was Nicholas, doubting others and himself equally. If brother could betray brother, upon what could a man rely?

"I am sorry, Nicholas," he said, knowing that the sympathy was powerless to change anything.

D'Aucassin laughed bitterly. "So were my father's friends, but they could do nothing either. They had themselves and their families to look after. They could not risk aiding the son of condemned heretics. But one of them told me that if a man took a crusader's vow, the Church was bound to protect his property. The Pope had lost interest in Languedoc. He was all hot for a renewed war in the Holy Land, had been pressing the Emperor for years to fulfill his vow. And now Frederick had promised, planning to leave for Palestine within weeks. Perhaps, my father's old friend suggested, if I took the oath and followed him, the Church would reward me by restoring my patrimony. Even if it did not, he added, I would be a crusader, with all the privileges of a holy warrior and a chance for glory in the recovering of Jerusalem.

"We were raised on such stories, Robert. You know that my uncle desired to fight with the Lionheart and was only restrained from doing so by King William's insistence that he was needed at home. The stories of his victories — and the greater ones of the First Crusade — were pounded into us. What greater glory could a man achieve than to fight for God and recover the Holy Sepulchre?"

Years removed from the schoolroom at Huntingdon in which the same tales and values had been drilled into his head, the outlaw leader could still feel their pull. Had not Richard Lionheart been his own first idol? Had not he burned to follow the king on his holy war? Andrew's values would have been equally strong in his nephew. "So you became a crusader," he said simply.

"Yes." For a long time, Nicholas was silent, not elucidating that bald statement. Then, when the quiet had stretched beyond endurance, he began to talk once more.

"I was not alone," d'Aucassin smiled crookedly. "There were many others as eager for the glories of crusading as I."

"I remember," Robert replied. "The Pope's agents were busy here in England. Many left to accompany the emperor."

"Unfortunately, he did not accompany *us*," answered Nicholas. "We sailed from Brindisi in August, but he remained in Italy. When we reached the Holy Land, some returned home upon learning that Frederick was not with us, but I, with the main force, marched to Ceasarea and Jaffa. For months we stayed there, restoring the fortifications, but fighting no Saracens while we waited for the Emperor.

"Gregory," the knight referred to the Pope, the ninth of that name, "grew impatient as well. While Frederick lingered at Otranto, claiming illness, the Pope excommunicated him. We were holy warriors, but our leader — who had not yet bothered to join us — was under the church's ban. When he finally did reach us, after more than a year's delay, he was still excommunicated and unrecognized as a crusader.

"Whether the Pope simply wanted to punish him for non-fulfillment of his vows," Nicholas mused, "or whether he merely sought excuse to invade the Emperor's lands in Apulia made no difference to me. I was there to recover Jerusalem — and to redeem my family's honor. Nothing — not the heat, the dust, the flies — nothing could discourage me. It took my fellow men to do that."

His eyes world-weary beyond his years, he explained. "Most of my comrades were ignorant, arrogant animals — much like de Rainault's steward. Though all around them lay the richness of the Saracens' culture, they despised it — and them as well. Clinging to their own ways, they wore wool surcoats and chain mail in the hottest months of summer." His nose crinkled in disgust. "They never bathed, considering it an infidel degeneracy. To them the most learned or cultured Mohammedan or Jew was worth less than one of their own hunting dogs! They were living in the Holy Land and they might as well have never left their own pig sties." Nicholas looked at the man sitting beside him as if expecting an argument, but Robert had seen too many examples of the men d'Aucassin was describing to question the veracity of his statements.

"Most of them," the knight repeated, "but not the Emperor."

"The wonder of the world," Robert murmured, quoting the appellation that had attached itself to Frederick.

"Or simply a practical man, and *that* is a wonder," responded the younger man. "He knew that we could not take Jerusalem. We were too few in number, too ill equipped. But *he* was not above consorting with the Saracen, and he knew their weaknesses as well as his own. He'd been in contact with the ruler of Egypt, al-Kamil, since before his departure — and he'd deliberately led him to believe that our position was much stronger than it was. He persuaded al-Kamil to see us as a counter to the ruler of Damascus — his own brother. For our support against al-Mu'azzam and a guarantee of Egypt's security, he was willing to give us a large piece of the Holy Land, including Jerusalem herself. And all without fighting. Of course the Emperor accepted the offer.

"We marched to Jaffa, and he signed the treaty, promising in return to observe a ten years truce and give no aid to other Christians who might attack Egypt. Without bloodshed, he had gained the prize that eluded Richard, but, of course, he had dealt with the infidel. For that, Holy Mother Church could not forgive him." Contempt filled Nicholas's voice. "The patriarch of Jerusalem lay an interdict on his own city for being freed in such a manner. Frederick entered the city, went through a formal crown-wearing, but still the church refused to recognize his accomplishment. The excommunication was not lifted, his possession of the Holy City never accepted by the Pope. So much for the rewards to be won by taking the cross!"

"We returned to Acre, but found the city in an uproar. Neither the patriarch, the nobles of the kingdom nor the Templars were happy with what the Emperor had done. While armed bands of soldiers roamed the streets, terrorizing the populace, the powers that be hindered and obstructed everything Frederick tried to do. And, if that were not enough," disgust lingered on the French knight's face, "we soon heard that the Pope had invaded the Emperor's own lands in Italy. That was enough for him — and for me.

"He planned to leave in secret early in the morning, but word got out and the people of Acre followed us to the port — throwing rotten meat and refuse at us.

"*That* was our reward for winning Jerusalem." In the pale moonlight d'Aucassin's face was sardonic. "The holy city was recovered by an excommunicate, whose crusade was unrecognized and whose lands were being invaded by papal armies. Jerusalem herself remained under an interdict imposed by her own patriarch and her liberators left Palestine covered with offal!"³

The bizarre ending of Frederick's crusade was known throughout Christendom. Robert knew that Nicholas had neither lied nor exaggerated in his account of it. Less idealistic men than d'Aucassin had been sickened by its history. How much more disillusioning these events had been to a young man still steeped in Andrew of Kilmartin's respect for the church was easy to see.

Given no justice by the secular authorities in Languedoc and only disillusion by the spiritual powers in the Holy Land, Nicholas had come to despise them all. But that, apparently, was not the extent of the younger man's disenchantment, for he was speaking again.

"The only one I still had any respect for," he said, "was the Emperor. So I returned with him to Italy, to help him regain his lands. The Pope had to lift the excommunication, but he did not cease in his enmity. No sooner was Frederick back in Italy than Gregory began meddling in the communes in the north, stirring up the citizens against their ruler. The Holy Father!" Nicholas exclaimed disdainfully. "Control of Italy, not the salvation of souls was what he sought. I suppose," he twisted his mouth in a parody of a smile, "no one ever told him that Christ played no politics, led no army. What the carpenter from Nazareth lived without, Gregory desired.

"His interference in the Emperor's attempts to control the north resulted in more fighting, in more bloodshed — Christians killing Christians, of course — in more deaths and more betrayals." The changeable eyes lit with a wicked glee. "Do you think you have seen double-dealing and hypocrisy here, Robert? The English are children compared to the Italians. There is nothing — and no one — they will not sell if they see a profit in it. I saw more throats cut in a single day in Genoa than I had in a year in the Holy Land — and all for personal gain.

"It sickened me." Three words, summing up a young man's disillusion. What injustice in his homeland and the most blatant hypocrisy in the Holy Land had begun, the casual and internecine violence of the Italian communes had completed. In five short years Nicholas had seen enough to disgust a saint — and nothing to convince him that the world was anything but a cesspool.

Seated upon the mossy stream bank, his nostrils filled with the sweet smell of the forest at night, Robert knew — and thanked God for it — that his own life had been blessed. Evil he had encountered in many guises and disillusion as well. But there had always been some one or some thing, even in his deepest despair, to pull him back, to remind him that darkness was but one part of existence, that day followed night and even the least likely of men was capable of committing a decent act. For d'Aucassin there had been no one.

"What did you do next?" he asked quietly, not wanting to prick the knight's pride by expressing a compassion Nicholas clearly did not want.

"I left. I went back to France, determined to be no better than the world in which I found myself. I made my way to Paris where I played at being a student. Perhaps," he laughed bitterly, "part of me still hoped that the wise men of the schools could give me back my faith. If so, I was wrong. The most degenerate toper, the lowest whore in Paris knew more of life than did my good teachers. When I could manage to make myself attend lectures, I either slept my way through them or spent my time bedeviling the scholars by pointing out the depths of their ignorance." He smiled wryly. "No wonder they had me expelled. I took to the taverns then with a vengeance. And that's when ..." he paused, looking off into inky recesses of Sherwood, "when I met Janette."

Something about the stillness of the knight told Huntingdon that Nicholas had reached the central point in his tale.

"She was beautiful, of course," he mused. "You have seen her for yourself. But I had known handsome women before. It was not her beauty, not the sensuality that was second nature to her, but something else. She was dangerous. Her very scent exuded the darkness I was seeking so assiduously. I knew it and I wanted to taste of it."

As if anticipating the outlaw's protest, d'Aucassin said heatedly, "Why should I not have? Goodness had brought me nothing." His anger ebbing as quickly as it had arisen, he added tonelessly, "I was ready to be evil."

After all that he had heard, Robert was saddened but not surprised by the confession. The evil Nicholas had willingly embraced had since possessed him, devouring more and more of him until he had become the *thing* which Huntingdon had come upon earlier in the night. "You wanted darkness?" he whispered.

"It is all that exists!" the younger man snarled. "Light is a delusion. Only the dark is real, and I recognized it in Janette. She thought she was seducing me, but I was using her, using her to plumb the depths of depravity." His grin was feral. "There was nothing that we did not essay. And still I demanded more. The darkness was not enough to fill me."

"Or to hide the pain," offered Robert compassionately.

"No!" Again the denial was sharp and, as before, impotent. "There was more to learn, more to experience, and I knew it and I knew that Janette was the one to reveal it to me. She played with me, as a cat would with a mouse, revealing new levels reluctantly. But at last she brought me to LaCroix.

"He had power. You cannot be near him without feeling it. I sensed at once that *he* had the secret, the answer to my quest. I wanted to become his acolyte, to let my true education begin. From Janette he had learned all that we had done together — exploring all the sewers of Paris — whether they were under the gambling dens of the Left Bank or in a cardinal's bedroom.

"He saw that I had experienced enough, that my contempt for humanity — including my own rotten self — was as complete as possible, and then he revealed the truth to me. He and Janette were not human, although they had once been. They had grown beyond humanity, metamorphosed into something higher, stronger. And I, he told me, could do the same. He was willing to take me through the change *if* I came across the gulf that separated mankind and *his* kind willingly."

Huntingdon's spirit chilled at the words. Somehow, despite all that he had witnessed and been told, part of him wanted to believe that Nicholas d'Aucassin was innocent, that the monster he had seen savaging the guard's body was a fiend who had possessed the French knight, a being as external as it was evil. But Sir Andrew's nephew, by his own admission, had knowingly, of his own volition, become something other than human.

Ignoring his listener's horror — and perhaps immune to it — Nicholas completed the tale of his transformation. "They — and I — are vampires," he said. At Robert's look of incomprehension, he added, "The undead. *Nosferatu*. We are immortal, Robert! We cannot die — save for by a few ways which I am certain you will pardon me for not divulging to you. Everything we desire is ours. The world is for us to take from as we want. Nothing and no one can stop us." D'Aucassin almost crooned the words, his voice rich with the seductive possibilities of his condition.

Huntingdon's bearded face paled, the deep creases in his forehead and lines framing his mouth deepening. "And the price for this power, Nicholas? Everything has a price. What have you paid? What are you paying? How," repugnance coated his words, "do you sustain this ... existence of yours?" Although he already knew, he needed to hear the knight say it.

"You have seen it," Nicholas replied, brushing his thick mane of hair back from his face. "We live by feasting upon others — upon their blood." To Robert, the emotionlessness of the reply was as horrible as the act he described. "It is that which keeps us forever strong, forever vital, forever superior to the pitiful creatures upon whom we feed. Robert, you cannot imagine the sweetness of it." Again d'Aucassin's voice sank to a crooning whisper and his eyes glazed with a sensuous film. "It is sweet, more sweet than wine, more satisfying than any woman."

"And it is that lust which holds you in darkness." Robert could not hide the horror, the repugnance he felt. The economic and social parasitism of his own class, which feasted on the labor and misery of those powerless to resist them, was appalling enough. It had driven him from Huntingdon, and he had fought it every day of his life since then. But this ... the callous theft of life itself from innocents, men and women who had done no injury to their heartless killers. He could find no words to express the revulsion which surged through him. Herne's son was one with the forest. His heart beat in rhythm to its pattern. Death was part of the pattern — and killing. The wolf killed the rabbit, the spider, the fly, and, yes, the outlaw and the forester who was in the process of taking a man's hand and thereby his ability to sustain his own life. But neither the animals who dwelled in Sherwood nor he, its king, gloried in the act.

His eyes boring into Nicholas's, he said quietly, "Your victims are human. They have the same right to live as do you. What has given you the right to take that away from them?"

"Because I need to." D'Aucassin was direct. "If I do not feed, I will die. It is my nature now — as the wolf — or the wolfshead — feeds upon the deer. You cannot condemn me for following my nature."

Beneath the bravado, Robert detected the barest hint of regret and, again, he thanked God for it. He had not misjudged the French nobleman. For all the horror of his actions, for all his insistence that he had done nothing which he regretted, Huntingdon *knew* with all the instincts of the Hooded Man that Nicholas did regret his choice. D'Aucassin might not admit it. Perhaps he was not yet even aware of it. But it was true and one day he would know it.

"It need not be," Herne's son asserted softly. "You chose one path, but you needn't stay on it. You can choose another. Do you remember what I told you at Huntingdon?" Robert pleaded with Nicholas to remember that he possessed freedom.

"You told me," the younger man said brittlely, "Someone may choose you, but the decision to accept — and the responsibility for that decision — are yours... . The choice will always be yours."

A cold laugh escaped him. "It *was my choice*, Robert. The responsibility mine as well. And I cannot go back."

"You can!" The Hooded Man was adamant, his terror for Nicholas's soul as great as his horror at the knight's deeds. "As long as there is breath in you, as long as you can think and feel," he urged, "you can choose."

Again d'Aucassin laughed. "Ah, but there is the problem, my friend. There is no breath in me. No soul either."

Robert demurred strenuously. "Everyone has a soul, Nicholas. And each of us chooses what to do with it. Destiny has a place in our lives, but it is we who decide what to do with what it has given us." His eyes clouded briefly. "We are driven by the wind, but we determine our nature. That freedom is God's gift to us."

"God has nothing to do with this — or with me." D'Aucassin's patience had clearly worn out. "You're beginning to sound like a priest, Robert. Herne's son preaching the White Christ! I wonder what the Pope would make of that?"

When Robert made no immediate reply, the knight continued. "For the sake of a day's friendship, I have told you what you wished to know. You have found your mysterious killer, Robin Hood — for all the good it will do you!"

His care-worn face lined with sorrow, Huntingdon asked, "What will you do now?"

D'Aucassin stood, stretching his legs as he paced in a tight circle on the stream bank. "Go away from here," he said. "That is what you want, is it not? Now that you know our secret, it is not safe for us here. I will not kill you, *mon ami*, for Andrew's sake — and for the puppy — but I do not wish to pit your *compassion* for me against your love of Sherwood. As long as I am here, I am a threat to those you have chosen to protect. Sooner or later, one of us would destroy the other." Above the faint gold stubble on his chin, his mouth curved in a sudden boyish grin. "I don't want to risk it! Besides," he added matter-of-factly, "we are already becoming too conspicuous. LaCroix and Janette feed most regularly. Before long, even a fool such as Gisburne will be able to put two and two together. It is best for all that we leave." He pulled on his cloak, adjusting the dark hood so that it once again hid his face. "*Adieu*, Robert."

"Nicholas, Wait!" Huntingdon tried once more to break the knight's conviction that there was nothing to be done.

D'Aucassin turned with a menacing growl. "No!" he gritted, "it's over. Do not interfere, Robert, or you will come to regret it. LaCroix does not give up what he has taken. If he even senses that you wish to battle him for what you call my soul, he *will* make you pay. He will take that which you most value and destroy it. *Adieu*, Herne's son. Pray to both of your gods that you never see any of us again."

Nicholas's form seemed to blur before Robert's eyes, fading even as it rose swiftly into the ebon sky. Then it was gone. In the sudden quiet a cricket's chirp sounded like a thunderclap. Drained, Robert of Huntingdon fell back against the mossy bank, his eyes tearing for Nicholas — and for his victims.

T rue to Nicholas's promise, there were no more mysterious deaths over the next few weeks. Seeking to spare the young Frenchman as much as possible, Robert had told his friends only that LaCroix was the source of the outrages, Nicholas and Janette his ensorcelled allies. All too familiar with sorcery and grateful that the murders had ceased, the outlaws had not pressed their leader for more. As October waxed and waned, drawing close to the twin festivals of Samhain and All Hallows, the people of Sherwood, villager and outlaw alike, turned their minds to preparations for winter.

Returning from Wickham with a fine haunch of pork — a gift from the villagers who could not keep their herd through the winter months, Robert found Marion, who had stayed behind pleading a mild indisposition, struggling to remove the cooking pot from its rack above the fire.

Laying the cloth wrapped meat upon the ground, he hastened to help his wife. His strong hands coming beside hers, he lifted the heavy iron pot and placed it on the edge of the pit. As he did so, he noticed that her skin was unusually flushed.

"Marion?" he queried, lifting his hand to feel her forehead. It too was unnaturally warm. "You're really ill!" he exclaimed. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I did," she chided. "I told you I was not feeling well. It's nothing, really. I just couldn't stand the smell of the stew." As she smiled up at him, he saw that her eyes were glassy.

"I am sorry to doubt you, my lady, but I don't believe you. Come, let me look after you."

Without protest, she let him lead her to their sleeping place. With the onset of colder weather — and no fear over the last few years that the sheriff's men would ever come this deeply into Sherwood — the outlaws had constructed a wicker hut, camouflaged by surrounding briars, within which the couple could know some privacy. Gently Robert settled Marion upon the piled furs within the shelter and pulled one of them up to her chin. "You have a fever, my heart. I'll fetch you some of Tuck's whatever for it."

Fatigue sweeping over her, she nodded, drifting off into a restless sleep. When Robert returned shortly thereafter with the warm, herbal remedy, he had to wake her and hold up her head while she drank. The color in her cheeks was hectic, and her eyes glazed over. "So tired," she murmured, "so tired."

"Sleep, my love," he urged. "Sleep and let the medicine do its work." He set aside the clay mug, readjusted her covers and exited the hut, leaving her to the rest which she so obviously needed.

When the rest of the band returned from Nottingham with news of King Henry's imminent visit to his royal castle, he hushed them, telling them softly of Marion's illness.

Concern filling his broad face, Tuck hastened to the hut to take a look at his Little Flower. As his bulk filled the entrance, he was relieved to hear her laughter.

"Has Robert been filling all of you with his worries?" she asked lightly. "I'm fine. Really. I just felt a bit tired, that's all. I'm rested now."

"Robin said," the cleric frowned, "you had a fever."

"He worries too much," she said with a trace of irritation. "I was slaving over the cooking pot. Of course my face was flushed." Grinning at her oldest friend, the woman added, "But don't tell him yet. I quite like being fussed over by him!"

Wanting to make sure that she was not hiding her sickness in order not to worry the rest of them, the friar insisted on checking her out, feeling her forehead and peering into her eyes. Clear and green as a forest stream flowing over mossy rocks, they looked back at him. Her forehead cool and dry, she seemed recovered from whatever had ailed her. Only the rapid beat of her pulse was abnormal, but Tuck put that down to irritation at the coddling. "You seem fine to me," he admitted at last. "Go and relieve your husband's anxieties before he drives us all crazy!" Laughing, the two of them exited the hut.

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he evening passed merrily with the outlaws speculating wickedly on the purpose of the king's visit and its likely impact on the sheriff and Gisburne. When Robert and Marion reentered their hut, his tension had vanished as thoroughly as had her fever. Sitting down on their pile of furs, she looked up at him, her eyes bright with invitation, her mouth somehow fuller. Raising her arms to him languidly in a gesture that was innately sensual, she pulled him down beside her with surprising strength. When their

lips met, she devoured his mouth with a completeness that took his breath away. And then he knew nothing save for the feel, touch and smell of the woman he loved above all else.

Waking in the early hours of the morning, he reached out for Marion, drowsily seeking the reassurance of her familiar presence. Emptiness met him. Coming fully awake, he looked about the tiny enclosure. He was alone. For no discernible reason, fear touched him. "Don't be silly," he chided himself. "She's answering a call of nature — or fetching something to drink." Not convinced, he quickly pulled on his breeches and exited the hut.

In the bright light of a nearly full moon all was quiet in the outlaw camp. Nasir, Much, Scarlet and Tuck, burrowed into their respective furs, slept peacefully. Against the giant oak at the far side of the encampment, John stood, his broad back straight as he kept the night watch. Marion was nowhere to be seen.

Not wanting to waken the others, Huntingdon walked softly to the tall man's side. "John," he hissed.

The former shepherd started. "By St. Thomas," he growled amiably, "you took a year off me life!"

"Where's Marion?" Robert interrupted his friend.

"Marion? Thought she were with you." A wicked glint shone in his eyes. "Fishing."

The outlaw leader was in no mood for the old joke. "No, she's gone. You didn't see her leave?"

By now, John was worried as well. There was nothing unusual about any one of the band leaving the camp for a night-time ramble. Living in such close proximity, each of them occasionally felt the need for privacy. Sherwood was their home and, with the apparent cessation of the brutal murders, safe once again for those who knew the forest well. But none of them ever left without letting someone know where they were going. "No," the big man's face creased with an anxious frown. "Why'd she go without telling me?"

"I'm going after her," Robert stated. "Wake the others and fan out around the camp. Tell Tuck to stay here in case she comes back." With that, he reentered the hut, completed his dressing and passed out of the camp into the forest. Moving in no particular direction at first, he emptied his mind of conscious thought, letting instinct, his acute awareness of his wife's presence, guide him. In the predawn darkness, he made his way through the towering trees of the greenwood, coming at length to the western eaves of Sherwood. There, walking slowly back into the forest, he found Marion.

At the sight of her husband, she smiled brightly and hastened her steps toward him.

"Marion!" He accepted her embrace and then stepped back, his anxious gaze scanning her. "Are you all right? Why didn't you tell anyone where you were going? Where have you been and what have you been doing?"

Putting one of her slender hands upon his mouth, she stopped the spate of questions with a musical laugh. "Really, Robert, you are such a worry-wart! It can be one of your most endearing traits," she smiled up at him, "but it can be excessive, too."

Refusing to be distracted, he continued to stare soberly at her. "You haven't answered my questions," he said softly.

She looked away, refusing to meet his eyes and thereby alarming him all the more. "I wanted to walk," she said. "The camp was closing in on me. I felt confined. I just wanted to be alone for a

while. There's nothing wrong with that, is there?" Her voice was mildly petulant. Defensive, she turned the tables on her husband.

Disturbed by her avoidance of his questions as much as by the coldness in her manner, he held her gently by the shoulders, forcing her to turn toward him, and probed her uneasy eyes. "No, there's nothing wrong with that. But you *know* we always tell someone where we're going."

"What does it matter?" The edge was back in her voice. "I'm all right. You've found me and now you can take me back." Somehow, she'd made it sound as if he were Gisburne escorting her triumphantly back to the Nottingham dungeons.

"Marion! What's wrong?" Robert's solemn gray eyes reflected his pain and bewilderment at her behavior.

"Nothing!" she snapped. "Let it be, Robert. Don't you have enough to worry about being Herne's son? I'm not one of the villagers you have to protect."

"I ..." As her husband, stung by the atypical sarcasm and unfair attack, began to protest, the red-haired woman suddenly swayed and reached for a nearby branch to steady herself.

"Marion!" Robert reached to support her.

"I'm all ..." she began again and then trailed off. Her face starkly pale in the morning sunlight, the faint sprinkle of freckles standing out sharply, she fell into his arms.

Holding her closely, he lifted her and hurried as quickly as he could without injuring or dropping her, taking her home to their camp.



Later that day, the outlaws all sat gloomily about the camp, save for Marion, who had not regained consciousness. When Robert had arrived back, his anxious face nearly as drained as his wife's, he had surrendered her immediately into the friar's care. Tuck had fussed over her, clucking to himself at the coldness in her hands and feet, the paleness of her complexion. Most worrisome was her deep, unbroken slumber.

"If she does not wake soon ..." The cleric could not finish the thought.

"What's wrong with her?" Much asked, looking first to Tuck, then to Robert. Neither had an answer.

"She were right peaked yesterday," John reminded them. "Mayhap she felt better and overdid it. She walked a fair distance. She needs rest — that's all."

His eyes shadowed in his newly haggard face, Robert nodded and prayed that his friend was right.

Although no decision was voiced, none of the men wanted to leave camp with Marion so ill. Busying themselves with private tasks such as the mending or cleaning of weapons, they stayed in a protective circle about their lady. And each, when he thought none of the others was watching, let his eyes stray worriedly to the hut in which she lay.

Throughout the day, there was no change in her condition, but as the sun set beyond the trees, Marion opened her eyes and smiled up at her husband who was sitting anxiously beside her. "Robert? What's wrong? You look as if you've lost your best friend!"

"I feared I had," he said softly. "How is it with you, my lady?" he queried hesitantly, fearing a repetition of her spiteful behavior of the morning.

A wide smile curved her lips which had recovered their color. Full, soft, their hue a vivid rose red, they beckoned him as did her wide, moist eyes, two green pools inviting him to explore their depths. As on the night before, her desire was unabashed. Swept away by the promise he saw within her, he forgot his fears and, without waiting for any other reply to his question, accepted her offer, dropping to his knees on the floor beside her.

As they kissed, he lost himself in the taste of her, not questioning the strength, which should have been impossible for one so recently too weak to stand, with which she gripped him. When at last their lips parted, their pulses racing, she looked at her husband with a frank hunger that he had never seen in her before. For the barest part of a second, the image of Lilith came to him and then departed as his wife pulled him back to her once more.⁴ Her desire fed his as their mouths explored one another yet again while eager fingers fumbled at laces, divesting each other of the impediment of clothing.

"Marion ..." he breathed as she tossed aside his shirt and began to nuzzle her husband's throat, moving slowly and sensuously downwards to his broad red-gold fuzz-covered chest. "Marion, you've been ill. Are you sure ..." Somewhere in the back of his mind he knew that something was wrong, but, as she continued to caress his body with a slow, circular movement of her lips, he ceased to care. Breaking off with a gasp as she sank her teeth into his chest, he felt all control eluding him.

"My heart," he murmured as she grinned enticingly at him. Then, as her tongue continued the search her lips had begun, he moaned softly, surrendering, his voice buried in the silky fullness of her hair, as he bent his face to hers.

Much later he lay, spent, idly watching his wife as she sat, still unclothed, languidly combing out her tangled curls. Clearly aware of his fascinated gaze, she ran the comb slowly through each strand of hair, drawing out the process and preening like a grooming cat. Was it just his imagination, he wondered, or a trick of the moonlight which filtered through the wicker walls of their home that made her body look fuller, rounded where it had always been slender, her breasts heavier and softer, inviting him to taste ...

As if she sensed his reaction, Marion stopped her combing and looked teasingly at him. "Still not satisfied, my lord?" The barest trace of contempt edged the words. As a deep red flush spread across his face, she stood, her movements slow, intensely arousing, and doing nothing to ease his condition. "Not now, my love. The others will be wondering what we — or rather you — have been up to. Later," she promised with a seductive smile. She pulled her dress over her head and began to lace it up, pulling the ties tightly over her breasts and thereby accentuating their newfound voluptuousness.

Groaning, Robert rolled over, burying his head into his arms, denying himself the sight of her while he battled his body. By the time he was victorious, he was alone, Marion having exited the hut. When he joined the others a few minutes later, he was met with knowing looks and ribald comments.

"Marion all better now?" queried Will with a broad leer.

"Ain't caught what she had, have you?" teased John. "You look a might worn yourself!"

Looking at his wife who was animatedly talking to Tuck and laughing as the two of them handed bowls of steaming stew to Nas and Much, the bearded outlaw leader smiled self-consciously. That he and Marion found pleasure in one another's bodies had never been a secret, although, he had to admit, they had never flaunted that fact quite so blatantly before. Without replying to his friends comments, he walked over to his wife and accepted a bowl from her.

As the outlaws sat, consuming a very late meal, Robert found his eyes returning constantly to his wife. It was thus that he noted that, although she had swirled her spoon constantly through the food in her bowl, she had not eaten any of it. Concern flared within him. "Marion?" She looked at him questioningly. "You're not eating. What's wrong?"

The irritation which flashed briefly in her eyes was quickly hidden beneath a brittle humor. "Have I not had my fill of you, my lord? There is room for little else."

Disturbed by her flippant response, he reddened again. Marion's customary humor was warm, finding delight in the absurdity of things without ridiculing or cutting down. And it had never been part of her nature to discuss their intimacy before the others. The insult implied in her tone was not typical of her — and it hurt.

Confused by Marion's behavior and sensing the pain it was causing Robert, Tuck broke in, commenting on the upcoming Samhain celebrations in Wickham. His cherub-round face turning to John, he shifted the focus of the conversation from Robert and Marion's love life to the former shepherd's. "Meg'll be waiting for you, I expect?"

"I saw her," Nasir offered, deadpan. "She was by the stream, testing fishing poles."

As the others broke into laughter, John refused to be baited. "Asked her to do it, I did. Haven't time to do it meself, what with fightin' Gisburne and all!"

"Wonder what he's doing for Samhain," Much mused.

"If past history means anything," said Tuck, "he'll bury himself in the chapel — as far away from Sherwood as possible. Couldn't hurt him," he added quietly, looking at Robert. But Huntingdon's eyes were still fixed on his wife, and he did not respond.

"e'd better pray the king ain't come to kick 'im out," said Scarlet, ready as always to slander the hated steward.

"struth," answered Tuck. "The way Henry's clearing out de Burgh's supporters, no one's safe anymore."

"No matter," said John. "De Rainault's jumped the right way before. Always lands on his feet. Just like a cat. And he'll keep Gisburne. He's too old to train another whipping boy."

As the outlaws shifted into one of their favorite occupations, vilifying the sheriff and his steward, Marion rose and walked back into the hut. With only a moment's hesitation, Robert stood, experiencing a slight dizziness as he did so, and followed her.

"Good fishin'!" John's voice followed him.

When he entered their sleeping quarters, the outlaw leader found his wife reclining beguilingly upon their bedding.

"I hurt you, Robert," her words were contrite. "I'm sorry. Let me make it up to you." As before, her meaning was undisguised, and again Robert found himself unable to resist her invitation.

Kneeling beside her, he caressed her slender neck with his mouth and then stopped abruptly. "Marion! What's this?" Reaching out, he gently touched the tiny punctures in her throat. He must have been totally besotted, he thought, not to have noticed them earlier.

His wife bristled. Jerking away from him, she said waspishly, "Nothing. I caught myself on a briar this morning. Let it be, Robert." Her hand slipped beneath his shirt, twining the short hairs on his chest between its fingers. "We have more pleasant things to think of!"

Fighting his body's urges, Robert tried to focus on the wounds. There was something familiar about them. Familiar and deadly. "Marion," he began again.

But she interrupted him, her mouth smothering his question. Defeated by his body, he gave in to its demands, his mouth answering the urgency in hers.

When at length they broke apart, she smiled wickedly. "Warm work, my husband." Rolling over and stretching, she reached for the silver goblets, a wedding gift from Earl David, which sat on the floor beside their sleeping furs. "Drink, Robert. You will need your strength."

His eyes never leaving hers, he took the goblet she proffered and drank deeply of the rich, dry wine which they had confiscated from the abbot Hugo some weeks back. The drink went down smoothly, warmth spreading rapidly throughout his body. His mind clouding, he stared fuzzily at her as his numbed fingers lost their grip on the vessel, letting it fall unheeded to the floor. "Str-strong," he struggled to form the words. "H-hugo's taste ..." His eyes closed and he fell clumsily forward.

Distastefully Marion knocked away his hand which had fallen on her thigh. A cruel smile spread across her face, marring its beauty as she stood and looked disdainfully at the insensate man sprawled on the floor in front of her. "Sleep, little weakling," she gloated. "Sleep while I go to my master." Her head tilted to one side and her eyes glazed as she listened to the command which sounded only in her mind. Pulling aside the wicker in the back wall of the hut, which she had loosened some nights earlier, she slipped out of the camp unobserved.

Robert gained consciousness slowly. His head pounding and his limbs heavy, he rolled over, his movements as sluggish as his thoughts. "Marion." The image of his wife, deeply shadowed, filled his sight although he had not yet forced his eyes to open. Accustomed to the waking dreams, the visions sent by Herne, he made himself relax, opening himself to the sending. As Marion's image came closer, it grew larger, filling his sight until all that he could see was her slender neck — and the blood-rimmed punctures within it.

With an abrupt chilling of his soul, he recognized what the wounds were — and what they meant. Nicholas's words, little heeded in the passage of days, returned to him.

"LaCroix does not give up what he has taken. If he even senses that you wish to battle him for what you call my soul, he will make you pay. He will take that which you most value and destroy it."

"Marion!" An anguished cry broke forth from the Hooded Man.

Another voice, sonorous with years and wisdom, responded. *"Dark calls to dark. Find Sherwood's lady in the house of darkness and bring her to Rhiannon's Wheel."*

"Herne," Huntingdon whispered as his vision and mind cleared. The lassitude which had gripped him when he woke dropped from him. He rose and hurried out of the small shelter. In the brilliant sunshine of late afternoon he was disquieted to find his friends sprawled, as deeply drugged as he himself had been. Remembering that Marion had helped Tuck with the meal and had ample opportunity to adulterate the ale, he cursed silently. The wine in the goblets had been merely insurance. Already she was doing her would-be-master's work. How, he chastised himself, could his wife have come so completely under the vampire's influence without him noticing a thing?

As he scanned the members of his band, searching for any sign of awareness, he heard the forest spirit's voice once more. *"Dark calls to dark. Find Sherwood's lady in the house of darkness and bring her to Rhiannon's Wheel."*

There was no time to wait for his friends. LaCroix had taken Marion to punish him. He was to blame for the danger she was in, and he alone could rescue her. Buckling his sword belt, he reviewed Herne's words. The house of darkness. That name could mean only one place: Castle Belleme where the evil baron had twice spirited Marion away, using her to lure both of Herne's sons to their destruction. Belleme was finally dead, but the stench of his evil had remained, blighting not only the castle, but the lands around it. No one went near it. Drawn by its darkness, LaCroix and his servants would be safe from discovery there.⁵

Praying that his friends would soon awaken, he searched rapidly through Tuck's possessions, pulling at length a piece of parchment, a quill and a jar of ink from the miscellany. "Gone for Marion," he wrote hastily. "Meet us at Rhiannon's Wheel." Anchoring the note with the jar, he set off to find his wife.

Castle Belleme lay to the west of Sherwood. As Robert raced through the blood-red light of sunset, he scolded himself again for not making the connection earlier. He had found Marion the morning before returning from that direction. She would never have gone near the castle of her own will. Recognizing, however, that self-flagellation would be no help to his lady, he repressed his tendency to place blame on himself and tried to work out a plan for rescuing Marion.

It was foolish, he knew, to go alone, but there was no help for it. By the time the others woke, it would be too late. Whatever hope there was lay with him. But what could he do? Nicholas had told him that vampires were immortal.

"We cannot die save for by a few ways which I am certain you will pardon me for not divulging to you."

A few ways. There was hope. But what were they? Robert forced his mind back to his discovery of Nicholas bent over the Nottingham guard's body. Albion had flared as he'd drawn her, the glow illuminating the night and sending d'Aucassin reeling. "Light," he whispered, "they cannot endure light." But the French travelers had all three sat around the outlaw's campfire. While it was true that none of them had ventured close to it, despite the chill of the evening, they had not noticeably been affected by its illumination.

"Albion," Huntingdon breathed. The sword possessed the powers of light and darkness. Crafted by Wayland and imbued with his magic, was it powerful enough when wielded by Herne's son to defeat the vampire? Trying to recall everything that he had done on that occasion, Robert remembered suddenly that Nicholas had not cried out until the sword had been raised, hilt upwards, forming a cross, the power of the old gods and the one God coalescing about its radiant blade.

Heartened, the outlaw leader continued his passage through the twilit forest. As he passed beyond the last of the trees and made his way across the darkened meadows, the vegetation faltered, grass, what there was of it, turning brown, living trees and brush becoming ever more scarce. By the time the ominous shadow of the castle rose above him, only rotted trees and lifeless bushes dotted the landscape. Fighting against the fear that this place aroused in him, Robert started toward the splintered and decaying wood of the drawbridge.

As he passed through the open mouth of the decrepit gate house, its rusted portcullis hanging like rotted teeth frozen forever in place, a shadow moved in the darkness, stepping out in front of him. Instinctively Robert raised Albion and fell into a fighting stance.

"Put down your sword, Robert. *C'est moi.*"

"Nicholas," he breathed, his relief undisguised. "Where is Marion?"

Regret etched the face of the undead French knight. "She is within. I am sorry, my friend. I warned you, did I not? LaCroix guards his own jealousy. Although we did not see him, he was there that night. When I returned to him and Janette, he taunted me with my 'hope of salvation' and swore that both you and I would pay for our presumption."

"You knew?" Rage filled Huntingdon. "You knew and you did nothing?"

D'Aucassin's eyes sparked, a glowing green light taking over them. Controlling his own anger with what Robert sensed was a tremendous effort of will, the vampire snapped. "I could do nothing. He is my master, my 'father in darkness', and he is far stronger than I. He laughed, pretending to excuse my childish behavior, and said that we would be leaving the next night. But while I rested, he bound me within my sleeping place. I could not escape."

"You are free now."

"Only because Janette let me go. She too is very jealous. She fears that our master will replace her with Marion. Your lady is beautiful and strong. LaCroix finds her desirable. But more, he wants to destroy the goodness in her. It is an affront to him — all goodness is. He will corrupt her and relish your despair."

"No!" Robert's soul protested the Frenchman's words.

"You wish to prevent it?" In response to Huntingdon's unspoken answer, Nicholas went on. "LaCroix will take her. Already she serves him. Soon she will be his slave, unable and unwilling to break away. As his poison fills her, she will become as evil as he is."

"No!" again the denial came from the outlaw's heart. "He is not that strong. He is your master," Robert said, "and you are not like him."

"Are you sure?" Scorn mingled with despair in the vampire's voice. "It is different with Marion. I was already corrupt when LaCroix and I met. Although he is my master, there was no innocence for him to destroy. He did not have to exert his full powers to control me. But with Marion, his evil works like Greek fire, corroding what is good in her soul and igniting the darkness that is in us all. He does not seek merely to kill or possess her. He wishes to make her his reflection in all ways. That is his punishment of you."

Robert fought against d'Aucassin's analysis, refusing to give in to the despair which held the vampire in its grip. "It is not determined," he gritted. "I will find a way."

"There is a way," Nicholas offered. As hope flashed in Huntingdon's eyes, he continued. "I can take her."

"What?" Shock filled the older man's eyes.

"Janette is delaying LaCroix. They are in the crypt." D'Aucassin's eyes strayed to the tumble-down keep below which so many horrors had taken place. "Marion waits for him in the tower. I can go to her, take her. Then she will be mine — not his."

As the outlaw's gray eyes smoldered with rage and denial, Nicholas sought to persuade him. "She will be as I am," he allowed, "but I shall not enslave her. She will be free to stay with you or come with me as she desires."

"As you are?" Revulsion filled Robert. "She would rather die than exist as you do!"

"Can you say that for her? If you believe it, I can oblige you. We can die, Robert, if our heads are cut off or a stake is driven through our hearts." Reaching behind him, he pulled a heavy wooden stake from its resting place against the wall. Aged, splintered and honed to a sharp point at one end, it lay between them as he held it out to the wolfshhead. "Take it, *mon ami*. Drive it through her heart and save her from our evil, but do it quickly. Janette cannot keep LaCroix distracted for long."

Robert's heart faltered, stopped at the thought of what Nicholas was asking. How could he take Marion's life?

"She is dead already," d'Aucassin said as if he were reading Huntingdon's thoughts. "There are only three choices, my friend. You can end her existence. I can give her the *life* I know. Or she can spend eternity as LaCroix's slave."

The outlaw's anguish flooded his soul and spilled over into a heart-rending denial. "No! There must be another way! I will find it. Herne will guide me."

Contempt overcame the vampire's momentary pity. "You self-righteous fool!" he snapped. "LaCroix is ancient — as old and as powerful as your forest demon. He will crush you as he would a fly. What good will that do Marion? Only I can save her, Robert."

"Save?" Repugnance again filled Robert. "To be as you? A fiend who lives by killing his own kind?" An image of Marion, to whom life was sacred, leaning over a helpless victim's body, her eyes filled with an unholy hunger, her mouth smeared with human blood, filled him with terror. "Never!"

"You canting hypocrite!" Nicholas snarled. "Did you not tell me that I should not despair, that I could *choose* my fate? What has happened to your faith, Robert? Or were those just words that have no meaning when it is someone you love who is threatened? Do you not believe that Marion would have at least as much a chance of salvation as you blithely promised me? Or will you admit at last that both she and I are damned to our fates!"

His heart breaking, Huntingdon listened to the knight throw back his own facile words to him. In his pity for the vampire, he'd urged Nicholas to remember that he possessed freedom, but he had not seriously considered how that freedom might be exercised. What had he really expected d'Aucassin to do? If he really believed that the Frenchman could find a way out of his torment, why could he not believe that Marion could do the same?

And she would be alive.

Again as if reading Huntingdon's thoughts, Nicholas reinforced them. "Alive, Robert. Forever young. Forever beautiful. Always by your side." Pausing, he let the thought sink in and then forced another image into the outlaw's consciousness. Marion, the stake driven through her heart, her body turning to dust before his very eyes. His life turned to dust without her.

"Your choice, Robert," the vampire said.

Robert groaned, his face twisted in agony. "No," he protested weakly, "no."

Sensing the outlaw's weakening, Nicholas stepped forward, dropping the stake which fell with a dull thud upon the uneven cobbles of the courtyard. "She needn't die — and neither need you. I can give the gift to both of you, Robert."

Huntingdon looked up sharply, his eyes searching Nicholas's.

"Eternity," d'Aucassin offered. "You and she forever. I will give it to you."

"Nooo!" The cry echoed against the uncaring walls of Castle Belleme.

"You want it." The vampire's voice was cold. "Everyone wants eternal life. Will you let hypocrisy deprive you of what you most desire? Will you," his contempt spilled over, "kill her before you abandon your self-righteous morality? Admit your feelings, Robert! Give in to them — and let me take her before it is too late."

Though he uttered no sound, Huntingdon's soul was rent. Nicholas had held a mirror to it, forcing him to see himself clearly. Ever since Marion had returned from Halstead, he had lived with the fear of losing her again. For all his self-sermonizing that death was inevitable, a part of life, he had never been able to bear the thought of being parted again. And now? He knew that Nicholas could do as he offered. The old promise he had made before Grimstone could be fulfilled.

"Promise me we'll never be parted. Whatever happens we'll face it together."

"I promise."

Together. Forever. Eternally young, their bodies never experiencing the indignities of age. And filled with power. He had seen evidence of d'Aucassin's abilities and he believed the Frenchman's statement that they were vast. What could he not accomplish with such power? For a moment he pictured de Rainault's face should Robin Hood fly into his chamber and spirit away his treasure, the soldiers crushed as easily as gnats. He could use the gift d'Aucassin offered for the good of Sherwood.

"Yes," Nicholas whispered, the word as sweet and as tempting as honey. "Yes. Give up your foolish ideals, Robert. Allow yourself and Marion to live!"

Desperately Robert fought the temptation. "Herne," he prayed, "help me!" With a greater effort of will than he had ever exerted, Huntingdon forced the seductive image from his soul. In its place, he focused on the ravaged bodies of Edgar, Tom and the other victims of the vampires. Human beings whose lives had been cruelly ended solely to perpetuate the existence of Nicholas and his kind. Minutes passed before he spoke again. "No," he groaned, his pale face streaked with tears and sweat. "No, the cost is too high."

"Then you have given her to LaCroix!" Nicholas turned his back on the tormented outlaw and faded into the darkness.

Grasping the crumbling wall to hold himself up, Robert whispered desolately, "No." In the pitch black of a moonless night all was silent around him. Breathing heavily, he gathered his strength. Marion. She was still here. Still in danger. He had to free her from LaCroix even if that meant ending her life as Nicholas had described. Though the thought broke his heart, his knowledge of his wife told him that that *would* be her choice. He pushed himself away from the wall and, with staggering steps, made his way into the loathsome building.

Rounding the last spiral in the curving stone stairway, Robert entered the tower room. In contrast to the rest of the castle, the chamber was ablaze with light, wall torches illuminating every corner with their flaring reddish glow. In the center of the room, clad in a dress of black silk which clung lovingly to every curve of her body and trailed behind her like a royal train, stood Marion. Her hair, fiery as the torches and with no trace of the white which had frosted it for the last few years, hung loose and luxuriant, falling over the bare shoulders as cold, white and perfect as marble which rose from the low cut neckline.

Save for her hair and the even redder lips which curved in an evil smile that was part seduction and part disdain, she was as stark and colorless as death itself.

"Marion," he cried, his relief at finding her alone causing him to sag momentarily. "Thank God. I've come to take you home." Still clutching Albion in one hand, he held out the other to his wife.

"You're too late, my young, fighting cock. She's mine!"

As the mocking words echoed in the tiny chamber, time stopped, slipped, fell backwards. Once again Robert was in the arena at Clun Castle, watching in horror as the lady of his heart was fondled carelessly by Lord Owen. Before him, LaCroix moved so fast he seemed to materialize next to Marion. As the vampire's arm reached out and wrapped itself around her, she leaned into the embrace, purring contentedly, her hands eagerly exploring his body, as if she could not have enough of him. Her eyes, a more vivid green than her husband remembered, devoured her master's saturnine face, worshiping him and begging him for more at the same time. Her back arching, her breasts straining at the thin silk which restrained them, she threw back her head, exposing her slender throat to LaCroix.

"No!" Breaking free of his paralysis, Huntingdon sprang forward, Albion raised protectively in front of him.

The vampire's white-haired head which had lowered fractionally, snapped up. His eyes sparkling with a hellish mirth, he said smugly, "But yes." His strong white fingers gripped Marion's slender shoulders, his nails ripping like claws through the fragile fabric. "She *is* mine, young fool."

"She is not!" Robert cried even as a part of him faltered to see that Albion and the light which radiated from it had no affect on the man. "She belongs to herself."

The vampire's amusement rang off the walls. "Does she? Put down your toy, *mon enfant*, and we shall see."

Against his will, Robert felt himself lowering his weapon. Although he managed to retain his grasp of the sword, he could not raise it again.

"Now," said LaCroix, "we shall see whom she chooses." With a sudden, vicious swipe he knocked Marion from his embrace, sending her tumbling to the lichen-encrusted and broken floor. Her face filthied by the accumulated dirt of years and her cheek gashed by the sharp edge of a dislodged floor tile, she snarled and forced herself to her hands and knees. Her catlike eyes narrowed as she hissed at her master, her back arching once more like that of an angry feline.

"Marion!" Robert stepped forward, his hand once again reaching out for his wife.

She ignored him. Tossing her head to shake the hair out of her eyes, she fixed her gaze on LaCroix. Her tongue moving over her lips in a slow, sensuous manner, she stretched, reaching out for him with her right hand. An animal-like cry, half-pitiful mew, half-desire came forth from her.

"Come, my cat," crooned the vampire. "Come, little puss, to your master."

With the same swiftness that Nicholas had evinced earlier, Marion leapt up and threw herself upon the object of her desire. Her hands clutched his face, pulling it toward her. Before Robert's despairing gaze, his wife and LaCroix kissed passionately, the moment seeming to last forever. At length the vampire broke the embrace. Placing his powerful hands on her shoulders, he forced Marion to kneel beside him. Undisturbed by the subordination which his action demonstrated, she wrapped her arms about his muscular legs, rubbing her cheek against the fine fabric of his hose and the oiled leather of his expensive boots. Crooning inarticulately, she paid

no attention whatsoever to Robert. With the casual gesture of a man absent-mindedly ruffling the fur of a favored hound, LaCroix ran his fingers through her disarrayed curls and gave the outlaw a look of utter satisfaction. "She has chosen, wolfshead," he said quietly.

The Frenchman's callous degradation of the woman who was more than life to Huntingdon ignited a cold flame within the outlaw. He did not doubt LaCroix's power. He did not doubt that he would die for what he was about to do. But he did not doubt either that he would not allow the degradation to continue. Taking advantage of the vampire's arrogance which would not credit him with either the will or the ability to resist, Robert found that he could raise Albion once again and did so. With tears in his eyes, he swung the blade toward Marion's unprotected neck.

Before it impacted, a form inserted itself between Huntingdon and his wife. Black cloak swirling, Nicholas d'Aucassin pulled Marion roughly from LaCroix's side and threw her at her husband. "Take Marion and go!" he shouted.

Without waiting for another word, Robert wrapped his arms around the woman and began leading her toward the door. She fought him. Elongated nails scratched his face, drawing blood even through the thickness of his beard. Twisting and biting, she struggled to escape his hold. Desperate to get her to safety, he struck her chin, knocking her out. With one last, grateful look at Nicholas, he lifted her into his arms and, holding her tight against him, raced as quickly as possible down the twisting, narrow spirals of the stairway. Above him, he heard LaCroix's howl of rage followed by the younger vampire's answering one. The sounds of the inhuman conflict followed Huntingdon as he raced across the abandoned courtyard, through the gate house and out of Castle Belleme. Marion was his first concern. Remembering Herne's words, he hastened through the blighted lands that had once belonged to the baron, and headed for the rolling moor on which Rhiannon's Wheel stood. As he did so, however, a part of him prayed for Nicholas, entreating God to have mercy on the tormented vampire.

It was now the dead of the night. Blackness surrounded Robert and he made his way solely on instinct, trusting that Herne was guiding him and praying that he would reach his destination in time. His heart filled with fear for both Marion and Nicholas, he doubted that the younger Frenchman could defeat the man he had called master. The only hope lay in reaching the promised sanctuary of the Wheel. As the ground began to rise beneath his feet and the trees around him to thin, he knew that his prayers had been answered.

His lungs bursting with a final effort, he scrambled up the slope to its summit and staggered into the circle of ancient stones, raised eons ago to honor an ancient goddess who had loved a mortal king. Witch or goddess, Rhiannon had known the power of human love, and her circle had protected lovers ever since. As he lay Marion gently upon the rock altar that stood halfway between the headstones and the opposite side of the circle, Robert remembered his friends' story of how Gisburne had shot her, the crossbow quarrel apparently bringing her life to an end and breaking all of their hearts in the process. But Herne, responding to Loxley's agony, had turned the Wheel, negating the act. Was that what the Lord of the Trees had in mind now — turning time backwards to free Marion from the vampire's hold? Kneeling beside the huge boulder, Robert held on to his wife's hands and prayed.

The air above him shuddered. Looking up, he gazed terror-stricken at the sight of LaCroix, winging his way like a giant bat across the night sky. Behind him Nicholas also flew, futilely reaching out to grasp the older vampire.

Cold laughter filled the air as the white-haired man circled lazily over the wheel, taunting Robert, dragging out the moments before sinking to the earth to complete his destruction of the Hooded Man and his lady. But even as the fiend began to descend, his laughter died. Twenty feet above the ground, inches above the tallest stones, he encountered a barrier. Try as he might, he could not penetrate it.

Uncertain as to whether the barrier would hold, Robert scrambled onto the altar stone and covered Marion's body with his own.

Cruel laughter answered his action. "That will not save her, wolfshead!" Abandoning his attempt to break through the barrier, LaCroix flew beyond the stone circle and landed hawk-like on the ground outside it. Beside him, Nicholas and then Janette, whom Robert had not noticed earlier, touched earth as well. "You cannot defeat me," LaCroix sneered. To Huntingdon's horror, he stepped between the headstones, entering the Wheel.

"Herne!" Robert cried out, his anguished voice filling the night.

"Herne has no power over me," growled LaCroix. He sprang forward, his vicious face a twisted mask of rage and inhuman lust, but Nicholas leapt in front of him. Using every ounce of his own inhuman strength, the younger vampire shoved his master aside, blocking his path to the vulnerable couple on the altar. LaCroix fell to the ground, emitting a hideous shriek of anger and frustrated desire.

Beneath him, Robert felt Marion stir, her body recognizing the vampire's call. Praying frantically to God and to Herne, the outlaw pressed down upon his wife, holding her safe to the sanctuary of the altar despite her struggles to break free.

Snarling yet again, the white-haired vampire jumped to his feet and swatted d'Aucassin aside as if he were an irritating insect. Nicholas flew through the air, his fair-haired head impacting with a thud against the stone to which Robert clung. Howling triumphantly, LaCroix stepped forward again, his ice-hard eyes fixed on the woman who, pushing with all her might, was still striving to dislodge her husband and come to the fiend who reached out for her.

As he did so, however, the ground trembled under him. Ignoring it, he took another step and paused as the earth shuddered again. A look of astonishment spread over his sardonic face as the ground convulsed and began to shift, moving in an arc around the altar. Slowly at first, but gathering speed, the earth spun in ever more rapid circles, the ancient stones of Rhiannon's Wheel blurring as they sped by.

Within the circle LaCroix howled again, this time with rage and thwarted need, as his figure faded, reformed, and then faded again before vanishing. In the darkness behind him Janette's pale face glimmered briefly before she faded and disappeared as well.

Next to the ancient stone on which Robert crouched, holding Marion close to him, Nicholas d'Aucassin struggled to his feet. As the centrifugal force of the spinning wheel pulled him into its grasp, he looked one last time at Huntingdon and smiled, the boyish irrepressible smile of the child Robert had once known. "A long life, *mon ami*," he shouted over the rising wail of the rushing winds, "and a natural one to the Hooded Man and his lady. God keep you safe, Robin i' the Hood." Then his figure too began to fade.

"Nicholas!" Robert screamed to be heard, "God keep you safe as well! There is good in you! You chose to do what was right. You can do so again. You *are* human! The choice is yours. It will always be yours!" The swirling winds grabbed his words and tossed them at the French knight.

D'Aucassin smiled regretfully. "Too late, Robert. Too late."

"No!" Huntingdon shouted, desperate to reach the soul of the tormented knight. "It is never too late. Choice, Nicholas! Choice and responsibility!"

The vampire shook his head and vanished.

For a moment longer the wheel continued to whirl, the world around the altar stone a blur of darkness and rushing wind. Then abruptly it stopped. Beneath the altar the earth was still, the standing stones once more rooted into their accustomed places. The clouds, which had hidden the moon for most of the night, parted, allowing a pale crescent to shine down upon them. The gentle light illuminated the ancient stones and the faces of the man and woman who clung to the altar in their center.

"Robert?"

At the sound of the tremulous voice, Huntingdon turned his gaze from the spot at which he had last seen Nicholas to his wife. The unnatural youthfulness and voluptuousness which had transformed her appearance were gone. The pure angles of her face, shaped but not marred by the passage of years, had returned. The eyes which searched his confusedly, trying to make sense of what had happened to her, were still green, but it was the living green of the forest she loved so well, not the unholy glow of a vampire's eyes.

"Marion!" He pulled her up to face him, his own worried eyes going involuntarily to her neck. The skin was clean and unbroken. Not even a scar marred it. Herne had once again altered time to save the life — and the soul — of his son's lady.

"Death offered life." The Horned One spoke within Robert's mind. *"You have chosen wisely, my son. Blessed be, Robin and Marion."*

As the forest lord's words faded, Robert suddenly succumbed to the stress he'd endured. The terror that had held him in thrall for hours, the fear of losing Marion, of falling to the vampire's powers himself, of making the wrong choice, took its toll now that there was no longer any need to fight them. Wrapping his arms tightly about his wife, he clung to her, sobs wracking his body, the healing tears falling and mingling with her own. From the forest surrounding the moor, the rest of Robin Hood's band stepped forward and made their way into the wheel, forming without words a protective circle of love and caring around them.

T

he next few weeks were busy as the outlaws tramped from one of Sherwood's villages to the next, assuring their inhabitants that the monsters who had invaded the greenwood were gone, banished by the power of the Horned One and the courage of his son.

As John, Will, Nas, Much and Tuck traversed the forest, Robert and Marion kept close to camp. Although the mark of the undead had disappeared, and Marion had returned to herself, she was still fragile, her confidence broken by what she saw as her too-easy surrender to LaCroix's powers. It took all of Robert's gentle compassion and loving persuasion as he related Nicholas's account of the vampire's abilities, to assure her that she had been more than bewitched, her mind and body violated by a power no human could resist.

Although her memories of her behavior while under LaCroix's control were confused, she did know that she had treated her husband abominably. "Forgive me," she murmured one morning as they sat alone in the sun-drenched camp, enjoying the warmth of November's brief and false summer.

"There's nothing to forgive," he chided. "Had Janette decided I was worth having," he coated the truth with a thin layer of humor, grinning self-deprecatingly, "I might have treated you the same." When that approach did not work, he questioned her quietly, his eyes sober, "Didn't you tell me that Robin spurned all of you when under Lilith's spell?" At her reluctant nod, he lifted her chin, forcing her to look at him. "And you did not blame him when you learned the truth. How can you blame yourself now? It was not your choice. What happened was not your fault. LaCroix must answer for it, not you."

"Do you think he's alive?" The fear in her eyes shook him, making him wish he'd not mentioned the vampire's name. But he would not lie or give her false comfort. "I think so. Herne said that they were gone. Sent back to France to work out their own fates. I'm not sure what that means," he grinned again, ruefully admitting how often the forest spirit's meaning eluded him, "but I'm sure he won't be back. Not here. Not in our time."

"And Nicholas?" Marion's voice was soft.

Sadness crossed the lined face of the Hooded Man. "I don't know," he said. "LaCroix will not forgive him for thwarting him. Nicholas's journey back to humanity will not be easy. But," the gray eyes lit with conviction, "he will make it, Marion. Of *that* I am certain."

"He will be lonely," his wife said. "Not like us."

"No," Robert whispered, joy at having her here beside him welling up inside him, "not like us." As he bent his head to kiss her, he prayed God once again to look after the soul of the man who had done so much for them. "Thanks to Nicholas," he smiled suddenly, his face lighting up like a summer's morn, "we might even live to see old age!"

"Or die tomorrow," she echoed their long ago conversation.

"Or die tomorrow," he admitted, knowing that he had finally accepted that fact. "But we're here today."

Smiling back at him, Marion pulled his head to hers.



pilogue
Winter, 1994

"Well," Natalie Lambert asked, her brown eyes inquisitive, "how did you like it?"

Nick Knight, detective for the Toronto Metropolitan Police, grimaced as his friend pushed the rewind button on the remote control and set the tape purring happily backwards. In the midst of the worst winter of the century, they were enjoying one of their rare nights off. "It's too cold for crooks," Schanke had chuckled into the answering machine earlier in the day. "They'd freeze their pazooties off. Have fun, Nicky. Myra and me are considering hibernation."

Undeterred by the temperature which had broken the record, Natalie had insisted on coming over. "I've got a new formula for you, Nick. And now's a great time to test it out. And I'll bring a movie, too. Your ignorance of popular culture is appalling!"

True to her word the coroner had arrived, wine bottle and videotape in hand. The new formula had been dreadful. The film was, in his opinion, worse.

"Honest?" Beneath his short, thick golden hair, Nick's eyebrow rose inquiringly.

"Of course, honest."

"All right," he said reluctantly, "but remember, you asked for it. It was pretty bloody awful. Ewok villages," the reference belied her assertion that he knew nothing about popular culture, "in Sherwood? Any sheriff — even Gisburne! — would have found so visible a group of people without any trouble at all. And that actor!" Nick's handsome face crinkled with disgust. "He was nothing like Robin Hood. He had none of Robin's fire or conviction."

"Oh," the coroner, who was very fond of Kevin Costner, bristled, "and I suppose *you* knew Robin Hood!"

"As a matter of fact, I did." Knight ducked to avoid the handful of popcorn she threw at him, his stomach heaving at the smell of the butter in which she had drenched it.

"Right," she answered, "and Dudley Do-Right was my prom date!" Catching a look she knew well, she sobered. "You're serious! He really existed? And you knew him! What was he like?"

Nick looked beyond her, his eyes going distant, not seeing the bright lights of Toronto outside of his loft windows. "Actually," he said reflectively, "he was a lot like you."

"Me?" The dark-haired doctor was surprised. She could not think of a thing which she might have in common with the bandit of Sherwood save for perhaps occasionally donning a pair of tights. "What do you mean?"

"He believed I could be human," said the vampire. For a long time the ultra-modern apartment, its stark chrome and glass decor rescued from coldness by a scattering of personal possessions garnered over the detective's extended lifetime, was quiet as both friends meditated upon the meaning of those simple words.

"And," Nicholas d'Aucassin, a.k.a. Nick Knight, added wickedly, his eyes twinkling with a very human mirth, "unlike some people, he had an *English* accent!"

Author's Notes:

¹ The Sisterhood of Arianrhod refers to "Priestess," a story, as yet unfinished, by me. Since "Choices" is set twenty years *after* the end of the series, I wanted to refer to something that had happened during that time.

² Robert is quoting the opening sentences from Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival* — a passage I have always loved.

³ Nicholas's analysis of the Emperor Frederick II's crusade is paraphrased rather directly from Jonathan Riley-Smith's assessment on p. 151 of his *The Crusades: A Short History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987)

⁴ There are a number of stories in *Robin of Sherwood* fan fiction in which Robert encounters Lilith. One such is "Insight" by Joyce Strohm, printed in *Albion 8*.

⁵ There are many stories in *Robin of Sherwood* fan fiction in which Robert is lured to Castle Belleme. See, for example, award-winning stories "Disillusion" by Laura Chevening (*Albion 3*), "Resurrection" by Cindy Fairbanks (*Longbow 4*), "Relic of de Belleme" by Deborah M. Walsh (*Arrowflight 1*), and *The Hooded Man* by Jenni Hennig.

I have deliberately compressed the events of Frederick II's crusade in order to get Nick back to Paris by 1228. In reality, the Emperor did not return until 1230, but I ask your indulgence for what is, after all, a fantasy!

Merci beaucoup to Helen Avry and Joyce Riffle for serving as Nick Knight consultants and unofficial editors, and to Deb Walsh for inspiring me at Media West to write the tale. Any blame, however, falls upon me, not them!