



# Lavender's Wolf (The Book of Roses)

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**Category:** Historical

**Description:** Young Wolfram dreams of becoming a knight, yet the path to knighthood is an arduous one.

Sworn to serve as a squire in the household of an ageing baron, Wolfram soon realises that greater challenges than martial training and courtly manners await him. His lords castle is crumbling, his knights feeble, and outlaws and extortionists prey on the estate unchecked. A growing infatuation with the barons daughter, the enchanting Lady Ingrid, binds Wolframs heart to the fate of the manor, yet a dark secret lurks within the castle that threatens to turn Wolframs dream into a nightmare.

How high is the price of knighthood, and how much must Wolfram sacrifice in the name of fealty?

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## Page 1

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Wolfram had always seen himself as a simple lad. Not simple of mind, despite what his sisters said, but simple of purpose. A childhood of hunting, riding, and playing at sports felt like it had all been in preparation for the one thing he'd dreamt of for as long as he could remember. He wanted to be one of the knights who ruled over the king's lands and rode into battle against his enemies. It was in the castle at the top of this hill that he would learn to be such a knight.

The damp earthen path crunched beneath his boots, freshly scattered grit giving the horses purchase as they plodded up a track that snaked from the village at the foot of the hill to the castle far above. It was more a cliff than a hill, Wolfram thought. Cracks and lines that might once have marked the work of an ancient quarry rose up the stone face, culminating in a sheer, plaster-flecked wall from whence the castle drew its name. The plaster had been the colour of lavender many years ago, but the expensive pigment had been washed out with the rain and bleached by the sun until only the faintest hint of its original hue remained. It must have been a striking spectacle once, for the locals still called it the Lavender Castle to this day. It sounded romantic to Wolfram. He still wasn't quite sure what romance was, but people said he would find out soon. Everyone at home told him he'd inherited his father's good looks. Fair-haired, tall, and strong for his age, he would be a striking young fellow in a few years' time.

A skinny man wearing a leather shirt waited for them halfway up the path. He looked underdressed for the damp weather, but he didn't appear to mind it. Tall and lanky, there were dark circles under his eyes that seemed to match the weary tangle of his brown hair. He would've looked like a vagabond if not for the intense wiriness of his physique and the sword at his belt. He acknowledged Wolfram's group with an upwards nod and waited for them to reach him. Their party was five strong, two

merchants and three adolescent boys accompanied by a pair of horses drawing a wagon.

“Gil,” the skinny man said, directing his nod to one of the merchants.

“Dunstan,” the merchant replied. “These are the lads, and we've got the delivery back there.”

“Is it the full delivery this time?”

Wolfram couldn't see Gil Merchant's expression, but the man put his hands on his hips and adopted a confrontational posture. “Can your master afford it?”

“Don't give me a headache. He'll want to see it all even if he only buys half.”

“Five casks of wine, two of mead, ten of beer.”

Dunstan nodded. “That'll do. Come on up with me.”

They resumed their trek up the path, but Dunstan stood to one side, waiting for the others to go first. As Wolfram passed by, their eyes met. He held the man's gaze and smiled amicably.

Dunstan glared at him. “What are you looking at?”

“Only yourself, Sir Dunstan.”

“I'm no sir.”

“So none of us will be squiring for you?” Wolfram indicated the other two boys walking with him. “Who'll be our masters?”

Dunstan fell into step at the back of the group. "Baron Erik's your lord, and I'm his dog, which makes you three my pups."

"But who'll we be squiring for?"

"For the Lord God and His blessed precept of silence," Dunstan said sardonically. "Mind your mouth and walk."

Wolfram frowned, but he did as he was told. It was his understanding that squires served individual knights, acting as their personal servants and apprentices until they were of age to be knighted themselves. He didn't know much about Baron Erik, only that he ruled over this part of the county from his lavender castle, and that he had agreed to take Wolfram into his household to squire for one of his knights.

Dunstan began falling behind. Once he was out of earshot, Wolfram turned to one of the other boys, a young nobleman named Robin of Dun Meadow, and said: "Do you reckon the baron must have many knights living in his castle?"

"I shouldn't think so," Robin replied. "Why would he?"

Wolfram paused to piece together his thoughts. This was why his sisters called him stupid; he sometimes said and did things without thinking. To avoid appearing foolish, he had to stop and rack his brains before he could answer the sorts of questions people like Robin knew off the top of their heads. It gave people the impression that he was slow. Perhaps he was, but he didn't think that made him stupid.

"We're going to be squiring for his knights," Wolfram said after a moment. "Wouldn't we have been sent to their estates if they're not garrisoned at the castle?"

Robin shrugged. "Maybe the lord wants to see us for himself. Give us away like

chickens at market. Only the best man gets the best squire.”

Wolfram grinned, enjoying the hint of challenge in Robin's voice. “That'll be me.”

“No it won't. You talk too much like a peasant.”

“I'm not.”

“You still talk like one.”

“There's noble blood in my family,” Wolfram said, “on my father's side.”

“He's not a lord though, is he?”

“No,” Wolfram conceded. “My mother's a merchant and my father's—” He stopped to think once again. “He's the village alderman.”

Robin didn't miss the hesitation. He seemed sharp, like the boys who studied with the monks and could debate them in class. Wolfram had never been able to match wits with those sorts.

“What kind of alderman?”

Another long pause followed before Wolfram answered haltingly: “He, sort of, takes care of things when he's not minding our horses.”

“Is he the alderman of a guild?”

“No. I don't think so.”

Robin laughed. “You don't know what an alderman is, do you?”

“That's what people in the village call him.”

“Then they don't know either. People who haven't been schooled don't know anything.”

“I've been schooled,” Wolfram insisted. Compared to most of the children he'd grown up with, he was an educated young man. He could read, albeit slowly, and pen his letters if he needed to. He understood basic mathematics and the importance of managing money. But none of those things were his strong points, and he sensed Robin knew this.

“You'll get sent off to live with some old knight on a farm,” Robin said. “Have to pour his wine and wipe his bum. I'll be here at the castle training with the real knights.”

Wolfram didn't have a comeback to that, so he just smiled at the other boy. He'd show Robin of Dun Meadow what it took to be a knight. As soon as Baron Erik and his men saw what he was capable of, they'd realise it too. Uncultured, slow to put his thoughts together, and lacking in noble airs though he might be, Wolfram had never suffered a poverty of confidence.

By the time they reached the top of the hill, Wolfram and Dunstan were the only ones who weren't short of breath. The skinny man-at-arms caught up to the head of the group and led them on to the castle gate. The sheer rock face was overlooked by the western wall of the castle, but the gate stood on its south side. Thick fir trees closed in from all other directions, forming a natural screen that, combined with the steep slopes, made it almost impossible to approach the castle from anywhere except the main path. Wolfram had heard that the Lavender Castle had never been captured in battle, and now he understood why. He wouldn't have fancied his chances scaling the winding path while soldiers pelted him with arrows and rocks from the lavender wall.

The path made a single loop through the fir trees before reaching the castle. The gates were wide open and seemingly unguarded. The merchants trundled their cart through and bade farewell to the boys, leaving them in Dunstan's care. Wolfram stared around at the castle buildings, fascinated by the size of the courtyard inside the bailey. He'd visited a castle before, but that had been in Tannersfield, the town from which their county took its name. The people there had all been nobles, merchants, and clerics, not fighting men who protected the kingdom.

“Welcome to Elkinshire Castle,” Dunstan said, with the air of a man picking something old and annoying out of his teeth. “Or the Lavender Castle, as they all call it. Wait here and don't bother anyone. I'll see if the family's up.” He left the boys standing by the gate and strode off toward the keep. It was a squat structure built into the corner of the north and west walls. Two storeys high, four small turrets rose from the corners of an otherwise flat stone walkway that encircled the vaulted roof. Next to the keep was a long, low building where the merchants had taken their cart, presumably a kitchen. A stable block occupied the corner opposite, while half a dozen smaller buildings spread their way around the edges of the bailey. Just like the scarred stone face of the hill, Elkinshire Castle looked weathered. Weeds and tufts of grass sprouted around the buildings where the earth hadn't been tramped bare, while little gardens of wildflowers fought for prominence amongst the cracks in the walls.

“It's not very busy,” the third boy, whose name Wolfram hadn't caught, said in a gloomy tone. He looked tired and miserable.

“Of course it's not,” Robin said. “Why would anyone from the village come up here? This place is for the lord and his men.”

“And their servants,” Wolfram said, pointing to a pair of women who had come out of the kitchen to meet the merchants. One of them was plump and wore a wimple while the other looked like a young assistant. Neither of them paid the boys any mind.

“It'll be busier when the lord holds court,” Robin said matter-of-factly.

Wolfram frowned for the second time that day. It seemed odd that the castle was so quiet. Where were the garrisoned knights he'd been expecting? The men-at-arms? Besides the people by the kitchen, he could only see a couple of men minding the stable and a single servant drawing water from a wellhouse cistern. He tugged at the clasp of his cloak, his excitement giving way to trepidation. Perhaps Robin was right. Maybe he was going to be sent off to serve some decrepit old knight who would order him around like a parlour maid and never teach him the art of fighting.

He wasn't given long to ponder before Dunstan came out of the keep and waved them over. They crossed the courtyard and went through the heavy oak doors. Dunstan held aside a curtain intended to keep out the draught as he ushered them into the great hall. Like the halls of all great houses, it dominated most of the ground floor. A handful of small windows would have let in light on warmer days, but they were all shuttered, leaving only the central hearth and some candles to paint the room in shadowy orange. Wolfram scraped his muddy boots off on the stone lip of the door and shuffled through a carpet of fresh straw that had been scattered near the entrance. The rest of the floor was bare stone lined with paths of woven mats, which were much less vulnerable to naked flame than the straw most people covered their floors with. The mats led down the aisle between three long tables that ran the length of the room, culminating at the high table where the lord and his family sat.

The hall was busier than the courtyard had been. Even though it was well past sunrise, several people still seemed to be breaking their fast. Three men in their twenties who might have been soldiers talked quietly over wooden cups and trenchers of cheese, while a man in priest's robes sat with a wax tablet at the table across from them. Half a dozen servants chatted loudly as they sorted laundry at the end of the priest's table.

Wolfram and the others followed Dunstan up the aisle and approached the high table.



Three people sat there, a man and two women, all of different ages. The man could only have been Baron Erik, for he was old and stout, wearing a tunic of dark green silk and a fur stole about his neck. His grey-and-black hair was shaggy like Dunstan's, but someone had tried to comb oil into it to temper his rough look. To his left sat a woman who might have been thirty or forty. Unlike the other two, she was fair-haired and wore a kind smile which quietly broadened when she turned to look at Lord Erik. The final member of the noble family looked a little older than Wolfram's thirteen years, but not by much. He stared at her for longer than was polite, a squirming feeling rising in his belly as he took note of her smooth, pale hands, the silky darkness of her hair, and the expression of playful superiority she wore. Wolfram hadn't met many girls who made him feel that way, and he wasn't sure what to do about it. He averted his gaze, tugging at the clasp of his cloak again. It was much warmer in the hall than it had been outside.

With a scraping of his chair, Lord Erik rose to his feet. The woman on his left followed suit, and after a few low words from the baron, his dark-haired daughter rose as well. Lord Erik tucked his fingers into his belt and looked the three boys up and down.

“You're my new squires, then?”

Wolfram immediately bowed. “Yes, my lord.”

“Yes, Lord,” Robin echoed, making a hasty bow of his own. Wolfram suppressed a smile. He'd won the first round.

“I am Erik of Elkinshire.” He motioned to the smiling woman on his left. “This is my ward, the lady Julia, and my daughter, the lady Ingrid.”

Wolfram forced himself not to look for so long this time as he bowed to both women in turn.

Erik continued: "You'll lodge here in the keep, over there in the parlour so you don't bother the older men. Dunstan here will take care of you. You'll be doing most of your training with him, so show the man respect. Understood?"

"Yes, Lord," the boys chorused.

"Good. Right, I've made you welcome to my house, now be off with you. Do as your elders say and we'll make fine men of you during your time here."

Dunstan stepped forward to usher the boys away, but before Erik could sit back down Wolfram blurted out: "If I may, my lord?"

"You may not," Dunstan growled, stinging Wolfram's ear with a clip from the back of his hand.

"We can indulge him one question, Dunstan," Lady Julia said. Her voice was soft and quiet, almost timid, but when she turned her gaze on Lord Erik, the baron's expression softened. He grunted and motioned for Wolfram to continue.

"What is it?"

Wolfram ignored his stinging ear and said: "When are we to meet the knights we'll be squiring for?"

An uncomfortable look crossed Erik's face. "Don't worry yourself about that. The time will come when you're ready. For now, you must do as Dunstan says."

Wolfram was about to speak again when Dunstan stepped on his foot. He caught the wiry man's eye, and the look of warning he found there froze the question that had been hovering on his tongue. He was not to pry any further, not if he didn't want to suffer worse than a clip about the head next time.

Resisting the urge to look at Lady Ingrid once more, Wolfram turned and followed Dunstan away from the high table. It didn't make sense to him. He'd spent the last five years of his life learning the skills of a page from his father. Those skills should have earned him a place as a knight's servant, yet now it seemed like he was going to be an errand boy for Lord Erik's men. He rubbed his ear, willing away the lingering pain of Dunstan's blow. There were a dozen questions he wanted to ask, but his tongue had already gotten him into enough trouble for one day. He didn't want to ruin his chances by letting Robin one-up him.

They were shown to a parlour off the side of the great hall. It looked well lived-in. Woollen blankets, some of them folded, others still crumpled atop straw mattresses, had been strewn near the room's hearth. A large round table near the door was scattered with crumbs of food that seemed to be slowly working their way into the scratch marks decorating its surface.

“This is where you sleep,” Dunstan said. He kicked a pile of folded blankets, then a rickety wooden box in the corner. “Grab one of those if you need it. Put anything you're not wearing in there. There'll be a few other lads in here with you. You're new, so they'll give you trouble. If you can't settle it out yourselves then I'll settle it for you, and you don't want that.” He stared at each of them in turn. Robin and the miserable-looking boy shied away, so Wolfram made sure to hold Dunstan's gaze. The man-at-arms cracked a mirthless smile.

“You're going to be a right little bastard, aren't you?”

Again Wolfram forced himself to hold his tongue. He just stared back, showing Dunstan that he wasn't afraid. The wiry man stepped forward. His leather belt creaked as he gripped it. Wolfram tensed, willing himself not to back away.

A patter of footsteps dispelled the tension before it could escalate any further. The young kitchen girl Wolfram had seen outside hurried in through a curtained door on

the other side of the parlour. She was as unkempt as Dunstan, her dark hair tangled like a bird's nest, and it only took a few seconds of her eyes flitting about the room before she made herself scarce through the door to the great hall.

“That's the passage to the kitchen down there,” Dunstan said, gesturing to the doorway the girl had come from. “Don't bother the servants when they come through. Have any of you eaten?”

The boys shook their heads. Dunstan beckoned them to follow him to the kitchen. Robin caught Wolfram's arm before he went.

“Do you think these other boys are squires, too?” Robin whispered, looking at the blankets scattered about the parlour.

Wolfram shrugged. “I suppose they must be.”

“Why does Lord Erik have so many squires and no knights?”

“It's funny, isn't it?” Wolfram said, his budding rivalry with the other boy momentarily forgotten.

“I don't like it.”

“Me neither. But we'd better do what we're told, or we'll get a beating.” The words cowed Robin's curiosity, but it wasn't a beating Wolfram was afraid of. It wasn't the end of the world to get smacked about the head. He was more worried about what would become of him if he wasn't allowed to train under a knight, to say nothing of the uncomfortable feeling he'd experienced when he looked at Lady Ingrid.

## Page 2

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“Which of you can fight?” Dunstan barked at the ten young men lined up in the courtyard. They were between the ages of thirteen and sixteen—all the squires who slept in the parlour. Dunstan spoke as if he was addressing the whole group, but his question was clearly directed at the three newcomers. No one said anything. Two days had passed since Wolfram's arrival, and the other boys still regarded him with suspicion. He said nothing, unwilling to single himself out as a target for Dunstan's ire. His shoulder and neck still ached from two separate bruises he'd received yesterday for asking persistent questions. Someone else could take the blows this morning.

Wolfram shifted from foot to foot, growing uncomfortable as the silence stretched on. The mild weather had drawn at least a dozen people outside to watch the squires train, Lady Ingrid and her maid Petra among them. Dunstan folded his arms and waited. He was a man who rarely repeated himself. A female voice giggled somewhere behind Wolfram. He squeezed his hands tight behind his back and swallowed, staring at a butterfly that had landed on a weed near Dunstan's boot. Wasn't anyone going to speak up? They were making the whole group look bad. How were any of them going to impress Lord Erik if they stood here like dumb sheep?

Wolfram felt his ears burning. Good Lord, he thought to himself. If no one else could find the courage, he'd just have to be the one who stood up to Dunstan. Again.

He took a step forward. “I know how to fight.”

“Do you now?” The man-at-arms pivoted smoothly on his heel, carrying on as if he hadn't paused at all. “Go on, then. Show me.”

The boys had carried several boxes of practice gear out from the castle armoury before they began. Along with weights and leather balls, there was a bucket of wooden swords and a pile of poles with their ends wrapped in padded cloth. Wolfram stepped past Dunstan and reached for one of the swords.

“Not that,” Dunstan said, then pointed at the poles. “One of those.”

Wolfram hesitated. “I've practised with a sword.”

“Good for you, but you're not going to be fighting with a sword when you face the king's enemies.” Dunstan turned to the rest of the group, once again directing his lecture at the newcomers. “A sword is a man's sidearm.” He patted the blade hanging from his belt. “It's your badge. It tells folk you're a man of status. You wear this thing to send a message,” he looked back at Wolfram, “not to win wars.”

The idea sounded ludicrous to Wolfram. The romance of a knight and his sword had inspired tales and songs across the kingdom for centuries. He'd adored playing at sword fighting as a child before learning the proper techniques from his father.

“Why do we train with them, then?”

“The same reason you learn to crawl before you can walk,” Dunstan replied, his voice deeply entrenched in its sardonic tone. “If you lose your legs, at least you've got your arms to fall back on. The sword's a jack of all trades.” He drew his blade and held it up for everyone to see. “It can cut, it can pierce, and it'll see off the average alehouse thug well enough. But if you send an army of swordsmen against spears, they'll lose every time.” He returned his sword to its sheathe and thrust one of the wooden poles into Wolfram's hands. “The spear's the weapon of war. It'll kill your enemies before they get close enough to land a blow, and if you've got horsemen riding you down, it's the only thing that'll stand a chance of stopping them. Come on now, boy. Pretend you're standing in a battle line. Show me how you'd kill me if that stick were a spear.”

Wolfram gripped the pole tight, unsure of how to handle the awkwardly long weapon. He'd never practised with a spear before, and judging by the look on Dunstan's face, he knew it. Wolfram felt foolish. He'd let himself get goaded into this, and now Dunstan was going to humiliate him in front of half the castle. Frustration at the lanky man and his irreverent tone spurred Wolfram into action. He swung the practice spear suddenly, trying to knock Dunstan in the side. Dunstan moved like lightning, stepping back and grabbing the end of the pole beneath its padded tip.

“It's not a club, boy. You stab—”

He didn't get the chance to finish before Wolfram twisted the pole in his hands. The sudden friction made Dunstan let go with a gasp. Wolfram hoped he'd skinned the old bastard's palm. He pulled back and thrust, trying to hit his opponent in the chest with the tip. Again Dunstan reacted quickly, stepping forward and to the side so that the pole went past him. He hooked his arm around the middle, gripped it with both hands, and yanked hard. Wolfram refused to yield the weapon, but Dunstan was far stronger than him. He stumbled forward and fell to his knees at his instructor's feet. He grit his teeth, steeling himself for a blow, but Dunstan spared him any further embarrassment, turning away to address the others instead.

“Everyone pick up a pole and spread out—far enough that you won't smack each other by accident. I don't want you taking any bruises you haven't earned.” He pushed the pole back into Wolfram's hands. “You new pups, stand at the end there. Look at how the others hold their poles. Copy that stance. Then I'll show you how to stab with these things properly.”

Wolfram was left with a bitter feeling in his stomach. He wanted to train with the sword, something he was confident with. Using a spear made him feel clumsy. With this weapon, he was as much of a beginner as the other new boys. Dunstan watched them closely, correcting their posture and moving their hands until he was satisfied with their stance. Then they began their exercise routine. They would thrust, pivot,

march, thrust high, thrust low, raise weapons, march, pivot, lower weapons, thrust, hold brace...

Within half an hour, Wolfram's arms were aching and his brow was damp with sweat. They rested for a while, then carried on with the exercises. The physical activity soon drove the sting of humiliation from Wolfram's mind. As clumsy as he felt holding the spear, he eventually grew accustomed to its weight. The postures Dunstan taught them made it easier to carry the awkward weapon, and each thrust felt better than the last. It was no sword, but there was something satisfying about learning how to use a new weapon. He began to get excited again as they went through their second round of exercises. He would learn how to use many weapons while he was here. The spear, the lance, the war axe, maybe even the bow. And he was good at it. By the time they broke for the midday meal, he could tell he was doing better than Robin and the other newcomer. They looked exhausted, and their form had become worse the tireder they got, while Wolfram had managed to keep up with the older boys.

Dunstan made no effort to acknowledge Wolfram's progress. He collected up the practice spears and took them back to the armoury, then they went inside for cups of cold, watery beer and trenchers of meaty pottage.

Wolfram sat at one of the long tables in the great hall, too weary to chat with the others. He almost choked on his beer when a feminine voice spoke behind him.

“You almost knocked Dunstan on his back out there. Petra and I had a lovely giggle.”

He turned and saw Lady Ingrid and her maid. It was the first time he'd been this close to the baron's daughter. She wore a dark blue dress that looked like a velvet shadow in the hall's dim light, and her lips held a keen smile.

Wolfram grinned at her stupidly. Older girls always seemed like they knew things he didn't, which made him feel far younger than he was.



“Thank you, milady.” He needed to say something impressive, but he wasn't sure what. After a pause, he settled on: “I'll get him next time.”

To his dismay, Ingrid turned away as if she hadn't heard him. The only acknowledgement he received was a faint “hm,” before the lady and her maid carried on toward the high table.

There were no more exercises that day. Wolfram and the others were put to work cleaning the great hall, helping the servants collect up the mats, stack benches, and move tables before scouring down the wood surfaces with sand and water. It was grinding work, and soon the hall was filled with the scent of lye as the servants soaped and scrubbed the floor. Wolfram went to bed exhausted that evening, curling himself up in a warm blanket in the corner of the parlour.

They exercised five days a week. In the mornings, they would trot out to the courtyard with Dunstan, where he would have them lift weights, jog around the bailey, practice with weapons, or compete in ball games. In the afternoons, they worked with the servants. Sometimes they'd be mucking out the stables, other times tidying and cleaning, washing and mending clothes, or serving at table when the baron hosted guests. Only at the end of the week were they given a brief respite. Market day was followed by church day, and while the boys still had to help at the castle in the afternoons, they were permitted two mornings off to visit the market and attend church. Squires received no wage to spend, but Wolfram earned himself the odd penny running errands for the kitchen staff, and he enjoyed walking down the winding path to the village to see if there was anything he could afford at market. The colourful wares, the smells of cooking food, and the antics of minstrels performing, charlatans hawking, friars preaching, and whores painting their faces had a way of bringing the world to life.

Church was far less interesting to Wolfram. The castle village, which was named Firfallow, had only one church, and it was a cramped, draughty building maintained

by half a dozen sleepy monks. Wolfram's father had rarely attended church, so he didn't feel the need to either. Dunstan didn't care one way or another. Wolfram contented himself with saying a prayer for his family in the castle's chapel once a week, for he knew his mother would have been upset if she knew he was shunning God entirely. Wolfram believed in God, he supposed, for monks and nuns believed in Him, and they were educated people. But as far as he was concerned, he and God could happily live their lives without bothering one another. Wolfram would try his best not to do anything blasphemous, and hopefully God would leave him to his own devices.

Two weeks after his arrival, Wolfram finally got the chance to train with a sword. His heart leapt when they lined up in the courtyard and Dunstan drew one of the wooden practice blades from the bucket.

“Everyone pick up a sword. Spread out in your usual places. We'll go through some strikes and guards, then you'll pair off to practice.”

Wolfram hurried forward and grabbed a sword from the bucket. He'd seen some of the older boys sparring in the courtyard on their mornings off, but they hadn't trained against one another properly yet. He hoped this would be his chance to impress the others.

The practice blade felt better than he'd expected. It wasn't too light or too heavy, and he guessed there was a metal rod inside the wood to make it handle more like a real sword. It was a shorter blade, like the one Dunstan wore at his belt. This kind of weapon was a sidearm, not one of the big longswords a knight might carry into battle.

Gavin, one of the older squires, looked at the way Wolfram was holding his weapon and said: “You should pair with Sebastian. He's left-handed too.”

“No,” Dunstan said shortly. “He'll pair with anyone but. None of you will learn a

thing if the left-handers always fight each other.”

“It's the wrong way to fight,” Gavin protested. His impudence earned him a smack in the shoulder.

“Wolf,” Dunstan barked. “Tell Gavin why I shouldn't make you train with your right hand.”

Wolfram paused to think. Dunstan waited, patient as always. If the instructor had one redeeming quality, it was that he never rushed anyone for an answer. Wolfram had always pestered the soldiers who visited his mother's inn for stories when he was a child, and one of them sprang to his mind.

“Spiral stairs are built to be difficult to attack by right-handed men.”

Dunstan nodded. There was no approval in the gesture, only acknowledgement. “I was thinking more that you'd fumble all over yourself, but that's true too—at least if the mason knows to build the stairs the right way round. A right-handed man doesn't have room to attack around the curve when he's climbing. Not so for a left-hander.” He slapped Gavin on the arm with one of the practice blades. “Wolf needs to learn how to fight right-handed men, and you should all have experience dealing with left-handers. Now go and line up.”

Dunstan warmed them up with a few basic strikes and guards, but they were all things Wolfram knew already. By the time they were ready to pair off, he was tingling with anticipation. The group donned protective caps and padded gambeson jackets, then spread out to face each other in two lines of five. His choice of partner had been obvious; Robin of Dun Meadow was just as eager to spar as he was.

“I bet you're not as good as you say you are,” Robin taunted him as they squared off a few paces apart. They were at the far end of the practice line, and Dunstan had

walked to the opposite end to watch two of the more experienced boys first.

“I am,” Wolfram said. “Watch.” He put one foot forward and gripped the sword with both hands. It might not have been a longsword, but it was large enough for a thirteen-year-old boy to handle it like one. He held the wooden blade at an angle across his body, ready to guard any strike Robin made at him. The other boy hesitated, so Wolfram struck first. With a quick step, he extended his arms and lifted the guard into a thrust. Robin raised his own guard, turning Wolfram's blade aside with a clack of wood. Wolfram withdrew quickly, knowing he'd left himself open for a counterattack. Again Robin hesitated before edging forward and throwing a slow diagonal cut. Wolfram didn't even need to guard. A small step to the side took him out of danger, leaving him free to angle a cut of his own at Robin's neck. He swung hard this time, putting all his strength and speed into the attack. Robin pulled back into a clumsy guard at the last moment, and the harsh clack of wood stung Wolfram's hands as it reverberated through his gloves. Spurred on by the thrill of victory, he attacked again before Robin could recover. The tip of his sword went under the guard and struck the other boy in the stomach. Robin fell back with a gasp of pain and held up his hand in submission.

Wolfram stepped back, smiling. “See. I knew I could beat you.”

“That's not proper sword fighting,” Robin huffed. “You just swing like an idiot.”

“Well, it worked!”

With a scowl, Robin lifted his blade and they began again. This time he was far more cautious. He held his guard and kept stepping back, wary of Wolfram's speed.

“Come on,” Wolfram panted when his fifth strike failed to connect. “You have to fight back.”

Robin refused to rise to the bait. He took a few shuffling steps forward, regaining some of the ground he'd lost, but Wolfram remained in control of the fight. He tried the same strike he'd used to go for Robin's neck, thinking that the heavy blow would force his opponent off balance again. But this time Robin was ready for it. He moved slightly to the side and swung his practice blade up at an angle, making Wolfram's attack glance off. Then, turning the momentum of his opponent's swing to his advantage, he continued the deflecting blow and clipped the top of Wolfram's cap. Wolfram stepped back in shock, rubbing his stinging head.

Robin was breathing heavily. “ That's proper sword fighting.”

“You tricked me. I thought you were guarding.”

“It's called a parry.”

Wolfram was confused. Robin had done it so fast. He hadn't seen the blow coming before it was too late. He wanted to lift his sword and go again, attacking faster and harder this time, but something stopped him. He held back, leaning on his practice blade as he massaged the tender spot beneath his cap.

“What's the matter?” Robin said.

Wolfram looked at the way the other boy was holding his sword. He was perplexed, but another feeling superseded his annoyance. He wanted to know how Robin had done that.

“Show me that parry one more time.”

Robin looked surprised. “You'll just get hit again.”

“Then I'll try and dodge.”

Robin shrugged. "Alright."

They went back into the stances they'd held before. Wolfram tried the same cut again, and Robin repeated the deflecting guard. This time Wolfram stepped back quickly, and the strike grazed past his face.

"Let's do it again."

Robin nodded. He was enjoying showing off his technique. Wolfram had learned most of what he knew from his father, who was a fair enough swordsman, but far from an expert. Robin had probably learned from a seasoned knight who knew all sorts of clever tricks. They went through the parry several more times. Soon Wolfram realised his initial mistake; he hadn't expected Robin to be able to attack him again so quickly, so he'd given no thought to preparing a defence. He tried attacking again from a slightly different angle, positioning his arms so that he could twist his blade back into a guard that would turn aside Robin's counter. He fumbled the first attempt, but the second time it worked. He swung, Robin parried, he guarded, and the rhythmic clack-clack of their blades hit his ears like the steps of a dance.

"That worked!" Wolfram said breathlessly, unable to hold back a grin. "I want to try that parry now. Swing at me like I swung at you."

Robin did so, enjoying the opportunity to go on the offensive. It took almost two dozen tries, but eventually Wolfram managed to make Robin's strike glance off and continue the momentum of his swing into a cut. They broke apart to catch their breath.

"I need to attack faster," Robin said.

"You do," Dunstan interrupted as he walked to their end of the line. "Your problem is you think too much. You know more about fighting than Wolf, but he's the quicker

swordsman. You'll trick him once with that parry of yours, but he'll get you the next time because you hesitated. Wolf—you've got to learn more than those same few strikes and guards. And Robin—you've got to practice till you can move without thinking. Show me your stance again.”

They did, and Dunstan showed them which attacks and guards they could transition into most easily from that position. He had them repeat the small, quick motions over and over again, teaching their bodies to remember the movements instinctively.

Wolfram was in his element. He loved every minute of this. The exertion, the speed, and the precision thrilled him, but it was the feeling of progress he enjoyed most of all. Struggling to master a new technique was frustrating at first, but that frustration gave way to determination when he realised he was getting better. He could only imagine what it would feel like in a few years when he'd practised and honed his movements until everything came naturally. He imagined sparring against other knights at tournaments, no longer performing the two-step dance of a parry and a guard, but a whole string of movements that made his sword ring like music to the cheers of the crowd.

That morning of training was Wolfram's favourite so far. He couldn't stop talking about it with Robin afterwards. Their conversation continued throughout the midday meal and on into the afternoon as they cleaned saddles outside the stable block. It was the first time they'd spoken at such length since they arrived. Robin was an educated boy, much more so than Wolfram, and he came from a true noble family that could trace their lineage back centuries. He knew many classic tales and poems based on knights of legend, and Wolfram wouldn't stop pestering him until he recounted them all. Robin liked showing off his intelligence, just as Wolfram enjoyed showing off his speed and strength when they trained.

By the time Wolfram went to bed that night, he'd completely forgotten his worries about what awaited him at the Lavender Castle. Whether he ended up serving a

knight or not, he felt like a true squire now, and it was everything he'd hoped for.



## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:26 am*

Months of training under Dunstan had toughened Wolfram's body, but he still couldn't understand how the kitchen servants endured the heat of the ovens all day. It was the height of summer, and every spare hand in the castle was hard at work preparing Lord Erik's harvest feast. Steam billowed from pots, wood spat and crackled beneath the ovens, and the kitchen cats hissed around Wolfram's ankles, daring him to put a foot wrong as he negotiated his way down the length of the room. Half a dozen cooks and half a dozen more helpers worked tirelessly to ensure the food would be ready when it was called for while Wolfram and the other squires ferried jugs and platters to the great hall.

“Why're you under my feet, Wolf?” Meg, the cantankerous, wimple-wearing woman who ran the kitchen, asked him.

“I need one more cask of mead for the high table.”

“Right, right.” Meg waved him past impatiently. “Into the pantry with you.”

He made his way to the end of the room and pushed the pantry door open. It was cool inside, though anywhere would have seemed cool next to the heat of the kitchen. He and Robin sometimes snuck into the pantry cellar with Cat, the mute kitchen maid they'd met on their first day, where they would sip cold cider until someone turned them out. There was no spare cider that day. The pantry was shockingly bare. Everything must have been used up for the banquet.

Wolfram paused with his hand on the door and called back to Meg: “What are we going to have for supper tomorrow? Gil isn't coming till the end of the week.”

“Oats and water, God bless us. I've no money for anything else.”

The bare pantry was yet another indictment of the manor's poor finances. Wolfram hadn't noticed at first, but the cracks in the walls and the flaking plaster weren't the only signs of wear the Lavender Castle bore. Nothing ever got fixed around here. Supplies were never restocked until the last moment. If something broke, they had to repair it themselves. If no one knew how, it got left the way it was. The servants and squires were always patching up clothes, mending saddles, hammering in nails, and sanding down splinters. Perhaps one day, when Lord Erik had money again, they'd be able to hire proper craftsmen to set the castle back to rights.

Wolfram went to the back of the pantry and hefted the one remaining cask of mead into the crook of his elbow. He would've struggled to carry it a few months ago, but the weight now sat easily in his arms. He headed back through the kitchen, down the long stone passageway that led to the keep, up the half dozen steps to the parlour, and out into the great hall. The banquet hadn't started yet, but the room was already full of guests. Several of Lord Erik's relatives had come to visit, and most had entourages accompanying them. The men and their wives had gone out hunting that day while the older and younger guests remained at the keep.

Wolfram put the mead cask down in an empty spot on the high table and turned to Robin, who was setting out a stack of Lord Erik's finest horn cups.

“Did they get anything from the hunt? There's nothing left in the pantry.”

“I don't know. I've been stuck in here since they got back.”

A weary sigh interrupted them from across the table. Lady Ingrid sat perched on the edge of her father's seat, her chin propped up in her palms. Wolfram's throat tightened at the sight of her. She had a ribbon in her hair and wore an elegant woman's surcoat quartered in red and black.

“Father never brings game back to the castle.”

“Why not?” Wolfram asked, before adding a hasty: “Milady.”

“He gives it to the people in the village. Imagine that? A baron hunting for his subjects.”

“He's a very noble man.”

Ingrid laughed. “A noble man. A nobleman. Ha.” The laugh faded as quickly as it had begun, giving way to a strange look that might have been sadness. “Are you going to be a nobleman someday, Wolfram?”

“If your father will let me. I'd be honoured to have an estate in Elkinshire.”

“Good luck. The people here are a thankless lot.” It seemed like she was about to say more, but at that point Lord Erik's loud baritone voice filled the hall as he strode in with the hunters. Ingrid took her chin out of her palms and quickly returned to her seat. She took the cup Robin had set out for her and banged it on the table in front of Wolfram. “Pour me some wine.”

He did as he was told, keeping his eyes fixed on the cup so he didn't splash the table. Ingrid's pale fingers gripped the horn vessel tightly. Not for the first time, Wolfram was struck by just how smooth they looked. He'd never seen hands like that before, unmarked by labour and toil, untouched by the harsh summer sun. They were hands that had worn gloves all their lives. He wanted to reach out and touch them so badly that the neck of the wine jug shook for a moment. But Ingrid had stopped paying attention to him, so he set the jug back in its place and returned to the kitchen with Robin. Behind him he heard some of the noblemen talking in a strange foreign tongue that Lord Erik and his family sometimes used. Robin said it came from a country across the sea where Erik's ancestors hailed from. Wolfram hoped he wouldn't have

to learn another language if he wanted to feast alongside them someday.

“You won't be that kind of knight,” Robin told him as they walked down the passageway. “You'll be the fighting kind. The king will send you off to war so you can protect our borders and take foreign land for us.”

“I like the sound of that,” Wolfram said.

“I don't. I'd rather fight in tournaments and have a big estate.”

“Don't you want to win a great battle for the kingdom?”

“Not really.”

Wolfram couldn't understand the other boy's attitude. He desperately wanted to express himself, but his thoughts faltered as he struggled to piece together exactly what he was trying to say. He fell silent, and Robin gave him a satisfied smile, the smile that always said: I'm right on this one, Wolf.

He wished he could be articulate like Robin and Lady Ingrid. It took until he was carrying a platter of roasted venison back to the hall before he had his thoughts in order, and by then it was too late to resume the conversation.

It wasn't that Wolfram was bloodthirsty. He didn't relish the idea of killing people, taking plunder, or making his enemies scared of him. His mother had warned him about knights like that. The grim tales she told about the war had taught Wolfram to hate such men. No, he wanted to protect the kingdom. He wanted to be part of something great. When he was old, he wanted to hear people talking about one of history's greatest battles and be able to say: I was there. It was a simple thing to be proud of, and such things spoke to Wolfram's soul. Perhaps he didn't need to be able to express that to Robin. One day, surely, his actions would speak for themselves.

The squires were kept busy for most of the evening. When there were no platters to ferry back and forth, there were drinks to be poured, spills to clean up, roasts to carve, and pots to scrub. It was almost as exhausting as a morning out in the courtyard. Some of the noble guests spoke to the squires, asking them where they were from and who their parents were. Robin always invited polite conversation and laughter when he talked, but Wolfram was largely ignored. No one was interested in the son of a merchant and a horse breeder. Perhaps bringing up the names of his noble aunt and grandfather would have impressed them, but his parents had always warned him that people who didn't respect you for your own merits weren't people worth knowing. He preferred the company of the kitchen servants, anyway. They poured the dregs from the wine jugs into a bowl and shared it between them after the banquet. Wolfram laughed when Cat pointed out that Meg Kitchener had dozed off standing upright against one of the ovens, her wine cup dribbling on the floor as it listed dangerously in one hand. She shooed the boys out when she woke, giving Wolfram the wine bowl to take back to the parlour for the others.

There was a surprising amount of drink left over. When Wolfram set the bowl down on the parlour table, Gavin started collecting half-empty cups from the great hall to continue topping it up. The mixture of beer, wine, and mead tasted so foul that Wolfram abstained from more than a single sip. His head was already dizzy from his cup of wine in the kitchen. Drink was drink, however, and the older boys had at it like they were supping from a pot of ambrosia.

Wolfram went back into the great hall where it was quieter. Most of the guests had gone upstairs to sleep in the family's chambers while their servants settled in on spare mattresses and piles of straw near the hearth. Wolfram gazed at the doorway that led upstairs. He wondered what it was like up there. What sort of room did Lady Ingrid have? Was it plain and warm like the parlour, or colourful and lavish with rugs and tapestries?

A dozen or so people sat around the high table sharing a final jug of wine with Lord

Erik. They were mostly his own men, Dunstan among them. The lanky marshal sat on the edge of the table next to his lord, who was frowning into the bottom of a horn cup. It was rude to stare, but most of the lights had been snuffed and Wolfram didn't think anyone could see him in the shadows around the parlour door. He edged closer to the high table, wondering what sorts of things Dunstan and the baron talked about when they shared drinks. The current topic of conversation seemed to be the new squires.

“They did well tonight,” Erik murmured sleepily.

“Well enough at serving tables, but that's not what they need to be good at.”

Erik let out a chesty cough that turned into a laugh. “An aspiring nobleman has to learn how to mind his manners, Dunstan.”

“I wouldn't know anything about that.”

Erik laughed again. “That one who played the flute, he was good. What's his name again?”

“Robin of Dun Meadow.”

“That's it. Sir Morgan's son. Charming lad. Does he do as he's told?”

Dunstan nodded. “Aye. No need to worry about him. He's been taught how to behave in a household like ours.”

“What about the other new boys? Wolfram and... Benedict?”

“Ben's a sheep. As soon as he toughens up, he'll be just what we need.” Dunstan cleared his throat loudly and spat into an empty cup before taking a drink from a full

one. "If we can keep Wolf in line, he'll be perfect, too."

"And can you keep him in line?"

Dunstan snorted. "He's not scared of me like the others. You hear about how he almost took me off guard the first day we trained?"

"Yes, Ingrid told me about that. He's a hothead then, is he?"

"It's not that. He's his own little man. Not too bright, but his heart knows what it wants. I've never seen a lad more eager for knighthood."

Erik sighed. "It's a shame. I hope one day he gets his chance."

"Just keep telling him it'll happen. If he's any trouble, I'll let you have a word with him. Promise him the biggest estate in Elkinshire. Say he'll get a kiss from Lady Ingrid. That'll keep the pup obedient."

Erik laughed once more. "You're drunk, Dunstan."

"But I'm not wrong."

Wolfram swallowed an uncomfortable lump in his throat. What did Lord Erik mean? Not all squires got the chance to become knights, but if they performed their duties well and impressed their lords, there was no reason they shouldn't. From the way the two men were talking, they made it sound like it wasn't likely to happen. Wolfram had the sudden urge to approach the high table and confront them about it. He hated the thought that he was somehow being tricked.

He made it two steps forward before the lingering effects of the wine made him stop. A wave of giddiness tugged him sideways, and he almost stumbled over. When his

head cleared, he realised how stupid he was being. He couldn't just walk up to the baron and ask him something like that, especially not in front of his men. Dunstan would cuff him about the head and tell him to mind his tongue, then work him to exhaustion in the courtyard tomorrow.

Wolfram reached out until his hand found the wall and crept back to the parlour. The warm cheer of the evening had left him. He felt frustrated and uncomfortable now, his head buzzing with intrusive thoughts. Why were there so many squires at the castle and no knights? What was the point of it? And why had it sounded so dire when Lord Erik said: "It's a shame."?

The others were starting to get rowdy back in the parlour. Gavin held up one of the nice horn cups over the drinking bowl, beckoning the other boys forward as he pretended to bless them like a priest.

"Wine for you, Brother Sebastian?" His words slurred as he poured half the cup into the other boy's face. "Wine for you, Brother Robin? Who's that? Wolf! Come and be blessed!"

Wolfram ignored him and went to sit at the table. He wished he'd stayed in the hall. He'd always been jealous of the older boys when they drank and joked, seeming so much more fun and full of life than their elders, but now that he was being invited to join in, he wanted no part in it. The feeling itched like fingers on his back. A man wasn't supposed to brood like this. And he was a man. He'd left home, joined a great house, and he was learning how to fight. He should have been laughing and getting drunk with the others.

"Wolf!" Gavin yelled again. "Get Ben over here. He hasn't had a drink yet!"

Wolfram looked up and saw that Benedict was the only other person not joining in with the game. He'd huddled himself up in his blanket, making a futile effort to go to



sleep. For the first time since they'd arrived together, Wolfram thought he understood how the other boy felt. Ben had been miserable from the start, never taking to the training, never engaging with the others. It seemed like he just wanted to be left alone. That night, Wolfram wanted to be left alone, too. Gavin made a scoffing sound and threw his empty cup at Ben. It bounced off his head, provoking a flinch and a roar of laughter from the older boys.

Ben threw the blanket off and stood up, the anger on his face plainly holding back tears.

“You'll be in trouble if you get caught with Lord Erik's cup!”

Gavin just laughed harder. “Oh no, not his cup! He'll put me in the pillory and flay off my cock!”

Wolfram realised it was only going to get worse. Gavin and his friends were blind drunk, and this wasn't the first time they'd picked on Ben. He wanted to sit quietly and let someone else deal with it, but that would've been cowardly. Nobody else was going to take Ben's side over Gavin's.

“Wouldn't be much to flay off,” Wolfram said loudly.

Gavin looked at him, still laughing. “Shut up, Wolf. Get over here and have a drink.”

“You threw your cup away.”

“Then go fetch it for me.”

“Ben's not wrong. If Dunstan gets sick of our noise, he'll come in here and give us hell.”

Gavin snorted, lifting up the drink bowl so he could pour it directly into his mouth. He stumbled, almost spilling the whole thing before Sebastian and the others rushed forward to save it.

Gavin let out a loud belch. “What's he going to do? I'm not scared of him.”

“Yes you are. I heard him say so. And Lord Erik won't make us knights if we don't stay in line.”

Gavin staggered forward and slammed his palms on the table. “You don't know anything. I'll be knighted in a year, and you'll be scrubbing my boots.”

“What if you aren't?”

Ben spoke up again, echoing the gloomy thought that had been in the back of Wolfram's mind for months: “What if none of us are?”

Wolfram winced internally as Gavin spun around and advanced on Ben. He was angry now, and the quiet boy was the easiest target in the room.

“Come here,” Gavin said. Ben took a step back, the anger on his face giving way to fear. Wolfram looked to the other boys, but they were ignoring what was going on, enjoying the drink bowl to themselves now that Gavin wasn't hogging it. He got up and stepped in front of Ben. Gavin sneered down at him. There was at least a foot of height between them, and while Wolfram was strong, the older boy was undoubtedly stronger.

“Hey,” Gavin mumbled the word drunkenly, then threw a sudden punch at Wolfram's face. Wolfram stepped back, reacting as instinctively as his training had taught him. He was still dizzy from the wine, but not nearly as drunk as Gavin. The fog clouding his thoughts made it easy to form a fist and throw it right back at the older boy's jaw.

He hadn't expected punching someone to hurt so much. He felt like he'd broken his hand when his knuckles slammed into Gavin's sweaty stubble. For an instant, he thought he'd made an awful mistake, then Gavin stumbled, his eyes rolled back, and he dropped to the floor like a sack of apples.

Wolfram stared in shock, numb to the pain in his hand as the others let out a roar of astonished laughter. Gavin's friends knelt to pick him up, breathless with mirth at how quickly he'd fallen to his younger opponent. Robin clapped Wolfram on the shoulder.

The laughter slowly faded as Sebastian slapped Gavin's cheeks, trying to wake him up. His body had gone floppy and still.

"Did you kill him?" Robin said in a low voice.

Gavin snored loudly, jerking an arm up in a helpless effort to knock Sebastian's hand away. He mumbled something unintelligible and slumped down again. The laughter returned.

"God help you tomorrow, Wolf," Sebastian said with a grin. "He's not going to forget that."

"It'll be a miracle if any of you remember anything," an angry voice snapped from the kitchen passageway. Meg stood there with a candle. She wore the expression of a woman roused rudely from her slumber. "I can hear you all the way in the kitchen. You keep this up and you'll have Dunstan in here."

"I told them," Ben said.

Meg bustled her way through the group, glaring down at Gavin, then up at Wolfram.

“Have you been fighting?”

Wolfram paused, groping for a good answer. His hand still throbbed from the punch, and the pain made him feel guilty. He didn't want it to seem like this was his fault.

Robin came to his rescue.

“Gavin started it. He was blind drunk. All Wolf said was that Lord Erik wasn't going to make us knights, then Gavin started giving him and Ben a hard time.”

Meg's eyes narrowed. “Well, you can forget about all that. What was I thinking, giving you boys wine? There'll be no more next time, mark my words.” She picked up the near-empty drink bowl and upended its remaining contents over the floor. “You can clean that up first thing in the morning. None of you are getting any breakfast till you do.” When a chorus of protests answered her, she raised her voice over them. “It'll be a dozen times worse if I let Dunstan know you were drunk and fighting all night! Drink some water and get yourselves to bed. Don't make me come back in here.” She looked down at Gavin, who had been dragged into a sitting position against the wall. “And lie him on his side so he doesn't throw up in his mouth. Give him that empty bowl, or you'll be cleaning up his mess, too.”

Meg's intervention had the desired effect of settling everyone down. The squires usually got away with a lot. They were important people in a lord's household, and the servants weren't supposed to boss them around, but Meg had been at the castle for a long time. She was good friends with Lady Julia and Dunstan, which made her a troublesome woman to cross. As the only female authority figure on this side of the castle, she took it upon herself to mother the rowdy boys. Before she went back to the kitchen, she gave Wolfram another probing look. He averted his gaze and headed toward his mattress.

Robin nudged him on the way and whispered: “You gave Gavin what he deserved.”

Wolfram tried to feel proud. He'd knocked down a much bigger boy and done what seemed like the right thing. The others were still chuckling about it. But still his thoughts didn't sit easy. He kept thinking about Lord Erik and Dunstan's conversation, and sleep was a long time in coming that night.

If there was one saving grace, it was that Gavin couldn't remember anything the next day.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:26 am*

The following morning was a terrible one for the squires. Everyone had slept poorly, and Gavin looked like death. They lined up in the courtyard, most having barely touched their breakfast, and sluggishly began their exercises. It felt like Dunstan was pushing them especially hard as punishment for last night's behaviour. After running a few laps of the courtyard, Wolfram had to help drag Gavin out of a puddle of his own vomit. They were exhausted before they even began their spear drill. Wolfram struggled through it with aching muscles until the merciful relief of the midday break came.

That afternoon there was plenty of cleaning to do. Robin and Wolfram were set to work outside the stable block. The hunting gear from yesterday was still filthy, and some of the guests wanted theirs cleaned before they left. The two boys ended up polishing a half-suit of plate armour that belonged to one of Erik's cousins. To scour the dirt off, they had to use a gritty paste that made Wolfram's fingertips tender and stung his sinuses with its smell. Robin held the breastplate up to the light, searching for any spots he'd missed.

“This probably cost a gold crown to have made. You could buy a whole village with a suit of armour like this.”

“No you couldn't,” Wolfram said. “It's just metal.”

Robin tapped the breastplate with his knuckle. “They do something special to it. If you shoot an arrow at this, it'll bounce straight off. It's like magic.”

“It must be heavy to wear.”

“Especially if you're hunting all day. Think about it, though. You could wrestle a boar in this and it wouldn't be able to hurt you.”

“I don't believe half the things you say,” Wolfram said, squinting at one of the knee plates as he tried to scrub something black out of a crease in the metal.

“You should,” Dunstan's voice called. The wiry man-at-arms was taking a break from helping with the horses, leaning against the stable door with a steaming cup of herbal tea in his hand. “Robin knows more than you about being a little lordling.”

Wolfram looked at the piece of armour he was cleaning and held it up to Dunstan. “Do arrows really bounce off this?”

“Aye, most types. That's why it costs so much. Not many smiths in the kingdom know how to make it right. No one used to wear it a few years back. Too hot and expensive. You know anything about the last war?” Robin opened his mouth to speak, but Dunstan kept talking without waiting for an answer. “There was a big battle right at the start. One small army of a few hundred rebels against thousands of the king's men. Well, the little army won. Why? Because they had the deadliest archers in the land and the terrain to make use of them. Never think less of the bow because it's a peasant's weapon. That battle proved that bows can win wars. These days, every lord who can afford it wants armour that can turn aside an arrow.” Dunstan slurped loudly from his tea, scowling at its hotness. “It's the fashion.”

Wolfram felt a tapping on his shoulder. He turned and saw Cat the mute kitchen girl standing over him. She made a beckoning motion and pointed toward the kitchen.

“You want me in the kitchen?”

She nodded.

“Who wants him?” Dunstan asked.

Cat mouthed the word: “Meg.”

“Go on, then. You hurry back as soon as she's done with you.”

Wolfram was glad for an excuse to wipe his hands and get away from the gritty cleaning paste. Cat led him across the courtyard and in through the kitchen door. The building wasn't as hot as it had been yesterday, but everyone was still just as busy. They found Meg elbows-deep in a bowl of half-washed carrots.

“Good girl—take the rest of that tea through for the folks in the hall,” she told Cat before addressing Wolfram. “Lady Julia wants a word with you.”

Wolfram blinked in surprise. “Lady Julia?”

“That's what I said. She told me to send you up this afternoon. You're to wait for her in the solar.”

“Where's the solar?”

“Upstairs from the hall,” Meg said impatiently. “Make sure your boots are clean, and don't be a bother to the family while you're up there. You let Dunstan know it was the lady who sent for you and he won't mind you missing a few chores.”

Wolfram had no idea why Lady Julia would want to speak with him. They'd barely exchanged a dozen words since his arrival. Of the three noble family members, she was the one he knew the least about. He wondered whether he was in trouble, but if that were the case surely it would be Dunstan or Lord Erik summoning him. Meg was busy with her carrots again, so Wolfram squeezed past her and made his way down the passageway to the keep. He scrubbed his boots with a handful of straw in the



parlour before heading into the great hall. The door leading upstairs waited for him at the far end of the high table. He glanced around nervously as he approached it. He felt like he was about to go somewhere forbidden. When no one moved to stop him, he pushed the door open and went upstairs.

The stairwell took him to a small landing at the back of the keep that led into what must have been the solar. It was a big room, not as wide as the great hall, but still long and spacious. A fine table stood beside a stone hearth that had a chimney to carry out the smoke. It didn't seem to be all that useful, for Wolfram could still smell the smoke from downstairs seeping up through the floorboards. Bundles of herbs hung from the lower beams of the vaulted roof, adding their fragrance to the air so that the smoky smell didn't dominate the room. Wolfram took a few hesitant steps forward, careful to avoid a colourful woollen rug that lay opposite the hearth. He didn't trust that his boots were clean enough to set foot on something so fine.

The silence of the room was what struck him most. The great hall was rarely ever quiet, but up here he could hear every pop and crackle of the hearth. A floorboard creaked under his weight as he stepped forward. The air became clearer at the other end of the room where an open door let in a breeze from the keep roof. Lady Ingrid sat beside the door with a wooden board game in her lap. Wolfram recognised the game; he'd spent hours playing it with his sisters when he was younger. The goal was to move all the coloured pegs on your side of the board into the holes on your opponent's before they managed to do the same.

Wolfram approached Ingrid with a smile. "Are you playing by yourself, milady?"

She looked up as if noticing his presence for the first time. "What are you doing up here?"

"I was told Lady Julia wanted to see me."

“What for?”

“I don't know. I'm supposed to wait for her here.”

“Well, she's in her room.” Ingrid gestured vaguely at a row of heavy doors behind the nice rug.

“I'd better wait.”

Ingrid sighed. “If you must.”

Wolfram stood there awkwardly as she returned her attention to the board game. His momentary pleasure at seeing Ingrid had given way to apprehension. He wasn't sure how to talk with a lady like her. It wasn't at all like talking to his sisters. He remembered Dunstan's conversation with Lord Erik the night before, about being offered a kiss from Lady Ingrid, and his stomach writhed.

“Would you like to play that game with me while I wait?” Wolfram asked, unable to bear the silence any longer.

Ingrid looked surprised. “You know how to play?”

“I used to play it with my sisters. I usually lost.”

A hint of a smile touched the corner of Ingrid's mouth. “Very well, then.” She stood up and went to the table, drawing back one of the cushioned chairs for Wolfram and setting the board down between them. “You play blue, I'll play rose.”

“Yes, milady.”

They played the game in silence for several minutes. Ingrid didn't seem to be

particularly experienced with it, but Wolfram was nervous and he kept making mistakes. It was probably wise, he thought, not to try too hard to beat his noble mistress.

“So, merchant families play games like this too, do they?” Ingrid asked.

“Ours isn't really a merchant family. My mother's a merchant, but she hires other people to do most of the work for her. She's got an inn she runs the rest of the time.”

“Oh.” Ingrid sounded vaguely disappointed. She reached out a gloved hand and plucked one of her rose-coloured pegs from its hole, then used it to move one of Wolfram's over a space.

“Milady,” Wolfram said, mustering the nerve to ask something that had been on his mind since Meg spoke to him. “What's Lady Julia like?”

“She's not my mother, if that's what you're thinking.”

“No. She's your father's ward?”

“Correct.” Ingrid moved another of her pegs, skipping Wolfram's turn. “One of his second cousins, I think. He has plenty. She couldn't manage her own estate, so she gave it up to live here. I don't think anyone else was willing to take her in.”

Wolfram didn't mind missing his turn. He was more interested in hearing about Julia. “What happened with her?”

“Her husband died in the war. She might've had a child that died, too. I can't remember. Anyway, she tried to carry on running their estate by herself, but she couldn't cope. After a few years, she gave it up to her late husband's brother and came to live here. It was shortly after my mother passed away, as I recall.”

“I'm sorry.”

Ingrid looked up at him. “What for?”

“For your mother's passing.”

She scowled, her beautiful features sharpening with a look of bitter hurt. “Don't say that. You didn't know her. What's the point in saying the decent thing if you don't mean it?”

Wolfram was tongue-tied. He hadn't meant to insult her.

Ingrid glared at him for a moment before her expression softened and she made another move.

“Well, Cousin Julia will enjoy your good manners. She has a soft heart and a soft head.”

Still not knowing what to say, Wolfram moved one of his pegs along the board. Ingrid didn't seem to like Julia, which only made him more nervous about why he'd been summoned. If there was some animosity between them, he felt like he should be on Ingrid's side.

They went back to playing in silence. Wolfram could hear the faint sound of voices coming from behind one of the big solar doors. He turned to look at it during one of Ingrid's turns.

“Do you want to peek?” she asked.

Wolfram turned back quickly, shaking his head. “No, milady.”

Ingrid grinned. “Go on. Have a look. I won't tell.”

Wolfram knew he shouldn't, but there was something exciting about being goaded on by Ingrid.

“Is that Lady Julia's room?”

“Yes. There's a gap by the door handle. Have a look and tell me what you see.”

Being careful not to make the floorboards creak, Wolfram took off his boots and crept over to the door. The woollen rug was soft and thick beneath his toes. He looked back at Ingrid, and she nodded at him. This was fun despite his nervousness, and it had been a long time since he got into any real mischief. Leaning forward, he aligned his eye with the space between the door and its frame. Just as Ingrid had said, there was a gap where the wood had warped. It was big enough for him to see a clear sliver of the room beyond. Moving his head back and forth allowed him to take in more details: a stone hearth like the one in the solar, a canopied bed, a small table, and two figures standing next to it. Lady Julia was one of them, and the other was Lord Erik. He had his arms around her and was resting his head on her shoulder. She rocked him gently like a mother comforting a child. Her voice was very soft when she spoke, but Wolfram was close enough now that he could make out the words.

“They'll all be gone the day after tomorrow.”

“Until the next time we have to empty the treasury putting on another feast,” Erik's deep voice rumbled in response.

“Don't mope. Think about all the things you have to look forward to.”

“What are those? It's wearing me down. I'm too old to keep pretending.”

“You are not pretending,” Julia said firmly. “You are a strong man and a fine lord. In time, everything will be well again.”

“I don't deserve your kindness.” Erik drew in a heavy breath and straightened up, breaking the embrace. “Don't mind me. I think the boy's out there waiting for you.”

Lady Julia's eyes moved to the door, and for a second it looked like she was staring directly at Wolfram. He pulled back, banging the wall with his elbow in his haste. His heart pounded in his chest. Ingrid was smiling at him from across the room. He felt stupid for having listened to her. The door to Julia's room creaked open and Lord Erik stepped out. He looked Wolfram up and down when he saw him standing there.

“Have you been waiting long, boy?”

Wolfram shook his head. “Not long, milord.”

“The lady Julia wants to see you.”

Wolfram nodded.

“Well, go in, then. Ingrid, come downstairs. Our guests need entertaining.”

“Yes, Father.”

The solar fell quiet again as Wolfram was left alone with the crackling hearth. Taking a deep breath, he turned and stepped into Lady Julia's room. She was waiting for him at the table.

“Good afternoon, Wolfram. I hope you weren't spying on us.”

For the second time that day, he was tongue-tied. He turned back toward the solar and

began making a vague gesture to where Ingrid had been sitting.

“Let me guess,” Julia pre-empted him. Her voice reminded Wolfram of steam rising from a warm bath. “Ingrid put you up to it? It's a habit of hers. I trust you know better than to repeat what you hear listening at doors. And I hope you'll learn not to do everything a pretty girl tells you.”

“Are you angry with me, milady?”

Julia shook her head. “I am rather tired of being angry at the small things in life. Come in. You may sit with me.”

Wolfram was still tense, but the noblewoman's calm manner took the edge off his unease. She wasn't addressing him the way he was used to being addressed by women of status. Now that he thought about it, he'd never heard her speak harshly to anyone in the castle. She reminded him more of a gentle nun than the lady of a great house. He took a seat with her at the table.

“Is something on your mind, Wolfram?”

“No, milady.”

“Are you certain? You look troubled. I spoke with Meg earlier today. She said you were fighting with the other squires last night.”

“No, milady,” Wolfram repeated quickly. “That is to say—it wasn't much of a fight. They were all drunk.”

“I see. It was a very rambunctious evening for everyone. But I don't want you fighting, not you or any of our boys. It breaks my heart to think you might be having difficulties here.”

Wolfram finally began to relax. He wasn't here to be scolded or punished. Lady Julia was just worried about how he was settling in. He felt touched by her kindness.

“Thank you, milady. I'm not having any trouble.”

“Are you sure? You must tell me if you are.”

A response hovered on Wolfram's tongue. He wanted to answer simply, to get it over with and leave, but Lady Julia's concern seemed earnest. She wouldn't ignore him like Lord Erik or slap him upside the head like Dunstan if he spoke his mind.

“Are we really going to become knights?”

Julia raised her eyebrows. “What makes you think you are not?”

“It's just something I noticed when I arrived. And I heard the baron talking about it yesterday. There aren't any knights here at the castle. Aren't squires supposed to serve knights?”

Julia looked over at the window, resting her temple against a thumb as she shook her head. “Dunstan is quite right about you. You're a man with your heart set on something.”

Hearing the lady refer to him as a man made Wolfram's chest swell with pride.

Julia continued: “May I ask you something? Do you know what a noble household is? Do you understand what we do, and how you are part of it?”

“I think so.” Wolfram took his time answering, speaking slowly so that he could think before the words came out. His mother and father had explained the feudal hierarchy to him many times. “You collect rent from the people who live on your land. They



give you money, or part of their harvest, and you protect them and uphold the law.”

Lady Julia looked pleased with his answer. “And why is that, Wolfram? Why is it that we collect the money and others have to serve us?”

“Because... that's how it is.”

“Do you think it is our right through birth? Or because God has ordained it so? Or because we have lived virtuous lives and thus earned our positions in this castle?”

Wolfram didn't want to contradict her. It would have been a grave insult to imply that any one of those things were untrue. But that wasn't what his parents had taught him.

“I think a noble family works hard to keep what they have,” he answered diplomatically.

Lady Julia let out a long sigh. “Yes, we do. And sometimes even that is not enough. People think things are the way they are because the world is set in stone; that nobles are nobles and serfs are serfs and it has all been ordered just so—by God, or the king, or by whichever power they believe in. I do not expect you to understand this at your age, but I think you will come to realise it on your own sooner or later. The world is a terrible mess, Wolfram. It is a tangled, unfair, chaotic thing, but we try our hardest to put it into some pattern of sensibility. Nobles are merely the custodians of the tenuous order imposed on this land. Erik is always upset with me when I speak like this, but I believe in the precept of honesty.”

Wolfram wasn't sure he understood, but he listened on obediently.

“Elkinshire is not a prosperous place. Perhaps I am a bad luck charm, for it was not always this way. Erik does not receive the rent he is due. His knights are all old or incompetent. Trust me when I say that you are better off here with Dunstan than you

would be with any of them. There is outlawry and crime in the villages, and rarely is it dealt with by the locals. They look to us for help, yet we have little help to give. Would you be eager to pay rent to your lord if he was unable to protect you, Wolfram?"

"Can't the baron force them to pay?"

Lady Julia shook her head. "Erik could not intimidate them into paying even if he wanted to. He barely has the men to staff this castle, and his knights are the ones keeping most of the money back. If he appeals to the sheriff of Tannersfield, the whole county will think him an incompetent old fool, and Erik's pride is as precious to him as his land."

Wolfram's heart sank. So his worries had been founded all along; Elkinshire was poor, Lord Erik's knights were not the sort of men any squire would want to serve, and there was little hope of him being granted an estate of his own—not a prosperous one, at least.

"So, I would be better off serving another household?" he asked. It probably wasn't that simple. A squire couldn't leave without good reason any more than an apprentice could turn his back on his master without suffering the consequences.

"You might," Julia said. "Or you could work hard to change the fortunes of our estate. Elkinshire can prosper. I have toured the villages myself. It is not blighted crops or rampaging outlaws that are the source of our problems, it is a lack of authority. With a dozen extra brave, strong young men like you, that will change. You could be a hero to us, Wolfram."

She'd said the right thing. Wolfram was too young to appreciate the nuances of everything he'd just heard, but it was easy enough for him to understand that Elkinshire was in trouble. Lord Erik, Ingrid, and Lady Julia needed his help. Perhaps

he couldn't be a rich and glamorous knight here, but he could still be a champion to his lord and ladies. He could protect these lands and deliver justice to the people. He could learn to fight and ride and restore order to the estate. And one day, when Elkinshire prospered again, he could look back and say: I had a hand in it . It wasn't everything he'd wanted, but it was a challenge he could either rise to, or back down from.

And Wolfram never liked to back down.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:26 am*

In the seasons that followed, other things would occur to Wolfram about his conversation with Lady Julia. Things like the fact that squires, unlike men-at-arms, did not need to be paid a wage. Lord Erik had been very clever in parleying the dwindling prestige of his household into free servants who could be trained into soldiers that would serve him loyally for years to come. Robin was the one who put these thoughts into words, but Wolfram liked to think he would have reached the same conclusions by himself given time. They didn't tell the other squires about what Lady Julia had said, sharing the story only with Cat, who couldn't repeat such things carelessly. They wiled away the summer evenings drinking cheap cider in the kitchen cellar, lounging on the straw outside the stable, and sitting in the low branches of a fir tree on the hill tossing stones at the roof of an abandoned cottage.

Autumn and winter were far more gruelling. Wolfram began to savour the hard exercise in the courtyard even when the ground was slippery with frost, for it was the only thing that kept him warm. They weren't allowed much firewood for the parlour, and Meg wouldn't let them sleep in the kitchen. Wolfram thought about the cosy solar a lot during the winter, though he was never invited up there again. Lady Julia spoke to him sometimes, always kind and inquisitive, and Ingrid played board games with him and Robin on occasion, but only ever downstairs.

The next year, they started horse riding. Wolfram was already good at it, having learned from his father, and he was glad to be able to show up Robin and the other boys with how deftly he handled his mare. The horses they practised with were borrowed from a farmer in Firfallow, which made for an exciting day-long excursion whenever they headed down from the castle. Wolfram got the impression that the villagers liked Lord Erik, for he treated them kindly and was swift to address their problems whenever he held court. If Lady Julia was to be believed, this was probably

the only village in Elkinshire that paid its rent on time. It was a good thing, too, for Firfallow was home to several wealthy merchants. Robin said it was only because of them that the Lavender Castle kept running at all.

Another year turned, and more squires arrived to join the household. Now that Wolfram was no longer a newcomer, he began thinking of the castle as his home. He felt that he had a place here, and he was determined to see his apprenticeship through to its end. There were times—usually when the pantry was empty and the hearth cold—that he questioned the wisdom of that choice, but his resolve strengthened whenever he had the chance to see his family. His parents had never been enthusiastic about him becoming a knight. When they came to visit Elkinshire, they were eager to give him every excuse to return home. They told him about how quiet the inn seemed without him, how his friends from the village missed him, how he would be more than welcome to change his mind if things were hard for him here. They meant well, Wolfram knew. He was lucky to have been given any choice in his future at all. Most children, even those from well-off families like his, were expected to go into the line of work their parents chose for them. But as tempting as they made home sound, he couldn't go back. It would be like admitting he'd failed; that he couldn't stomach cold winter nights, plain food, and gruelling exercise. That wasn't him. He was a man with his heart set on something.

The years at the Lavender Castle matured Wolfram quickly. Along with the daily exercise building up his body, he was a fast grower. By the time he was sixteen, he was already as tall as the average man and as tough as a farm labourer. His features became more defined, tightening the structure of his face and lending him a brush of fair stubble that he had to shave daily. Cat, signalling with the hand gestures she used to communicate with Meg and the other servants, told him he was handsome, and the village girls started to smile at him when he visited Firfallow. During one of the summer fairs, a baker's daughter kissed him behind her father's stall and let him put his hands beneath her dress. For a week afterwards, Wolfram was giddy with the thought of marrying her. But that desire soon faded, subsumed by the recurring

fantasies he had about going to Lady Ingrid's bed in the solar. He thought about her a lot whenever he had trouble sleeping. Part of him had come to realise that it was a hopeless longing, but he clung to it all the same. There was still a chance, one day, that she might notice the handsome young squire who had helped her family regain their former glory.

It was a summer evening, and rain rattled the castle shutters urged on by an aggressive wind. The dark clouds had cut an end to the daylight early. Wolfram and most of the other boys were taking shelter in the keep. He shivered as a draft blew around his ankles, the wind somehow forcing its way through the castle stonework to reach all the way into the parlour. He and Robin were taking it in turns to mend a mail shirt Dunstan had brought in from the armoury. Wolfram wished he could start making a suit of mail for himself, but the riveted rings were fiddly and expensive to make, and Lord Erik couldn't afford to furnish his squires with them. Wolfram could have asked for the money from his parents, but he wanted to earn everything he owned. Robin slid the shirt across the table towards him. It was a heavy thing. There was a tear in one of the shoulders—not from battle, but from where someone had dropped a heavy barrel on it when it was left out on the armoury floor.

Wolfram lifted the broken part up to the candlelight and took one of the new rings from a small cup. Looping it through the others in an interlocking pattern, he took a pair of pliers and flattened the riveted hole so that it closed up and secured the new link in place. He did four more links, then slid the shirt back to Robin. Even making a small repair was taking them all evening. He couldn't imagine how long it took to knit an entire suit together.

Cat came in from the kitchen passageway with her hand on the shoulder of one of the new squires. She pointed to an empty sleeping blanket crumpled in the straw, and the boy nodded. Wolfram took a sip from a cup of tea as he watched them, wondering what was going on. Cat steered the boy in the direction of the table, where Gavin and two other squires were playing dice opposite Wolfram and Robin. She tapped Gavin

on the shoulder and pointed at the empty blanket.

“What?” Gavin cupped a hand behind his ear. “I can't hear you.”

Cat grabbed his ear and twisted.

He yelped in pain. “Get off me you bitch!”

She let go and slammed the table with her palm, jabbing her finger at the empty blanket again.

Wolfram scanned the room. The blanket belonged to Ralph, another new squire. He was nowhere to be seen.

“You'd better tell her where he is, Gavin.”

Gavin shot Wolfram an annoyed look. “I told him I'd dropped a silver shilling in the cesspit.” He flinched away as Cat slapped him on the arm. “It was just a joke! I didn't think he'd actually go looking for it.”

Cat gave him a withering look. She turned to Wolfram and made a hand sign that he'd come to recognise as a request for help. He nodded and rose to his feet, clapping Robin on the shoulder.

“You can have that shirt to yourself. We'll go and find Ralph.”

“Watch yourself out there,” Robin said. “You won't be able to see a thing in this rain.”

“Exactly. Poor Ralph might not be able to find his way back to the gate. You shouldn't tell him things like that, Gavin.”

“Sorry, milady,” Gavin replied in a mocking tone. Wolfram ignored him and went into the great hall with Cat. They put on cloaks and lifted the door curtain aside. The force of the elements struck them like a crashing wave. The rain was worse than ever, blowing in beneath Wolfram's hood to sting his face as the wind ripped at his cloak. He could barely see two yards in front of him. He considered going to the kitchen for a light, but even a covered lantern would blow out in this weather.

“Hold on to my cloak,” he called to Cat over the roaring wind. “Give it a tug if you see Ralph!”

Now that he was out in the deluge, he understood why Cat had been so concerned. The cesspit was behind the northern wall under a latrine that jutted out from the castle over a sheer drop. People relieved themselves there during the day and emptied night buckets down the hole in the mornings. There was no way of reaching the cesspit without exiting the castle and following the eastern wall down a tumble of steep rocks at the north end. It was a precarious climb even in good weather.

Wolfram and Cat crossed the courtyard, navigating via the dim slivers of light shining through the shutters of the castle buildings. Wolfram had no idea how they were going to find Ralph out in the dark. He banged on the gatehouse door until the night watchman came out and helped him lift the locking bar from the small door in the castle gate. He stepped into the darkness, shielding his brow from the rain as he scanned the gloomy path.

“Ralph!” he bellowed into the wind. “Ralph! Are you out here?”

Cat tugged on his arm and brought him back to the wall. She patted the stones with her palm and took a step forward.

“Follow the wall around?” Wolfram asked. She slapped the wall and tugged again. “Good idea. If Ralph's got any sense, he'll be doing the same.”



Step by careful step, they made their way through the shadows until they reached the end of the wall, turned the corner, and followed it north toward the cesspit. The fir trees rattled and danced overhead, scraping the battlements with their outstretched limbs. Wolfram moved as fast as he dared, apprehensive that his feet might catch in a tangle of weeds and send him sprawling. Both he and Cat kept a tight hold of each other. It was foolish, blundering through the dark like this, but the thought of young Ralph lost in the rain lit a fire in Wolfram's belly that kept him moving. He wondered if Cat felt that same fire, too. She didn't train and fight like a squire, but she was tough in her own way, and she showed no fear as she groped her way forward.

“Ralph!” Wolfram shouted for the dozenth time. He gripped Cat's shoulder and held her back when they reached the end of the wall. There were probably only a few yards separating them from the rocky precipice. “Ralph! Come here if you can hear me!”

Out of the darkness, a thin voice answered.

“I can't.”

Cat tugged free of Wolfram's grip and hurried on. She dropped to her knees, soaking her skirt in the wet grass as she felt her way between the rocks. Wolfram followed her lead, afraid of losing her in the darkness.

“Keep calling to us, Ralph! We'll get you.”

“I'm here.” The voice came from directly in front of them.

With great care, Wolfram and Cat crawled their way down the steepening slope, bracing their hands on the rocks so they didn't slip and tumble. Out of the gloom, a small, pale hand reached up at them. Cat snatched it and held on tight. Moving past her, Wolfram reached down until he felt the neck of Ralph's shirt and heaved him up

with all his strength. Wriggling like centipedes, the three of them crawled their way back up the slope until they reached the firm footing of the grass beneath the castle wall. They were covered in mud and drenched to the bone. Ralph, short and stocky, was shivering like a leaf. Cat wrapped her cloak around him and took him into her arms. The other boys would have scoffed at her for mothering him, but Wolfram felt sympathetic. Perhaps Ralph needed a hug right now. He ruffled the boy's wet hair.

“You were almost back up. Another few yards and you'd have made it on your own.”

“I couldn't see in the dark,” Ralph replied in a shaky voice. “I didn't know where I was, and the rocks were all wet. I thought I'd fall if I kept going.”

“You're alright now. Come on, you can get warm inside. Cat will fetch you something from the kitchen. And don't listen to Gavin the next time he starts telling tales.”

They retraced their steps along the wall until they reached the gate. The small door had been latched from the inside and Wolfram had to bang on it to attract the night watchman's attention. Just as the door was opening, a sudden noise from the trees startled Wolfram. Hoofbeats splashed up the rainswept path. If he'd heard them a second later, he would have been trampled. He threw himself out of the way at the last moment, putting his body in front of Ralph and Cat to shield them from the horse's hooves. The night watchman let out a cry and stumbled back through the doorway. Hot breath snorted against the back of Wolfram's head as the horse reared to a halt inches behind him.

He rounded on the rider angrily. “What the hell are you doing?!”

The young man on horseback was soaked through and breathing hard. He must have been mad to brave the path up the hill in this weather.

“They've killed Hundolf,” he gasped. “Percy and his friends, they killed him right in the farmhouse! We need the baron's men.”

“Get off your horse and come inside,” the night watchman said. “Wolfram, help me open the gate.”

A few minutes later, the rider's horse was stabled and the group stood in the great hall, their cloaks trickling a growing puddle of water across the stones beneath their feet. Cat took Ralph into the parlour to get warm, but Wolfram stayed to see what was happening. He wanted to know what this talk of murder was all about. The young man who'd arrived at the gates was clearly distraught. He had a fresh bruise on his face and a panicked look about him, and he wouldn't stop babbling until Lord Erik raised his voice.

“Speak sensibly, man! Who are you and where have you come from?”

A half-circle of people gathered to listen. It was rare for visitors to come this late, let alone in such weather.

The young man took a deep breath and bowed. Then, perhaps as much from exhaustion as in deference, he fell to one knee at Erik's feet.

“They call me Loddy, milord, from Kilwick. There's been a murder. Hundolf, my cousin, he and I were at the farmhouse getting ale. All the workers go there after sundown. Only, Percy Butcher was there, too, and we said to him, we said he doesn't have any business taking ale with us, as he doesn't work the farm. Well, he wasn't being reasonable. He made it into a fight. We tried to calm it down, but him and his friends kept beating my cousin till he couldn't get back up.” Loddy's voice rose in anger. “He needs to hang, milord!”

“Are there other witnesses who can attest to this?” Lord Erik asked.

“Half a dozen, at least. We all saw it. I can take you to the village now.”

Erik shook his head. “We'll slip to our deaths going down the path in this weather. You'll sleep here in my hall tonight, then at dawn you can take my men back to Kilwick with you. If what you say is true, we'll have the culprits arrested and put on trial.”

Loddy didn't look satisfied with the answer, but Erik's expression brooked no argument. He was a decisive man in a crisis. The baron moved back toward the high table, motioning for Dunstan and a few others to come with him. Wolfram followed at the back of the group and was relieved when no one sent him away. He felt proud to be included in a discussion of such importance.

“I want you to take four men tomorrow,” Erik told Dunstan. “Find out the truth of what happened and arrest the people responsible. Don't bring them here—put them in the lockup in Firfallow. If we're quick, we can have a trial held before Lord Ricaud arrives. I can't afford to leave this business unresolved while he's here. Do you understand? He'll think the shire is in shambles if everyone's gossiping about some farmhouse murder.”

Dunstan wore a look of perplexity.

“Four men? Who do you want me to take? The ones I'd usually bring left this afternoon to escort Lord Ricaud from Tannersfield.”

Lord Erik looked at Wolfram. “Take some of the boys. They're trained for this, aren't they? It's about time they started earning their keep. Look at young Wolfram. You can handle some village thugs, can't you?”

“Absolutely, milord,” Wolfram answered instinctively. He wasn't sure what the significance of Lord Ricaud's visit was—noble guests came and went all the time—but

it seemed very important to the baron, so it was important to Wolfram, too.

“Alright,” Dunstan said reluctantly. “I suppose they'll do well enough. Wolf, tell Robin and Gavin I want the three of you up and ready to leave before dawn.”

“Are you sure you want Robin?” Lord Erik asked.

“I'll need a clerk to take down names. It'll take all day if I'm the only one asking questions, and we don't want Wolf and Gavin barking at our villagers. Robin knows how to talk to people.”

Erik nodded. “You know them best.”

When the conversation died down, Wolfram returned to the parlour to dry his wet clothes and tell the others what had happened. He was excited. This would be his first time travelling Elkinshire on official business for the baron.

Finally, he would get the chance to impress his lord.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:26 am*

It was still dark outside when Dunstan dropped a bundle of surcoats and sword belts on the parlour table.

“Put those on. You're the baron's men today.”

Wolfram picked up one of the sword belts, admiring the blade that hung from the waist loop. It was old and the guard was dirty, but the metal gleamed when he drew it from its oiled sheath. He'd practised with real swords before, perhaps even this very one, but this wasn't practise. Today he would carry this weapon as a symbol of his status and authority. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Gavin surreptitiously swap the sword Dunstan had given him with one he kept hidden under a pile of wash rags behind the clothes chest. It was a personal favourite he'd pilfered from the armoury, and he always liked to keep it close to hand.

Though the surcoats weren't tailored for them, Wolfram and Gavin were tall and broad enough to fill theirs out well enough. Only Robin looked a little awkward in his oversized garment. The material was quartered in red and black, just like the surcoat Lady Ingrid wore at her father's banquets. They were bold and imposing colours for a noble household. There was no mail for them to wear, but they had thick gambeson jackets and half-helmets with nose guards. To Wolfram, his new outfit felt like the finest clothing he'd ever worn.

They headed out to the stables where Dunstan issued each of them with a coil of rope and a short wooden cudgel that looped into their belts alongside their swords.

“Use those if we get into any trouble. We're not looking for a fight, but folk do desperate things when they think they're headed to the noose. Remember, we can't

hold a trial for dead bodies.”

“What if one of them's got a knife or something?” Gavin asked.

“Then use your sword.” Dunstan handed Robin a stick of charcoal wrapped in a roll of birch bark. “And you—use that. I want you to write down the names of everyone we talk to and anything important you hear; where folk live, who they know, whether they're willing to testify. You two,” he pointed at Wolfram and Gavin, “don't talk to anyone. Just stand there and look frightening.”

There were no spare mounts at the castle that day, so they rode the noble family's horses. Dunstan and the other man-at-arms accompanying them took two of Lord Erik's horses while the squires rode palfreys belonging to Julia and Ingrid. Loddy Kilwick met them at the castle gates, eager to be off.

“Follow after me, sirs,” he said.

“I know the way to Kilwick,” Dunstan replied shortly.

The young man rode ahead all the same, leading the way down the winding path as the sun came up. The wind and rain of the night before had mercifully abated, promising a fine day ahead. The path was only wide enough for two horses, and Wolfram found himself riding next to Dunstan.

“So, are we going to arrest this Percy Butcher fellow?” he asked his instructor.

“Who?”

“Percy Butcher. Loddy said that was who killed his cousin.”

“I don't care what he said. We're not arresting anyone till we get the whole story.”

Wolfram frowned. "Don't you believe him?"

"Always get both sides of a story before you believe anything, Wolf. That's why we have courts. We're going to talk to everyone, Percy Butcher included, then we'll decide who we're arresting. The victim was Loddy's cousin, so the only side he's interested in arguing is his own. He could've had a hand in it himself for all we know." He glowered at the young man riding in front of them. "How does a farm labourer like him afford a horse, anyhow?"

"We could ask him?" Wolfram ventured.

"Go on, then. Solve our first mystery for us."

"Loddy!" Wolfram called. "Where'd you get that horse?"

Loddy turned halfway around in the saddle. "It's my uncle's. He said to take it and ride straight to the castle."

Wolfram looked back at Dunstan. "That sounds fair enough."

"It does," Dunstan replied with the air of a teacher imparting a lesson. "And why's that?"

Wolfram paused to think about it. Patient as always, Dunstan waited for his answer.

"Oh!" Wolfram said as they turned a bend in the path. "His cousin's the one who got killed, so his uncle's probably the victim's father. Obviously he'd want him to ride up here fast."

"There you are," Dunstan said. "There's a drop of sense in that thick head after all. If something doesn't make sense to you, ask about it. If it still doesn't make sense, keep



on asking. Folk who can't give you straight answers are usually hiding something. It's important to get these things right. Arrest the wrong man, and you'll stir more problems than you had in the first place. Remember, we're wearing the baron's colours today. Everything we do is going to reflect on him.”

Wolfram nodded. He understood the weight of the responsibility, and he was determined to do right by his lord. They would find the culprits and see justice done.

Kilwick was about two hours' ride down the road from Firfallow in a low-lying area of woods and meadows in the south part of Elkinshire. The road began to dry out as the temperature rose, and soon Wolfram was sweating beneath his helmet. They passed by several fields and farmsteads as they travelled. Most of the harvesting was over at this time of year, and now the water mills were turning as labourers tossed grain in baskets to winnow out the chaff. Some of them came over to the roadside when they saw the group of colourful riders approaching. They pointed and stared, calling out hails of greeting. Dunstan ignored them, so Wolfram did, too, even though he wanted to smile and wave back. He enjoyed cutting such a distinguished figure

“Lord Erik's got a lot of land, doesn't he?” Wolfram said to Robin as they rode over a small hill that commanded a view of the surrounding area. In the distance, he could see a cluster of buildings and fields that must have been Kilwick.

“His ancestors had even more,” Robin replied. “Elkinshire used to be about three times bigger. It was its own county back then.”

“Why isn't it anymore?”

Robin shrugged. “The count of Tannersfield probably decided he wanted this land for himself. So now it's part of Tannersfield. That's how it usually goes.”

“Lady Julia says it's good land. Lord Erik's knights are just useless.”

Robin grinned. "We'll be replacing them soon if we do a good job today."

When they reached Kilwick, it was obvious there was trouble afoot. The village wasn't particularly large, only about a dozen buildings clustered around a well, but Loddy said there were several farmhouses nearby. The yard around the well was full of people. Dunstan held up a hand and the group slowed, approaching at a cautious pace. Wolfram urged his horse aside with a nudge of his knees so he could get a better look. Something strange was going on. He'd expected to see peasants dressed in the browns and greys of homespun wool, but the people standing by the well were as colourful as Wolfram's group. There were half a dozen of them, and they all wore coats of green, orange, and yellow with mail shirts and sword belts. One of them was holding the bridles of several fine horses. Wolfram heard Dunstan curse under his breath.

At the sound of the baron's men approaching, one of the well-dressed men broke off his conversation and stepped forward to greet them. He was young and handsome, with a head of wind-tousled brown hair and a look of cocksure confidence. He set his feet squarely in the middle of the road and put his hands on his hips, showing no fear as Dunstan approached.

"It's the baron's men!" he called, speaking loudly so that everyone could hear him.

One of his older companions eyed the group over. "More like the baron's boys."

The handsome man laughed. "Good morning, Dunstan. You're quick off the mark."

"Master Aldrich," Dunstan replied with forced courtesy. "I hope you're not taking the baron's business into your own hands again."

Aldrich looked around with a smile. There was something unnerving about his demeanour. It reminded Wolfram of some of the boys he'd known back home, the

sort who were polite in front of their elders and bullies in private. All smiles and charm until your back was turned.

“This is Sir Tancred's village,” Aldrich said. “It's his duty to keep the peace here, and we work for him.”

“Really,” Dunstan replied, his voice heavy with sarcasm. “Last I heard, you were working for Sir Daniel.”

“We work for anyone who can pay us.”

“It's not for sellswords to uphold the king's law.”

“Who else is going to uphold it?” Aldrich eyed the three young squires deliberately.

“Sir Tancred doesn't seem to think he can rely on the baron.”

“I'm not here to have a pissing match with you, pup,” Dunstan snapped, his patience reaching an abrupt limit. “Keep Tancred's money if you want, but stay out of our way. We're here to arrest the men responsible for a murder.”

Aldrich seemed momentarily uncertain, hesitating as he weighed up his options. Wolfram didn't like the coldly calculating look in his eyes. He was cocky, but he didn't seem to be stupid. He spoke like an educated man, and his mail gleamed as if it were brand new. He came from money.

“We don't want any trouble with the baron. I'll tell you what—how about we join forces? We're looking for a man named Percy Butcher, but no one seems to know where he is. With a dozen men between us, I'm sure we can find him somewhere.”

“I'd rather you went on your way.”

“Don't be unreasonable, Dunstan. Like I said, we don't want any trouble.”

It seemed like Dunstan was about to spit out another aggressive retort, but he held his tongue this time. “Don't get in our way,” he repeated, and kicked his horse forward.

Aldrich stepped aside to make room.

“Who are they?” Wolfram asked Dunstan as they rode past.

“A bloody headache,” Dunstan replied. “Boys who like to swing their cocks around because they think no one's going to stop them.”

Wolfram looked back at Aldrich and his men. “Should we stop them?”

“No. That's not what we're here for, and believe me, it's more trouble than it's worth trying to handle a man like Aldrich.”

“If they want to help, I say we let them,” the other man-at-arms said.

Dunstan snorted derisively and swung himself out of the saddle. They stabled their horses at the local public house and made their way back to the road.

“Loddy,” Dunstan said. “Show us the place where it happened.”

A short trek across the fields took them to a large farmhouse with an attached barn. They found the farmer and his family inside along with half a dozen labourers. None of them seemed to be working that day. The body of Loddy's cousin was still in the barn, shrouded beneath a pair of large rush mats on a table. Dunstan lifted the mat covering the young man's face. His flesh was pallid, still discoloured with bruises around the eyes and nose. Brownish-red blood had dried and cracked in rivulets streaming from his nostrils.

It wasn't the first time Wolfram had seen a dead body. When he was ten, one of the merchants who worked with his mother had taken a fall from his horse and hit his ribs on a sharp rock. He'd lain in the inn all evening making horrible wheezing sounds and moaning in pain every time he coughed. The next morning, after the moans and wheezing had stopped, he'd looked a lot like this young man.

Robin turned away from the grisly sight, deliberately staring out of the open barn doors. Wolfram unfastened his helmet. Dead bodies didn't bother him. He'd wrung the necks of enough birds and rabbits on hunts with his father to be familiar with the process of death. As long as it was quick and merciful, he could look past it and move on.

The man on the table didn't look like he'd died mercifully. He must have been kicked and punched till his skull cracked. An indignant anger rose in Wolfram at the thought of the poor fellow's final moments; cowering on the barn floor, his strength slowly leaving him, the pain of the endless blows overwhelming his will to fight back. That was no way for a man to die.

“Definitely looks like someone beat him to death,” Dunstan said.

“It was Percy Butcher,” the farmer said. “Him, his brother Tom, and Charlie Black from the charcoal camp.”

“I didn't think they'd go that far,” said Loddy, his voice sombre as he stared at his cousin's body. “By the time I called the others in to break it up, it was too late.”

Dunstan looked at the farm workers. “And you can all swear to this? You'd stand witness in court?”

One by one, they all nodded. Robin unrolled his birch bark and went over to the open doors so he could write down names in the light. Wolfram suspected he wanted to get

away from the dead body. The villagers lined up to give him their names while Dunstan continued speaking with the farmer.

“Where can we find Percy?”

“His family's got a swine farm about a mile south over yonder. You'll see the smoke from the charcoal camp by the woods if you head that way.”

“Wolf, Gavin,” Dunstan called. “Go back and fetch our horses while we finish here. We'll be riding out to that swine farm next.”

“Do you think we'll find Percy there?” Wolfram asked. “Aldrich said no one knew where he was.”

“We'll see for ourselves. Go on. I want those horses here before we're done.”

Wolfram set his helmet down on the table and jogged back to the village with Gavin. He was perplexed. It felt like Dunstan was being too slow and cautious. They'd known the culprit's name from the start. Aldrich had already told them he was missing. Surely they should have embarked on a search right away rather than stopping to gather names and ask questions? If Percy Butcher had decided to run, he could be miles away by now. The baron's men would look like bumbling fools if they spent all morning dawdling while he escaped. He shared his frustrations with Gavin as they approached the public house where the horses were stabled.

“You don't know better than Dunstan,” the other boy replied. He was loyal and stubborn, and while he had a sense of mischief when he was on his own, that proclivity for independent thought didn't extend to his martial duties. He did what he was told without question.

They gathered up the horses and had the villagers help string them together so they

could be led in a group. Just as they were getting ready to leave, Wolfram heard a commotion from the other end of the village. He looked around the side of the public house and saw the bright outfits of Aldrich's men. By the looks of the man sprawled on the ground in front of them, they'd found someone to interrogate.

“Go on with the horses,” Wolfram said, thrusting the lead into Gavin's hands. Before his companion could protest, he was already halfway down the road. As he jogged toward the group of men, he saw one of them drag the sprawling villager to his feet. Aldrich moved to intercept Wolfram when he saw him coming.

“Did Dunstan change his mind?”

Wolfram stopped, his heart beating fast. Now that he was alone, he didn't feel so confident about confronting the well-dressed men, but he didn't want them to think he was afraid. He pointed at the villager and asked: “Who is he?”

“His name's Tom Butcher, the brother of the murderer. We were just about to ask him where Percy is.”

Again Wolfram felt a tug of frustration. While Dunstan and the others were wasting time at the farmhouse, Aldrich had already caught one of the culprits! He looked back down the path and saw Gavin waiting with the horses.

“Go on back!” he called. “I'll be right behind you.”

Gavin shrugged and turned away. Dunstan would be angry, but Lord Erik would be angrier if they let the murderers escape. It seemed counterproductive to ignore Aldrich if they were both working towards the same goal.

“What do they call you?” Aldrich asked. Now that he didn't have a crowd watching, his cocky demeanour had left him. He looked like he might be a couple of years older

than Wolfram, with a similar build and a relaxed bearing.

“Wolfram.”

“Good to meet you, Wolfram. I'm Aldrich Merchant.”

The familiar surname caught Wolfram off guard. “That's what they call me. I'm from a merchant family, too.”

Aldrich smiled. “I thought all of Dunstan's boys were noble lordlings. Well, I'm glad to be surprised.”

The cordial moment was dispelled when Tom Butcher groaned in pain as one of Aldrich's men punched him in the stomach.

“Leave him be!” Wolfram called out instinctively.

Aldrich raised a hand to signal his men to stop. “Let the man speak. He knows what's coming if he holds his tongue.”

Tom Butcher looked pale and frightened, his stringy fair hair stuck to his face with sweat.

“I didn't do anything, I swear! I was just there when it happened. I never killed him!”

Aldrich tutted. “You helped though, didn't you? Someone's getting strung up for this. If we can't find your brother, we'll have to make do with you.”

“He didn't mean to! It was Hundolf who started it. We just fought back. He must've fallen and hit his head or something. It was an accident, not murder.”



He was lying. The man in the barn hadn't suffered a bad fall. He'd been beaten far beyond the point where any reasonable person would have known to stop. The bare-faced deception angered Wolfram.

“Don't lie,” he cut in. “I saw the body. If you've any decency, you'll give yourselves up and accept the judgement of the law.”

Aldrich nodded as if he and Wolfram had been working together all along. “Are you going to lie to one of the baron's men?”

The combined pressure broke the last of Tom Butcher's resolve. His eyes fell to the ground.

“If I tell you where they are, will you let me go?”

“It might help you at your trial,” Wolfram said.

Tom pointed to the east. “Out that way, by the stream. I'll show you.”

“Anyone have some rope?” Aldrich asked.

Wolfram untied the coil Dunstan had given him. Aldrich's men bound Tom's hands behind his back and used the leftover slack to walk him forward like a hound on a leash.

“You should come with us,” Aldrich said to Wolfram. “It's only right we lend assistance to the baron's men.”

Wolfram hesitated. The path Tom had pointed out led away from the farmhouse. If Dunstan and the others rode off to the Butchers' farm, it might be hours before Wolfram found his way back to them. Then he'd really be trouble. But he wasn't a

child shirking his chores; this was a matter of life and death. As wary as Aldrich made him, he was the one getting the job done, and Wolfram wanted to be there when they caught Percy Butcher. He imagined telling the story to the others when he returned to the castle, and his excitement got the better of his trepidation.

“We'll find him together,” he said decisively.

Aldrich smiled. “That we will. Have you got a horse?”

Wolfram remembered that Gavin had taken all the horses, and he felt foolish.

“Don't worry, we'll get you another,” Aldrich said. “Men like us only have to ask.”

Wolfram wasn't sure what he meant by that, but he didn't want to appear any more clueless in front of these older men who seemed more like real soldiers than anyone he'd met at the castle.

A few minutes later, Aldrich's group had rounded up their mounts and saddled a workhorse for Wolfram. It didn't ride very well, but it was better than nothing. They set out east from the village, walking Tom Butcher on his rope leash in front of them. It looked like there were more farms out this way, but the fields were sparser, intercut with stretches of forest, overgrown meadows, and a winding stream that made travel awkward. Before long they had to dismount and lead their horses through a dense copse with low-hanging branches by hand. The trails here were narrow and ill-suited for riding. Percy Butcher must have come this way on foot.

“Perhaps we should have left the horses,” Wolfram panted as he dragged his boots out of a patch of sucking mud on the stream bank.

“We'll be glad for them as soon as the land opens up,” Aldrich said from behind him.

“Our outlaws won't be able to run from us if we're on horseback.”

Wolfram got clear of the mud and led his horse aside so that he and Aldrich could walk abreast.

“Do you do this often?”

“Someone has to.”

“And the knights pay you for it?”

Aldrich nodded. “They need men to keep the peace, and we're the best men around.”

“Whenever there was trouble in my village, we rounded up a group of people and dealt with the culprits ourselves.”

“There's too much outlawry here for the locals to deal with on their own, especially when we don't get paid. The people here need our protection.”

Something about Aldrich's words made Wolfram frown. Hadn't Lady Julia said there was relatively little outlawry in Elkinshire? He certainly hadn't heard any talk of footpads on the roads recently. This murder was the most dramatic thing that had been reported to the castle in months. Dunstan's warnings echoed in the back of his mind once more.

“Dunstan doesn't seem very fond of you.”

Aldrich scoffed. “He wouldn't be. He doesn't think upstarts like us deserve to take over the divine rights of the nobility. I used to play with Lady Ingrid when we were little, you know. She'd come down to the village for the day with her parents, and we'd play in my mother's parlour. But every time I went up the hill to try and see her at the castle? Dunstan would shoo me away like I was a stray dog. Never mind that my mother's richer than Lord Erik's been in years.”

“That's just how Dunstan treats everyone. He calls us dogs, too.”

“But we're not. The nobles, they're the real dogs, Wolfram; doing everything their royal masters tell them, never having to work. They get born into money, so they think they deserve castles and feather beds. Men like you and me, we know what it's like to work for our supper.”

Wolfram felt uncomfortable as Aldrich reached over to squeeze his shoulder, as if taking it for granted that they were both complicit in his improper views.

“I thought your mother made all your money?”

Aldrich was silent for a moment, then he let go of Wolfram and laughed.

“You watch what you say, or we might just string you up alongside our murderers!”

Wolfram forced a smile that he didn't feel. He was almost certain it had been meant as a joke.

Almost.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:26 am*

It was well into the afternoon by the time they found Percy Butcher's camp. According to his brother Tom, they'd agreed to meet here at midday, fearing they would be caught if they stayed at home. Tom had stopped at the village to get food when Aldrich's men caught him.

“Well, where is he now?” Aldrich asked when they came upon the campsite. It looked like an old fishing spot. A pile of wicker traps lay in the undergrowth next to a dilapidated bivouac shelter made from branches and dry grass. Birch trees hid the spot from afar, but up close it was plain to see that someone had been here recently. The ground, still soft from last night's rain, carried the imprints of boot soles clearly, and the ashes of a small fire had been scattered near the stream bank. Wolfram knelt down and held a hand over them. They were just barely warm.

“I don't know where they went,” Tom Butcher said in a miserable voice. His wrists had been chafed badly by the rope, and he looked exhausted. “We just agreed to meet here.”

Aldrich walked up to him and brought his face uncomfortably close. “Have a guess.”

Wolfram ignored the confrontation and went to look around the edges of the camp. One of his favourite pastimes as a boy had been hunting with his father. He'd been too young to use a bow or a big spear, but he'd listened carefully to everything he was told on those trips. It had been like a game at first. His father would take him to a seemingly nondescript spot in the woods, sit down, and ask him to look around until he found something. Sometimes it was animal dung, other times tracks in the mud. It could be a rabbit warren, a bird's nest, a recently gnawed carcass, or bark stripped from a tree trunk. His father always made sure there was something to find. He would

wait patiently, offering hints when Wolfram got stuck until he completed his little hunt. Once he was older, they had started learning how to track properly. When you didn't have a dog's nose to trust, Father said, you had to rely on your intuition. Tracking was less about searching and more about anticipation. An inexperienced hunter might spend an hour combing the same patch of ground for a trail to follow, while an expert would quickly assess the most likely path an animal would take and check that first.

Wolfram had never tracked people before, but it made sense that the same principles would apply. Percy and his other accomplice wouldn't have gone back in the direction of the village, nor would they have tried to pick their way through the densely packed birch trees. They might have crossed the stream, but that would have been awkward, for it was deep and wide here. As Wolfram looked around the camp, he saw only two obvious paths. One led along the stream bank heading east, while the other went off towards a grassy meadow behind the shelter. He checked the bank first, and his intuition was rewarded. The tracks weren't obvious, for the earth here was pebbly and firm, but every few feet he could see an angled imprint where the corner of a wooden boot sole had scraped the soil into a flat line.

He checked the other parts of the camp to make sure there weren't multiple trails. The only other tracks he could find were intermingled with those left by the horses, and it seemed unlikely that Percy Butcher could have doubled back the way he'd come without being spotted.

Aldrich was still trying to get Tom to talk when Wolfram interrupted them.

“They headed that way,” he said, pointing down the stream bank.

“How do you know? Can you sniff out a trail?”

“I'm not bad at it.”

Aldrich looked at Tom. "What's out that way?"

"A couple more farms, then the old forest."

The old forest marked the eastern edge of Elkinshire. People said there was nothing out there, not even woodsmen. You could lose yourself for a week beneath those branches without seeing open land.

"Well then," said Aldrich. "He's probably gone to one of the farms. Come on, baron's boy, get sniffing that trail."

Wolfram didn't expect the trail to lead them to a farm. If Percy had camped out in a hidden spot like this, he obviously knew to stay away from other people. That was why outlaws lived in the woods. As long as you stayed away from civilisation, you could evade the law for a long time.

They set off down the stream bank with Wolfram in the lead. It was slow going, for he didn't have his father's years of experience following trails, but Aldrich and his men seemed not to notice. None of them were hunters, that much was clear. Wolfram couldn't make sense of what kind of men they were. Their manner of speaking was rough and loud, as he might have expected from a band of mercenaries, but the way they dressed and held themselves reminded him more of a gang of rich friends roaming the countryside. He had to hold his tongue several times when he saw them draw their swords to carelessly lop at tree branches and swipe thick grass out of the way. Dunstan would have skinned him alive if he'd caught him handling his weapon so recklessly. They might have looked the part of men-at-arms, but they had none of the training. There was no discipline among them.

Wolfram became painfully aware of the sun's passage across the sky as the afternoon wore on. He was still following Percy's trail, of that he was fairly sure. He never strayed far from the stream, only making small detours when the footing became

untenable. At these points, tracking became harder. Wolfram had to rely on spotting trampled earth and broken grass, and he completely lost the trail several times. But Percy had been following the stream all day, and it didn't seem like he wanted to venture far from it. Perhaps he feared getting lost or losing his supply of fresh water if he planned on hiding out here. So whenever Wolfram lost the trail, he didn't panic. He kept going forward by the easiest path until he found the stream again. Then, after a few moments of searching, the tracks in the mud would inevitably reappear.

They couldn't have been more than a couple of hours' walk from Kilwick, but the slow pace made it feel like they'd trudged halfway across Elkinshire. There were no villages out here, only farmsteads occupied by a handful of families and labourers. Every so often they would spy a farmhouse in the distance and the men would ask to stop. They were obviously getting bored and weary, but Wolfram was used to mind-numbing exercise. Compared to his usual routines at the castle, this trek across the countryside was almost relaxing. But Aldrich insisted they keep going, so Wolfram maintained his pace. He'd show this gang of shiny sellswords what a real soldier looked like.

When they were eventually forced to stop for the day, there was still no sign of Percy Butcher. They'd reached the edge of the old forest, and the light would be gone within the next hour. Ahead of them, the stream snaked away into a thicket of trees. Percy and his accomplice must have pressed on till they reached the safety of the forest.

“We can't search the woods in the dark,” Aldrich said.

Wolfram was forced to agree. His stomach was gnawing at him. Had he eaten anything today? Not since he left the castle, he didn't think.

“Will we go back to Kilwick?”

Aldrich scoffed. “And let them get away? I don't think so. Let's head back to that last



farmhouse we saw and stay the night there. We'll get out first thing in the morning and catch Percy while he's still napping.”

The idea was met with wholesale approval from the others. Even Tom Butcher looked relieved. His wrists were bleeding and he looked like he was about to keel over. Wolfram hadn't realised how bad the poor man had gotten. Murderer or not, it seemed distasteful how he was being treated. Punishment was the duty of the courts, Dunstan would have said, not soldiers.

They mounted their horses and followed the stream back the way they'd come till they reached a long farmhouse on a hill. It looked similar to the one where the murder had happened, but smaller and more dilapidated. Inside they found a family of four along with a couple of labourers who cleared out as soon as the gang of armed men pushed their way inside.

“You know who I am?” Aldrich asked, planting his boots squarely on the earthen floor.

The father of the family, an older man with a head of greying hair, moistened his lips with the tip of his tongue before answering.

“You're those ones who protect the village.”

“Good man.” Aldrich smiled. “We protect all the villages around here, and there's a brace of murderers abroad. We've already caught one of them.” He shot a glance in Tom's direction. “We need food, drink, and a good fire. We'll be staying here till morning.”

The farmer nodded, plainly afraid. His wife stood behind him next to a younger woman who must have been their daughter. She had a small infant cradled in her arms. If the baby had a father, he was nowhere to be seen, unless it was one of the

labourers who'd fled.

“You needn't worry,” Wolfram said, trying to ease their concern. “I'm from the castle. Lord Erik's men are here looking for the culprits, too.”

Some of the tension left the farmer's expression, but his family still cowered behind him.

“I'll set out some food. You can sleep here in the hall.”

“And drink,” one of Aldrich's men said. “I want the best cider you farmers can brew.”

“We've got some cider.”

“Bring all of it.”

Wolfram sat down at the end of a long table in the middle of the room, trying to smile and look confident so the family would feel reassured. He didn't trust the men whose company he'd found himself in. Now that night was falling, he'd become uncomfortably aware of how alone he was. Where were Dunstan and the others? Had they found out from Gavin where he'd gone? Surely they would have caught up already if they'd come looking. Maybe Dunstan was still combing the farms around the village for news of Percy.

Wolfram ran his hands through his fair hair. Whatever happened, he was sure to be in deep trouble when he returned. Dunstan would probably have him whipped in the courtyard. It wouldn't be as bad as a proper flogging—the squires were too important to suffer the same punishments as common folk—but when one of the boys pushed Dunstan's patience too far, he always had the others drag a pillory out into the courtyard. Once the offender was locked in place, the squires would take turns lashing his back with a piece of leather on the end of a stick. Wolfram had been

whipped twice; once when he'd spilt Lord Erik's wine three times in one night, and once when he, Robin, and Cat had been caught drunk in the pantry cellar when they were supposed to be helping with a spring fair.

The farmers had no meat to share, but there was bread, cheese, pottage, some hard apples, and a sizeable barrel of cider. Wolfram ate and drank sparingly despite his hunger, knowing that the farmers were unlikely to be reimbursed for their hospitality.

The house was one long room split into three areas. One end served as a barn for the livestock, the middle part was the hall, and the other end had blankets hanging from the beams to cordon off a living area for the farmer and his family. They stayed behind the blankets most of the time, only coming out when Aldrich's men called for more food and fuel for the hearth. Tom Butcher, who had been tethered to a post near the livestock pen, lay on the floor with his back to them, his bloody hands resting limply on the straw. Wolfram brought him some cheese and cider when it became clear that no one else was going to. The young man ate hungrily, but spared no words of thanks for Wolfram's kindness.

As the cider barrel emptied, the atmosphere grew rowdy. Aldrich's men shared raucous tales about public houses they'd been to, minstrels they'd heard perform, cockfights they'd gambled on, women they'd slept with, and noblemen they didn't like. Wolfram only joined in if he was prompted. The banter made him uncomfortable. It wasn't all that different from the things the squires talked about at the castle, but the tone was off. Aldrich's men kept pushing jokes too far, ridiculing each other to the point of cruelty like Gavin had done the night he got drunk and Wolfram punched him. The conversation took a particularly nasty turn when the farmer's daughter, whose baby had started crying, came out to warm water over the hearth so she could change the infant's swaddling.

“Can't you shut it up?” one of Aldrich's men asked.

“I'm trying,” the woman replied in a quiet voice, avoiding eye contact.

“Try harder, or I'll give you a spanking.”

A scattering of laughter followed. One of the younger men, a chubby-faced lad not much older than Wolfram, leaned over to mutter to one of his companions: “Do you think she'd going to feed the baby?”

The other man smirked. “Go and pull down those blankets so we can see.”

“I bet she's got nice tits.”

“What about her mother? Think we could get both of them to show us?”

Wolfram couldn't hold his tongue any longer. He banged his cup loudly on the table, making the pair flinch. “Don't talk about these people like that. They've given us food and hospitality. The least you could do is show them some respect.”

The plump young man gave him a sour look. Under different circumstances, Wolfram might have been cowed into silence by the thuggish group, but there were other people in the house more vulnerable than him that night, and that got his temper up. Some things cut Wolfram more deeply than fear.

“ Baron's boy ,” Aldrich crooned in a mocking sing-song tone. “There's no Dunstan around. You don't have to mind your manners with us.” He gestured at the farmer's daughter as she shuffled back behind the blankets. “These people are sheep. Look at them. We can do whatever we want. They're not going to tell.”

“That's no excuse.”

“Don't tell me you've never had a little fun.”

“This isn't fun.”

More jeering laughter answered him. Despite being half drunk, Aldrich's expression still held the same cold, clever look from earlier, as though he was weighing up how best to deal with the situation. Wolfram gripped the hilt of his sword beneath the table. It made him uncomfortable when people looked at him like that. He wasn't a quick thinker, and the longer Aldrich stared, the more he felt like he was slipping into the clutches of some unseen scheme. For the first time that day, he regretted leaving Dunstan and the others. Without his help, Aldrich would probably have turned back at the fishing camp and left these people alone.

Aldrich stood up and went to the hanging blankets. He yanked on one of them, ripping it from its fastenings. The farmer and his family sat huddled around the edge of a bed in the far corner.

“Give that baby here,” Aldrich called in. When the farmer's daughter didn't move, he grabbed her by the arm and dragged her out. She remained sullen and silent, only voicing a cry of protest when Aldrich carelessly yanked the infant from her arms.

“Dom, come here,” Aldrich called to one of his older men. “You've got a daughter. Show us how you keep a baby quiet.”

Wolfram rose to his feet, his fingers tight on the handle of his sword.

“Give him here,” the man called Dom said. He took the crying baby into the crook of his arm and rocked him. He was drunker than the others, and he stumbled, shooting out a hand to catch himself on the table as he almost fell over.

“Stop this!” Wolfram said. “You'll drop him!”

“Now, now,” Dom said in a reproachful tone. “Give me time, give me time. Lad just

needs to get merry like the rest of us. A bit of drink does them more good than mother's milk.” He picked up a cup of cider and pressed it to the baby's lips. Aldrich slapped him on the back, and he stumbled again, pouring the entire cup over the infant's head as the others roared in laughter. The baby screamed.

Wolfram strode around the table, but Aldrich got in his way and shoved him in the chest.

“Please, give him back!” the farmer's daughter begged, on the verge of tears. “I'll settle him down, I promise!”

“Take your dress off,” the chubby young man said, “then you can have him back.” The others cheered their agreement, banging their hands on the table until it rattled.

Wolfram drew his sword. The rasp of steel on leather changed the mood in an instant. Aldrich's mocking expression turned serious.

“Alright, baron's boy. No need to piss yourself. Dom, give her the baby.”

To Wolfram's relief, the older man passed the boy back to his mother. She shot Wolfram a look of gratitude and hurried back to her parents.

“Lord Erik's man has spoken,” Aldrich continued, a hint of his previous mirth returning. “There's to be no fun tonight. Come on, put your sword away. No one wants to get killed over a joke.”

“I don't care for jokes like that.”

“Don't you? I'd never have guessed.” Aldrich grinned, and the others started laughing again.

Keeping one eye on Aldrich, Wolfram slid his sword back into the sheath and went to help the farmer refasten the fallen blanket.

He barely slept that night. Over the next couple of hours, Aldrich's men drank the last of the cider and fell asleep in the straw one by one, their banter trailing off until the farmhouse grew quiet. Wolfram sat with his back to a post, his sword resting across his lap. He was too unnerved by what had happened to close his eyes. He heard movement behind him, and the sound of the farmer's voice whispered close to his ear.

“Thank you for earlier. You're a brave lad.”

Such compliments usually flattered Wolfram, but not tonight. He couldn't feel proud about standing up for what felt like the barest minimum of human decency.

“Call for me if they bother you again,” he whispered back.

“We'll be alright. They'll be gone in the morning once they realise there's no more food. Thank you. It's good to see the baron's men doing right by us.”

Wolfram nodded and the farmer went back to bed.

The snores of the other men grew loud in the early hours of the morning. The pile of mail they'd left on the table glinted in the dying hearthlight. Wolfram watched the points of fire reflecting in the shiny armour as they danced and flickered, wondering what he was going to do tomorrow. He wanted to see his task through to the end, but he no longer felt safe with Aldrich. The sensible thing would be to return to Kilwick and find Dunstan. That would mean running back with his tail between his legs.

Wolfram's eyelids eventually grew heavy, and he dozed for a while before dawn. The sound of feet shuffling through the straw snapped him awake a few times, but it was only Aldrich's men getting up to piss. Only one of them bothered finding his way to

the door so he could go outside.

There was no more rowdiness the following morning. The men were subdued, some of them weary and hungover. They took what was left of last night's food and went down to the stream to splash cold water in their faces. It was bright and mild for now, but the wind was picking up and Wolfram could see dark clouds on the horizon.

"I'm going back to the village," he told Aldrich after he'd drunk a cup of water. They were standing apart from the others at the base of the farmhouse hill where the stream snaked toward the old forest.

"You're not, are you?" Aldrich sounded genuinely surprised. "Not because of what happened last night?"

"You'll have to find Percy Butcher on your own."

Aldrich's attitude had changed from the night before. There was no more mockery in his tone. Like the others, he seemed subdued and serious, perhaps even a little remorseful about what had happened.

"We can't find him without you. You're the only huntsman we have. If we don't catch that outlaw soon, he'll be away into the forest. Do you want him to get away with murder?"

The back of Wolfram's neck prickled uncomfortably. "I don't trust your men."

"I'm sorry. They were just having a bit of fun. You know what it's like after a few drinks. They wouldn't have taken it any further, I promise. I'd have stopped them if they tried." He reached out and clapped Wolfram on the shoulder. "We've got to stick together. You don't want to go back to those noble snobs empty-handed. Let's get this thing done, then we can drag Percy Butcher back on a rope for everyone to see;



Aldrich and the baron's men together. Even Dunstan won't be able to fault you for that.”

The sincerity of the man's tone gave Wolfram pause. He wasn't sure he believed him. The Aldrich he'd seen last night hadn't seemed like he was ready to step in if things went too far. He'd spoken about the farmers as if they were toys for him and his men to play with.

But that had been last night, when the sun was down and the drink was running freely. Now that it was daylight again, Wolfram wondered whether he might have overreacted. He no longer felt threatened by Aldrich. Sleazy and thuggish though his men might be, they weren't going to turn their swords on him over a disagreement. Like Aldrich said, they had a better chance of catching Percy Butcher if they stuck together.

“I want your promise that nothing like this will happen again.”

Aldrich placed a palm on his chest and bowed. “You have my word. The next man who steps out of line gets put on a rope like Tom.”

Wolfram took a deep breath. “Dunstan says rough work sometimes means working with rough men.”

Aldrich laughed. “That it does. But we're all on the same side here. Now let's get going and catch our killer.”

Focusing on the task at hand, Wolfram tried to ignore the uncomfortable prickling at the back of his neck as he set out to find Percy Butcher's trail once more.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:26 am*

Wolfram estimated they had one day left to catch up. The dark clouds circling Elkinshire promised more rain like the deluge from two nights ago, and he had no doubt that Percy Butcher would slip away if they didn't catch him before the weather turned. For now, it seemed like their quarry was still following the stream, but if he got wind of his pursuit he was sure to head in a different direction.

“Unless he's a complete idiot,” Aldrich said when Wolfram voiced his thoughts. “Which I reckon he is.”

“They don't fall far from the tree,” the man leading their captive said, giving a tug on the rope. Tom groaned and stumbled. He didn't look well at all. He'd been shivering all morning, and his face was unhealthily pale.

“We should send someone back to the village with him,” Wolfram said.

Aldrich shook his head. “We'll keep him with us.”

They reached the edge of the old forest and were forced to dismount. A narrow trail followed the stream bank, but Wolfram doubted it went far. They would have to leave the horses behind if they went much further. Fortunately, time was on their side. Their early start paid off when they found the embers of a fire on the stream bank. Unlike the ashes from yesterday, these ones still burned hot. The presence of another fire concerned Wolfram. If Percy and his friend could kindle a blaze after the lingering damp from two nights ago, one of them was probably an experienced woodsman. People like that could disappear into the forest on a whim. He shared his concerns with Aldrich, but he was brushed off once again. His travelling companions seemed too preoccupied with the annoyance of leading their horses through the

undergrowth to be bothered by anything else.

“Just leave them,” Wolfram said. The trail had already thinned, and half the men were falling behind.

“Do you know how much these horses cost? I'm not leaving them to get stolen.”

“A couple of us can stay and stand watch.”

“I'm not staying,” Dom grumbled. “Not with a pair of murderers sneaking about.”

Wolfram realised his efforts were pointless. He and Aldrich handed off their horses and pressed ahead while the others fell farther and farther behind. It was unnerving to think that they might stumble upon their quarry without anyone to back them up, but at least they could move quietly now. Without the noise of the horses and the chatter of half a dozen people behind them, Wolfram and Aldrich's steps were muffled by the rustle of the tree canopy.

It was approaching midday when Wolfram held out a hand to stop Aldrich.

“There,” he whispered, pointing away from the stream. Between the browns and greens of the forest, there was a splash of white. They crouched down and edged closer. The white was a stained linen shirt. A man had it hitched up around his waist while he squatted to relieve himself in the undergrowth. Wolfram moved back towards the stream, scanning the forest for any sign of a second person. A few dozen yards ahead, he spotted a wiry young man with dirty hair and black marks on his arms. He had a walking pole in one hand and a dead squirrel in the other. That was probably Percy's friend, the charcoal burner. Judging by the squirrel, he seemed to be the woodsman of the two. Fortune was once again on Wolfram and Aldrich's side, for their short detour from the stream kept them out of the second man's line of sight as they approached.

“Wait here,” Aldrich murmured. His voice was so quiet it was barely audible over the rustling branches. “I’ll get the others.”

Wolfram whispered back: “If they see me, I’ll chase them and start yelling. Just follow my voice.”

Aldrich slipped away without a word. Wolfram winced at the sound of his mail shirt clinking, but neither Percy Butcher nor his friend appeared to notice.

Wolfram waited. When Percy returned from the bushes, the pair set off down the stream again. They seemed weary, their pace slow and plodding. Unlike the woodsman, Percy was plump and had short legs. Aldrich's group would have caught up hours ago if the horses hadn't been slowing them down.

Wolfram crept after the pair, waiting until they were out of sight before moving forward. They were still hugging the stream, so there was no reason to risk staying in eyeshot when their path was so obvious. They would only head into the trees if they realised they were being followed. Wolfram hesitated for a moment, pondering that thought. Aldrich's men would be slow in their mail, and they were sure to make a racket when they approached. Percy would probably be easy to catch, but what about the other man? He looked quick and lean enough to dart away and lose himself in the trees.

Wolfram picked up his pace, angling away from the stream so that the foliage would conceal him from view. His eyes itched from lack of sleep, but his body was used to physical activity on weary mornings. To his relief, a carpet of moss and ferns supplanted the usual undergrowth in this part of the forest. Bushes and brambles would have made it a nightmare to try and sneak around his quarry and get ahead of them. He kept his distance, keenly aware that the red quartering on his surcoat would stand out as conspicuously as the white of Percy's shirt. Once he was sure he'd overtaken the pair, he edged back toward the stream and crouched in a patch of ferns.

Aldrich and the others must be close by now. When they caught up, Percy and his friend would be trapped between them and Wolfram.

After a few minutes, the pair hove into view again, still following the stream bank. Wolfram remained still, not daring to move in case he was spotted. They walked past and disappeared around another bend in the stream. Wolfram cursed and picked himself up. His surcoat was muddy from lying on the ground. What was taking the others so long?

For the better part of an hour, Wolfram repeated his tactic of circling around, hiding, and waiting. His heart beat fast, the constant tension beginning to erode his strength. His stomach growled uncomfortably. Besides a piece of bread and a slice of cheese that morning, he'd eaten nothing besides a few leaves of wild mint he'd stripped from a plant in the forest.

Just as he was beginning to lose hope of Aldrich and the others ever catching up, he heard the sound of voices coming from the stream. He was in the middle of circling around to cut Percy and his friend off again. They were to his left now, and something had startled them. One of them hissed a warning before falling abruptly silent, then their boots pattered against the earth. Someone yelled in the distance.

Wolfram's pulse quickened. This was it. Throwing caution to the wind, he drew the long club from his belt and ran forward, angling toward the sound of the voices. Whether by instinct or by luck, his plan worked perfectly. Percy Butcher's friend sprinted around a tree and crashed through a patch of ferns right in front of him. He didn't see Wolfram immediately. The man swerved, trying to make his path erratic so that his pursuers would lose him, and realised too late that he'd blundered into a trap. Before he could reach for the knife at his belt, Wolfram was swinging his club. The smooth wooden shaft slammed into the man's stomach and winded him. He doubled over with a gasp. His shoulder struck a tree, and he fell into the ferns at Wolfram's feet. It was the work of a moment to disarm him and pin him down.

A swell of triumph rose in Wolfram's chest. He'd done it. He'd arrested an outlaw! For years he'd been practising, following orders, still feeling like a boy being led around by his elders, but in that moment, he was a man. The exhilaration brought a grin to his lips.

Percy Butcher didn't get far before Aldrich's men caught him and dragged him back. Once they had both men securely bound with rope, they lined them up next to Tom on the stream bank. Aldrich looked pleased with himself as he paced up and down in front of the trio with his sword drawn.

“Well done, boys. It was all worth it in the end, wasn't it? Now, what are we going to do with these three?”

“I'm not dragging them all the way back to the village,” one of the men said.

Tom let out a groan of despair as Aldrich tapped his cheek with the flat of his sword, drawing a rivulet of blood.

The uneasy feeling from the night before returned, draining the thrill of Wolfram's jubilation.

“We have to take them back. They need to stand trial.”

“We can hold a trial right here,” Aldrich said. “Who thinks these buggers are guilty as sin?” Everyone but Wolfram raised a hand. Aldrich turned around with a smile. The look sent a chill through Wolfram. The reasonable man he'd spoken to that morning was gone. Had it all been an act? He had a terrible feeling that this was Aldrich's way of punishing him for speaking up the night before. He'd led him on under the pretence of carrying out the king's justice, and now he would force him to stand by and watch while something horrible happened.

“How about...” Aldrich began, his gaze never leaving Wolfram, “we show them a bit of mercy? Hear that, you three? You can go off and live free in the forest. But we can't have you coming back to stir up trouble again. That wouldn't do at all. So we're going to have to cut off your feet first.”

Tom groaned again. Percy and the other man were pale with fear.

“You can't do that,” Wolfram said through gritted teeth.

“Why not? They're outlaws. We can do what we want with them.”

“They aren't outlaws! They haven't stood trial.”

“Oh, come on,” Aldrich scoffed. “Everyone saw them do it. They ran. They're scum. Don't tell me you're going to stand up for them.”

“I didn't mean to do it,” Tom wailed. “I barely even hit him!”

A shiver of anger tensed Wolfram's muscles. He was sure Percy Butcher was guilty, but they needed to hear the whole story first. Maybe Tom and the other man deserved leniency. He couldn't stand the thought of Aldrich doling out his cruel version of justice with no oversight. This wasn't the way it was supposed to be done.

Had he been as quick with his tongue as Robin, he might have been able to articulate those thoughts in a way that gave Aldrich pause, but all he could think to say was: “It's not your place to decide.”

“I don't think you understand who we are,” Aldrich said. “Without us, there'd be no one bringing murderers to justice. If we didn't get paid, there'd be a lot more trouble around here. We'd make sure of it, right lads? It's not your colours people look for, baron's boy, it's ours. So we get to decide what happens here.” He stared Wolfram

down, daring him to object.

“If the sheriff finds out about this, you'll be hanged.”

Aldrich's men laughed.

“Who's going to ride all the way across Tannersfield to tell him?”

Wolfram swallowed, fighting his growing fear. “I will.”

Aldrich turned to face his men. “He's not that bright, is he?”

“Chop his feet off, too,” the chubby young man said. To Wolfram's horror, several of the others jeered in agreement.

“We can't go chopping up the baron's men,” Aldrich said. “Then someone really will go to the sheriff. Wolfram's not going to say anything. Are you?”

Wolfram's hand closed around the hilt of his sword. He was standing apart from the others, but most of them already had their weapons drawn. If he ran, they would probably catch him. The look of smug satisfaction on Aldrich's face said it all; he was going to force him to watch while they tortured their captives and left them to die. There was nothing he could do to stop it. The feeling of helplessness bit into Wolfram's soul and tugged like a fish hook. It was worse than fear.

He took a step back and drew his sword.

“Don't be an idiot,” Aldrich said.

“I'll duel you,” Wolfram retorted. “Unless you're afraid.”



The barb landed. Aldrich worked his jaw back and forth in consternation as his men began goading him on.

“Go on, chop his guts out.”

“Kill the little shit.”

“Shut up!” Aldrich snapped. “Alright, baron's boy. First to draw blood wins.”

Wolfram nodded. “If I win, we take these three back to the village unharmed.”

Aldrich paced back and forth in front of the captives, warming his arm up with a few swipes of his sword before pointing it at Tom Butcher.

“And if I win, you cut this one's feet off yourself.”

Wolfram's muscles felt like knots. Trying not to think about it, he forced a nod. It was best not to think about anything right now. Worrying would only distract him. He just had to win. Unbidden, he suddenly thought of his mother and sisters. They would be horrified if they could see him right now. He wavered, his sword trembling in his grip. Aldrich saw the tremor and stepped forward confidently. Wolfram raised his weapon, ready to defend himself.

The other men stepped back to make room. There wasn't a lot of space on the stream bank, and Wolfram knew he couldn't afford to trip. A tense fear settled over him, the kind that washed away weariness and dulled pain. It surprised him how quickly his body adapted to the lessons that had been drilled into him for the past three years. He wasn't training anymore. This was a real fight.

Aldrich kept his distance, sizing him up. Even though Aldrich was older, they were both of a similar height. The weapons they used were near-identical: one-handed

arming swords with medium-length blades and simple crossguards. Wolfram wasn't as confident with the shorter blade as he was with a longsword, but he understood how to wield it well enough. He moistened his lips with his tongue, trying to take in Aldrich's whole posture rather than focusing on any one detail that might distract him.

Aldrich made the first attack. It wasn't intended to connect, only to probe. With their blades held out in front of them, a forward step would be necessary to land a proper cut, and Wolfram knew he had nothing to fear until Aldrich moved his feet. His taunting swipe was just a feint. Wolfram took a quick step and moved his weapon so that it missed. They were testing each other, each trying to get a feel for how competent the other was before committing to an attack. The fact that Aldrich knew how to exercise such restraint indicated that he was no novice swordsman. But Wolfram was no novice either. Three years' training might not have been much compared to a knight, but he was still leagues ahead of a beginner.

The pair of them kept testing, making short, quick swings in an attempt to provoke a reaction. It was no elegant spectacle like the showy duels knights put on at tournaments. They moved sharply and frantically, often stumbling in their hurry to stay out of each other's reach. Even if the goal was only to draw blood, the keen edge of a sword could easily open up a mortal wound if the cut landed true.

Wolfram realised too late that he'd entered the duel at an immense disadvantage. Aldrich wore mail, while Wolfram's only armour was a padded gambeson. He couldn't land a cut on his opponent's torso or arms and expect to draw blood. He could aim for the legs, but it was difficult to cut that low without opening himself up. He would have to try and pierce the mail with a stab, or strike at Aldrich's hand.

Wolfram was the first to break the tense standoff. It was best to attack with offence and defence combined. Every good cut could also function as a guard if the blade was positioned correctly. Every parry should be aggressive, immediately ready to

transition into a strike. Wolfram lunged with his blade held diagonally to cover his torso. The attack took Aldrich by surprise. Unused to fighting a left-handed opponent, he reacted incorrectly, throwing his blade out in a guard that swept through the air on the wrong side of Wolfram's arm. The edge of Wolfram's sword ripped through the expensive green fabric of Aldrich's surcoat and scraped across the mail beneath. A cry went up from the men watching, but Wolfram couldn't spare any of his focus on them. He dodged back as Aldrich swiped recklessly, panicked by the hit he'd taken. It hadn't drawn blood, but without the mail, it would have.

Emboldened, Wolfram attacked again. Aldrich's panic didn't override his swordsman's instincts a second time. He threw a parry that forced Wolfram to sidestep as their blades grated past one another. They drew apart, circling, their breath heavy in their throats. Aldrich had murder in his eyes as he lunged, throwing a heavy cut at Wolfram's head. Wolfram tried to dodge back and stab under the blow. Neither of them gained the reach they needed, and their blades met nothing but air. Wolfram cut up at Aldrich's arm. Aldrich turned his sword and knocked the attack aside. Their blades scraped and rattled. Wolfram defended himself against an aggressive attack as Aldrich lunged forward once, twice, then a third and fourth time. He'd lost the discipline of his swordplay. Angry, fearful—or more likely both—he was desperately trying to end the duel by landing a hit as fast as possible. Triumph emboldened Wolfram as he stepped back, raising an easy guard that let him dodge and dodge again. Training beat recklessness every time.

Then he made a mistake. The next time he put his foot back, it found no ground beneath him. His stomach dropped like a stone as his heel splashed into the stream, throwing him wildly off balance.

The stumble saved his life. Aldrich thrust the tip of his sword out in an enormous lunge, but Wolfram was already falling, toppling back into the stream and out of reach. A great spray of water crashed into the air as he fell flat on his back, muffling the roar that went up from the onlookers. Wolfram turned over and groped to find the

stream bed with his free hand. If he couldn't get himself back upright, he was done for. His palm found soft earth beneath the water, and his knee followed. He was halfway up before Aldrich's next attack came. He threw his sword out instinctively in a diagonal cut to guard his torso. It met Aldrich's blade with a jarring clash. The keen edges turned each other aside, twisting the sword handle in Wolfram's grasp as his blade slid down the length of Aldrich's in a bind. He pushed as hard as he could, heaving upwards so that Aldrich's blade went past his shoulder while his grazed over the back of his opponent's hand. Aldrich cried out in pain and stepped back. He was about to attack again when Wolfram leapt out of the stream on the far side, putting the water between them. They faced each other in a tense standoff. Neither man wanted to throw himself off balance by stepping in.

Wolfram breathed heavily, his muscles humming with the warmth of combat. His clothes were soaked and heavy. If he'd been wounded, he couldn't feel it. Red blood dripped from Aldrich's right hand into the moss.

"I cut you," Wolfram panted. "I win."

Aldrich looked down at his hand in surprise.

Dom bellowed with laughter. "You let him get you!"

Aldrich rounded on him. Dom's smile vanished. He stepped away, raising his hands in front of him. Aldrich looked back at Wolfram. His hateful gaze lingered for a second, then he lunged toward Tom Butcher and swung his sword. It was a dreadful blow, so heavy that Wolfram heard the bone snap as Aldrich's blade cleaved halfway through Tom's arm and knocked him over.

Half a second passed before he began to scream. Blood poured into the moss, and the stream bank erupted into chaos.

Wolfram wanted to run forward, to attack Aldrich and protect Tom and the other prisoners, but the good sense of fear held him back. He couldn't fight half a dozen men. All bargains were off. Everything that had been said before the duel no longer mattered. Anger and wounded pride were in control now, and Wolfram knew his life hung in the balance. Seeing Tom fall, Percy and his friend threw caution to the wind and ran with their arms still bound.

No one knew where they were going or what they were doing. Half of Aldrich's men stood staring in surprise while the others went after the captives. With his heart in his throat, Wolfram turned and sprinted into the trees. He'd never run for his life before. His chest burned, each breath painful, but numbing adrenaline drove him on. He felt like there were wolves snapping at his heels as Tom Butcher screamed in agony behind him. A second scream followed. It sounded like Percy. Then Wolfram heard footsteps sloshing through the stream in his direction.

He ran as fast as he could.

The stream would give him a head start, but his clothes were heavy with water and his sword was awkward in his hand. There was no time for him to sheathe it. He couldn't see anything but bare tree trunks and sparse ferns around him—nowhere to lose himself in the undergrowth. He made for the ferns anyway, hoping that if he tore through enough of them they might eventually obscure his red surcoat from view. He snatched a glance over his shoulder. The sounds of voices had fallen silent, but he couldn't tell if Aldrich's men had broken off the pursuit, or if they were just being stealthy. He kept on running. There was no doubt in his mind that his pursuers would kill him if they caught up.

Something beyond weariness eventually slowed Wolfram's pace. He ran until his body began to feel heavy and his head light. He stumbled suddenly, his leg refusing to go where he told it, and his ankle twisted. The next thing he knew, he was lying on the ground, his lungs burning, leg throbbing, and he'd dropped his sword. Blinking

hard to try and drive out the dizzy haze, he hauled himself upright. The ground was uneven here. He'd rolled into a small hollow buried in the ferns. Fearing that his legs wouldn't obey him if he tried to walk again, he lay down on his side and scanned the surrounding forest. There was no one in sight. The sky had darkened with clouds and a heavy wind dragged through the treetops. All he could hear was the sound of creaking branches and rustling leaves.

Wolfram lay in the hollow and caught his breath. He was shattered. His stomach felt hollow and full of bile at the same time. The gruesome sight of blood pouring from the rent in Tom's arm came back to him, and he swallowed the urge to vomit. Tom was surely dead by now. The other two as well, most likely, unless Aldrich had kept them alive to vent his sadistic anger. Wolfram felt tears of frustration welling in his eyes and had to grit his teeth to hold them back. He balled his hand into a fist and struck his forehead, letting out a noise of frustration. He didn't know whether it was sadness, anger, fear, disgust, or some horrible new emotion. He'd never felt this way before.

He'd been a fool. He should never have trusted Aldrich. If only he'd gone back to the others that morning like he'd planned. When he felt something warm on his cheeks, he realised he was crying despite himself. He was sobbing like a child, and he couldn't stop. What was wrong with him? He wasn't a little boy anymore. He was a man. He couldn't let himself fall to pieces like this.

With a staggering effort, he hauled himself upright and stumbled on. He didn't know where he was going, just so long as it was away from the stream.

Within a few hours, he was lost, and night was falling.

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:26 am*

Wolfram felt like death when dawn broke the next day. He'd slept in his wet clothes inside the hollow of an ancient tree. Time had split it open like a ripe fruit, creating a small cavern in the wood just big enough for a person to squeeze into. It had rained all night. If not for the forest cover and the tree sheltering him, he would have frozen to death. His stomach was empty, his throat parched, and he felt feverish. He remembered the way Tom Butcher had been shivering the day before and wondered whether he'd caught some sickness from him.

The only tools he had were his sword and the wooden club. Maybe if he found some dry tinder he could whittle the club and make a fire stick, but what good was a fire if he didn't have anything to cook? It would be better to keep himself warm by walking. He had to get back to the castle and tell Lord Erik what had happened.

Forcing his exhausted body to obey, he crawled out of the tree and looked for water. Rain had pooled in a few old nooks in the wood where branches had snapped off and the bark had swelled up around them. He didn't want to think about what the bitter, woody-tasting water would do to his bowels later, but it was better than dying of thirst. After that, he went looking for food. There was little chance of him killing an animal with his sword, and it would take too long to set a snare. He would have to look for edible plants and bird's nests while he walked.

Based on the direction he'd been going yesterday, he thought he was probably north of the stream. His father had taught him how to judge direction from the sun, but the clouds and tree cover made it difficult that morning. He set out at a plodding walk, trying to make his body move faster than it wanted to so he would warm up. He kept his eyes pointed upward, both to try and catch a glimpse of the sun and to spot any nests. There were plenty in this part of the forest, but they were so high in the trees

that he had no confidence in his ability to reach them.

The only thing that lifted his spirits that morning was a brief glimpse of the sun through the canopy. It was to his right, in the northeast, which meant he was going in the direction of the castle. If he kept on walking north and west, he would eventually reach the edge of the old forest, then he could follow the treeline all the way home. He didn't want to risk crossing paths with Aldrich again by retracing his steps to Kilwick.

Wolfram's thoughts grew miserable as he pictured his ignoble return. How would he explain why he'd gone off on his own, vanished for two days, and failed to stop a gang of thugs from murdering three people in cold blood? His face stung with the imagined shame. All he could do was try to hold his head high.

A handful of small eggs nestling in the branches of a birch tree took the edge off his hunger later that morning. They weren't much, but they were better than nothing. He ate them raw and felt a little stronger afterwards, though his shivering was still getting worse. The fever had progressed into a headache, weighing down his muscles with fatigue. At a brisk walk, he might have made it back to the castle before nightfall, but that seemed unlikely now. He felt like he'd strained his legs in a dozen places.

Eventually the trees thinned and the edge of the forest hove into view. He was high up on a stretch of hill overlooking eastern Elkinshire. Below him, he could see a village he thought he remembered passing with Dunstan two days ago. Sheep grazed the pasture all around. A bout of homesickness made Wolfram's throat tighten as he imagined the villagers settling in at the local public house to relax at the end of the day. His mother's inn had always been full of familiar faces and friendly cheer on days like this. For the last three years, he'd been so busy with his training that he'd had little time to feel lonely or homesick. It had all been too exciting. But the events of the past day had shaken him. He didn't feel invincible anymore. There was no one



around to support him, no one to tell him what to do, no one to pick him up when he fell down. He pushed his melancholy aside with a wince. Feeling sorry for himself wouldn't get him home. But ignoring the way he felt didn't make it go away, and the distraction chafed like burrs in his boots.

Dusk was falling by the time he saw the castle hill. There was no chance of him reaching it before dark. Perhaps if he'd made his way back to the road earlier he could have managed it, but he hadn't wanted to confront anyone else on the way. That had been a foolish decision. It was drizzling again, and the rain of the last few days had turned the pasture between the forest and the road into a marshy bog. He couldn't wade through that in the dark. His only choice was to keep following the trees until he reached the base of the hill.

Each weary footstep made Wolfram's body throb. His brow burned with fever, and the wind made him shiver uncontrollably. With no moonlight, the shadows darkened until they were pitch black. He was afraid to keep walking, but he was more afraid of freezing to death if he stopped. The only guidance he had was the shape of the hill looming large in front of him. He walked until the ground began to steepen, then he turned to his left and skirted the base of the hill, stumbling and groping until he saw lights burning behind the shutters of Firfallow. He was almost there. Soon he could be safe and warm inside one of those houses. But he wanted to get back to the castle on his own, not pass out in the village and have Dunstan send someone to fetch him tomorrow morning.

Rain lashed Wolfram's back as he found the twisting path that led up the hillside. He kept one hand on the rocks so he didn't stumble over the edge in the gloom. Water dripped from his soaked hair and squished in his boots. The steepening slope made each step harder than the last, and the wind blew stronger the higher he went.

"Come on," he groaned to himself, his voice so hoarse he could barely hear it. He used his sword as a walking stick, gripping the crossguard tight as he pushed it down

into the sloping path. He felt the blade flex disconcertingly from how hard he was leaning on it. With each twist of the path, he felt sure he would reach the top, but there was always one more turn to go. Left and right, left and right, up and up, his head pounding and his body shaking.

At long last, the rocks ended and he felt fir branches brushing his cheek. He followed the path by memory, unable to see anything in the dark. His hand found the familiar stone of the castle wall, then the wood of the gate. The door hadn't been barred that night. He twisted the handle and staggered through. If the night watchman was on duty, he didn't seem to notice him. Just like when he'd run from the stream, Wolfram could feel his body giving out. He stumbled his way to the closest building he knew would be warm: the kitchen. He wasn't sure whether his eyes were full of rain or tears when he pushed the door open and lurched inside. Everything looked blurry and distant.

“Don't drip that mud in here!” he heard Meg Kitchener's voice call, then she gasped in surprise. “Oh my lord, Wolf!”

He dropped his sword on the floor with a clatter and felt someone put their arms around him. He leaned heavily on them.

“Drag your cot over by the fire. He's soaked through.”

Wolfram let himself be walked to the middle of the kitchen where the fire burned and the air was warm. When he sat down on the cot, he felt like he would never get back up. Someone tugged off his boots and lifted his legs. It was Cat. Her, Meg and the rest of the kitchen servants clustered around him.

“Where've you been?” Meg asked. “Robin came home this morning saying Dunstan and the others had lost you.”

Not knowing what else to say, Wolfram mumbled: "I walked back."

"Through the night and the rain and a fever by the looks of you, you silly boy!"

"I'm alright."

Cat punched him on the arm. That usually meant she was upset.

"You're half dead," Meg said. "Why in the world didn't you find someone to bring you home? That pride of yours is more trouble than it's worth. Cat, fetch some blankets. We need to get him warm. Someone tell the family. Lady Julia's been worried sick all day."

Despite Meg and Cat's reprimands, the heavy feeling that had been in Wolfram's heart all evening eased. Their concern touched him. Cat was abrasive, Meg cantankerous, but he realised in that moment that they cared for him. Lady Julia had been worried, too. He wondered if Ingrid shared their concern.

The servants fussed over him, bringing him bread and pottage to eat while they rubbed his shoulders with blankets. Lady Julia came into the kitchen and insisted that he come upstairs to the solar. If he was ill, she said, then he needed to be moved to a room on his own, for that was the most effective way of stopping sickness from spreading. Meg seemed to think that warmth and company would do him more good, but she didn't argue with her mistress. Wolfram let Cat walk him upstairs to one of the guest rooms in the solar. He felt bad about dripping rainwater over the thick rug when he crossed it. One of the male servants helped him undress and change into a nightshirt, then he was put to bed and wrapped up in blankets.

Wolfram slept through most of the next day. The hike home combined with his fever had taken everything out of him. Whenever he woke, there was always someone sitting beside his bed, usually Lady Julia, occasionally Cat. He pretended to be dozing

so he wouldn't have to speak to them. He still felt wretched about everything that had happened. Even the desire to tell Lord Erik about Aldrich wasn't enough to rouse him to action. He lay awake much of the night, no longer tired enough to sleep. The room was dark and draughty. He shivered beneath the thick blankets, tossing and turning with his thoughts. He hated being ill. With so many visitors, there had often been sniffles and fevers going around at his mother's inn. He needed chores to keep his restless mind at bay, but his thoughts were the only company he had in the early hours of the morning. It wasn't often that Wolfram stopped to ponder things deeply or at length. All he could think about that night was the day he'd spent with Aldrich. The events kept repeating in his mind's eye: the trek up the stream, the night at the farmhouse, the chase, the duel.

How was a man like Aldrich able to walk about Elkinshire doing whatever he wanted? It seemed like everyone was afraid of him. Even Dunstan had been reluctant to assert his authority. Aldrich must have a fearsome reputation; that was the only thing that made sense. He'd said he worked for Lord Erik's knights, which was a common enough arrangement between men-at-arms and nobles, but it didn't excuse his actions. What was it he'd said? When he and his men didn't get paid, there was trouble?

Lady Julia said Elkinshire wasn't a lawless place. Did that mean Aldrich was the one causing the trouble? He certainly had the means to. With his gang of armed men, he could easily go around stealing livestock, damaging crops, and vandalising property. If everyone was afraid of him, who was going to call for his arrest? Erik's knights probably thought their lives would be easier if they appeased him rather than risking a confrontation.

The more Wolfram thought about it, the more it frustrated him. When he talked to older men about the war, they often said that fear had a way of breaking down law and order. People turned a blind eye to evil when the alternative was inviting its ire. There was no war in Elkinshire, but there was definitely fear, and something had to

be done about it.

Dunstan and the other squires returned home the next day. Robin came upstairs and told Wolfram what had happened. They'd stayed in Kilwick searching the farms for him and Percy Butcher until Aldrich returned a couple of days later. He'd given them a version of events that eschewed the duel and the plan to torture their captives. According to him, Percy and his cohorts had fought back and been killed when they caught up, while Wolfram had wandered off and gotten himself lost in the forest. When Dunstan heard that Wolfram was back at the castle, they'd taken Aldrich at his word and returned home.

Wolfram wanted to talk to his friend about everything that had happened, but Robin was soon needed downstairs again. Lord Ricaud, the baron whose visit Erik had been so concerned about, had arrived. Meals needed to be prepared, horses tended, hunting organised, and floors scrubbed. Wolfram was left on his own again until Dunstan came to see him. The lanky man-at-arms looked even surlier than usual, with dark circles under his eyes and his hair tangled into a bird's nest. To Wolfram's relief, Lady Julia came in with him.

"Don't be harsh with him," she said softly. "He's unwell and needs his rest."

"The stupid pup's unwell in the head," Dunstan growled. "Running off without my say so. If you weren't in that bed, you'd be out in the courtyard getting your back whipped raw."

"There will be no whipping while Lord Ricaud is here," Julia said firmly. "It's very important that we make his stay a pleasant one."

Dunstan grunted something noncommittal, but the rebuke succeeded in taking the edge off his temper.

“So, what happened to you?” he asked Wolfram.

Piece by piece, Wolfram recounted the story. He tried not to leave anything out. Dunstan had impressed upon him the importance of getting the full picture before you took a man to trial, and Aldrich needed to be punished for what he'd done. By the time he'd described the dishonourable attack on Tom Butcher and his flight through the forest, his throat was sore from talking.

“We need to gather everyone up and arrest him,” he concluded. “He murdered three people.”

“Three outlaws.”

Wolfram gave Dunstan an incredulous look. Was he really siding with Aldrich? Lady Julia waited for the man-at-arms to elaborate, but he just stared at the edge of the bed with a furious expression.

“We're aware of what Aldrich and his men have been doing,” Julia said at length.

“Then why haven't you stopped him?!”

“Do you recall the conversation I had with you not long after you arrived, Wolfram? I believe I explained our problem. Lord Erik does not have enough men to arrest Aldrich, nor the confidence that it would be to our benefit in the long run.”

“Aldrich's grandfather was the richest bastard in Elkinshire,” Dunstan said, his voice full of derision. “And his mother's only grown that wealth. The merchant tax she pays is half of what keeps this castle running. If she packs up and takes her business elsewhere, it'll be the ruin of Erik's household.”

“But if we deal with Aldrich, won't the knights start paying their taxes again?”

Wolfram asked.

“Maybe. Or some other upstart might step in and pick up where Aldrich left off—probably put up to it by another lord who fancies adding Elkinshire to his estate. There are plenty of barons out there who'd love to show the king that Erik can't manage his land anymore. We're a ship full of holes, lad, and the moment we open up another one, we'll sink.”

“But that needn't be the case forever,” Lady Julia said. “With you and the other squires coming of age, we'll soon have the men to start asserting our authority once more. Just think—if Dunstan had taken twice as many men to Kilwick, would Aldrich have been so bold in standing up to you? And if our alliance with Lord Ricaud can be secured, we shall secure the future of Elkinshire for another generation.”

“It's just wrong,” Wolfram said bitterly, his curiosity about Lord Ricaud subsumed by his frustrations. “Why can't we go to the sheriff of Tannersfield?”

“And make a public spectacle of our failure?” Dunstan snorted. “Even if we did manage to put Aldrich on trial, he'd have all the witnesses he could pay for—ones whose word carries more weight than yours.”

Julia nodded in agreement. “Believe me, Wolfram, this is a conversation we have had many times before. Aldrich is a wicked man, but he is a problem for tomorrow, not today.”

“It's just an endless circle,” Wolfram said. “The knights have to pay for his protection, so they can't afford to pay Lord Erik, so he can't afford to protect his knights, so they have to pay Aldrich.”

“Bloody hell, Wolf, why couldn't you have been that astute a couple of days ago?”

Wolfram looked down at the floor in shame. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have gone off with him. I just wanted to catch Percy Butcher."

"Well, it sounds like he's been caught one way or another. Nothing to be done about it now. But I'm going to take it out of you the moment you're well enough to leave this room, mark my words." Gruff though he was, Dunstan no longer seemed furious. He would never say it out loud, but Wolfram sensed that he'd accepted his apology. A weight lifted from his heart.

"I'll do my penance."

"Too right you will," Dunstan grumbled as he turned toward the door. "You'll wish you were back with Aldrich after I'm done with you." He exited the room, leaving Wolfram alone with Lady Julia.

"Does Lady Ingrid know I'm up here?" he asked hopefully.

Julia gave him a sympathetic smile. "If you were hoping for a visit, you may have to wait a little longer. Ingrid will be busy entertaining Lord Ricaud and his entourage while they're here."

"Oh."

"I wouldn't get your hopes up," she said gently. "She isn't a good match for you."

Wolfram turned away, feeling his face burn with something other than fever. He knew what she meant. Ingrid was too high born for him. He'd told himself the same thing a hundred times, but while his infatuations with other girls came and went, Ingrid was always there. He wished she was the one sitting at his bedside wetting his brow with a damp cloth and stroking her smooth fingers through his hair. Perhaps that would have made the past few days seem worth it.



Ingrid didn't come to see him that day, nor the day after. But the evening of the day after that, when Wolfram's fever had come down and he was starting to feel like his old self again, the door creaked open and Ingrid stepped inside. Wolfram's heart leapt. He'd been sitting atop his blankets trying to read a book of Elkinshire's history that Lady Julia had brought him. He snapped it shut and swung his legs off the side of the bed.

Ingrid held out a hand to stop him from rising. She lit a couple of extra candles from the one beside the bed and drew up a chair. She'd brought her board game with her.

“Would you like to play?” she asked in a distant voice.

Wolfram nodded eagerly. “Any time, milady.”

“Cousin Julia says you've been unwell.”

“I'm feeling much better now.”

“At least no one else seems to have caught your malady. That really would have ruined Lord Ricaud's visit, don't you think?” She added a sarcastic sniff to the end of her sentence.

“I'm sure it would have. Lady Julia said I had to stay in here to keep the miasma from spreading.”

“Father Everwin says it's eye contact that spreads sickness, so you'll forgive me if I keep my attention on the board.” Ingrid began setting the coloured pegs in their holes, his blue, hers rose, as always. “I needed to escape the headache downstairs.”

“I've been hearing the noise from up here. It sounds like Lord Ricaud and your father are having a good time.”

“Oh, yes. My father especially. The news was all good for him this evening.”

The noises from downstairs weren't all Wolfram had been hearing during his stay in the solar. Lady Julia's room was next to his, and Lord Erik often went in to visit her. After the dull sounds of conversation faded, the bed sometimes began creaking and knocking against the wall. They were obviously more than just a nobleman and his ward. Perhaps that was why Ingrid disliked Julia.

“Him and Lady Julia make a lot of noise in there,” he blurted out. It was a slip of the tongue, the sort of thing he might have said to Robin or one of the other boys. A heartbeat passed before he realised his mistake. “I'm sorry, milady,” he stammered. “That was impolite of me.”

To his surprise, Ingrid laughed. “You really are a dumb pup sometimes, aren't you?”

Wolfram stared down at the board, cursing himself for saying something so stupid.

“It's alright,” Ingrid said softly. “I like dumb pups.”

Wolfram looked up at her. Despite what she'd said about making eye contact, she was gazing at him intently.

“I say things without thinking sometimes.”

“That's refreshing. But you're like that, aren't you? All those men downstairs,” Ingrid scowled in the direction of the door. “They can be so coy about what they mean when all they really care about is themselves. You're our little wolfhound. Simple and brave and obedient. Getting into fights for your master. What was it like, fighting Aldrich?”

“You heard about that?”

“I listened to Dunstan tell my father the whole story, but I'd rather hear it from you.”

Wolfram wondered how he could describe it. He wasn't a very good storyteller.

“It was fast. Even faster than practice. I wasn't frightened, I don't think. Well, I was, but I couldn't really feel it. It's like when your toes are cold and it doesn't hurt when you stub them.”

“You're precious, Wolfram. I'd keep you in a basket at the foot of my bed.”

He flushed, not sure what to make of the oddly intimate compliment. His heart was pounding like it had during the duel. Maybe that was why he was speaking so carelessly.

“Do you like me, milady?”

“I'm very fond of you.”

“Would you ever marry a man like me?”

Ingrid smiled. She was so beautiful when she smiled, yet so cold, as though it was an expression she'd grown used to wearing without feeling it. “Whether I would or wouldn't hardly matters now, does it?”

“Why not?”

“As of today, I'm engaged to Lord Ricaud. Didn't you know?”

Wolfram felt suddenly unsteady. Something stuck in his throat. The bed seemed to drop beneath him with a sickening lurch.

“That's what this whole visit was about,” Ingrid continued. “My father wanted to make sure everything was perfect. That's why he sent you off to deal with that murder business before it got out of hand. I suppose it worked. Ricaud is fairly wealthy, you see, so Elkinshire will be able to prosper with his dowry. I expect he'll gift me some of his land, and when my father dies we'll inherit the estate here.”

“Right.”

The pair of them stared at the game board for a long moment.

“Rather miserable news, isn't it?” Ingrid said.

“Yes.”

She reached out to take Wolfram's hand. “Go on, you make the first move.”

Wolfram took one of the pegs out of the board and slotted it into a new hole, not caring where he put it.

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:26 am*

The only silver lining to Ingrid's engagement was that it wasn't rushed. Lord Ricaud declined to set a date for the wedding, but the promise had been made, and promises between nobles were binding. If he went back on his word now, it would damage his reputation and sour relations with Lord Erik. Even so, Wolfram prayed every day that Ricaud would renege on the agreement. He was much older than Ingrid, probably thirty-five or forty, with a pompous attitude and a gaudy sense of style. The thought of her living with a man like that and having his children filled Wolfram with sickening jealousy.

He realised he was in love with her. The infatuation hadn't passed. It had stuck with him for years, only growing stronger each time they spoke until it was too late to do anything about it.

He tried to keep himself busy with training and chores. The rough paces Dunstan put him through by way of punishment were a welcome distraction. He was happy to run a hundred laps around the courtyard and do push-ups till he wanted to vomit. It gave him something to channel his energy into that wasn't pining over Ingrid. He couldn't put her out of his mind, but the rigorous activity did help take the edge off his initial shock until it faded. He wished there was something he could do about it, but the decision had been made, and Ingrid was bound by the responsibility she bore to her father and their household. Wolfram's mother had always told him to pick his battles; change the things he could change and lose no sleep over the things he couldn't. It was hard, but he had to find a way of accepting it. If a man couldn't win his love through strength and merit, he could at least keep his dignity when he failed.

As winter approached and Dunstan's harsh training eased, Wolfram's thoughts turned toward what he could change. The problem of Aldrich was first and foremost in his

mind. Some dim part of him even reasoned that if Aldrich was gone, Ingrid might not have to marry Ricaud for his money. Dunstan had no patience for his ideas, so he stayed up late talking with Robin instead. What if they set a trap for Aldrich or sent letters to the sheriff in secret? What if they could gather brave witnesses who would be willing to testify against him in court? Perhaps his rich mother could be persuaded to rein him in? Maybe Wolfram's noble relatives would be able to help? Robin indulged his ideas as if it was all a game; a fun problem they could puzzle out during the dark winter evenings.

“What if we stole all the horses in Elkinshire?” he suggested one night over supper in the parlour. “Then Aldrich wouldn't be able to get about the shire. Him and his friends would be too worn out from walking to make any trouble.”

“If only we were good horse thieves,” Wolfram said. “That's it though, isn't it? It's his money. He wouldn't get away with half of what he does if he couldn't afford horses and weapons for all his men.”

“Maybe it would be better if his mother did pack up her business and go away. At least then they'd be gone.”

“But Dunstan says Lord Erik doesn't like that idea.” Wolfram frowned as he ate a cube of cheese from the end of his knife. “I wonder if my mother knows their family. She's a merchant.”

“A merchant from the middle of nowhere.”

Wolfram conceded that Robin was probably right. His family was wealthy, but not on the level of someone like Aldrich. He wished he could have asked his mother for advice. She'd always been a practical, level-headed woman. But his family were halfway across the county, and he was unlikely to see them again until spring.

“When my mother's carters had trouble with outlaws, they always just avoided them,” Wolfram said. “Go where the trouble isn't, you know? Avoid the bad roads and stick to the good.”

“Can't avoid Aldrich, though. It's not like Lord Erik's got land anywhere else.”

Wolfram paused, intrigued by the thought. Ingrid had mentioned receiving land as part of her dowry. “What if he did?”

“He couldn't afford it.”

“But what if? Aldrich wouldn't be able to cause trouble all the way in somewhere like Kinedwyn or Dun Meadow.”

“Go and ask Lord Erik, then,” Robin said. “What else has he got to offer in exchange for land like that? He's already promised Ingrid away.”

“Maybe she wouldn't have to marry Ricaud if they found another way to get land.” Wolfram tried not to let thoughts of Ingrid distract him. He didn't have many good ideas, but something told him this one was worth holding on to. At the very least, he wanted to broach it to Lady Julia. Maybe she could figure out a way for the estate to obtain land where Aldrich couldn't extort anyone.

He sat on the idea for another day, getting Robin's advice on how to present it while he waited for a chance to speak with Julia. Their paths didn't cross very often, and Wolfram had little free time to go looking for her. It was best to try and talk to the noble family during meal times when everyone was in the hall together.

Lord Erik and Lady Ingrid were dining privately upstairs the next evening—probably to discuss the upcoming wedding—which left Julia by herself at the high table. Wolfram seized his chance and hurried over before anyone else could join her.

“Milady, might I sit with you tonight?”

Julia smiled. Squires weren't often afforded the honour of seats at the high table, but she was a liberally minded woman and fond of her dalliances.

“You may, Wolfram. Just for tonight.”

He drew back a chair and sat down with his supper trencher. “Thank you, milady. I wouldn't ask, but I wanted to talk to you about something.”

“Oh?”

“You know the conversation we had when I was in the sickroom?”

Julia's smile faltered and she lowered her voice. “I'd rather not discuss affairs of the estate here in the hall.” She glanced around the room. It was quiet that evening, and no one else was seated at the high table yet. “Then again,” she continued with a sigh, “if you can be discreet?”

Wolfram nodded eagerly. There was something exciting about scheming with the ladies of the house. “I was talking to Robin the other night. We've been thinking of ways to deal with Aldrich. What if Lord Erik had land somewhere outside Elkinshire—somewhere he could collect rent from without anyone getting in the way?”

“Distant land is often more troublesome to manage than a local estate.”

“I think we've got the opposite problem.”

Julia gave him a half-smile. “True. But we have nothing to exchange for such land. Even if we can negotiate a gift from Lord Ricaud, it'll be some time before the



wedding.”

Wolfram leaned forward. He'd memorised what Robin told him to say, and with his clever friend's advice backing him up, he was sure the idea was a good one. “You've got Elkinshire. What if you gave away some of the villages here?”

“Erik won't like that. This land has been in his family for generations.”

“But what good's it doing him right now?” Wolfram pressed on. “The knights aren't paying their rent. Everyone's scared of Aldrich. If we swapped land with some other lord, Aldrich would become their problem instead. Meanwhile, we'd have rent coming in from elsewhere in the county. It's like my mother always says: you should avoid the bad roads and stick to the good.”

“Spoken like a true merchant's son. Some of that ruthless market sense must have rubbed off on you.”

“So, what do you think?”

Julia took a sip of her wine. “It sounds sensible enough, I suppose. The trouble would be making such a thing actually happen. Erik would be against the idea on principle, and negotiating a fair exchange would be difficult. Lords are wary of land someone else is trying to get rid of. Who would accept property on the other side of the county unless it was worth far more than what they were giving up? And it would be underhanded of us to saddle someone else with Aldrich.”

Wolfram's spirits fell.

“But,” Julia continued, “I am not above a little underhandedness in the name of protecting the estate. Who can say—perhaps if Aldrich gets under the skin of another lord we might be better positioned to deal with him once and for all. It's a fair idea,

Wolfram, though I wouldn't get your hopes up.”

“Lord Erik can always bargain to get his land back again after things get better.”

“That is an optimistic outlook, and old men are cynical. But the right words have been known to soften men even as leathery as Erik. I will broach the idea to him and see what he thinks.”

“Thank you, milady.”

“Thank you , Wolfram. It makes me happy when you come to me with such thoughtful advice. Elkinshire is lucky to have you.”

He bowed his head. “It was mostly Robin's idea. I just want what's best for the household.”

“And believe me, every household wants men like you. You're a noble soul.”

Just not noble enough for Ingrid, he thought to himself, tainting his satisfaction with a twinge of regret.

As Julia had anticipated, Lord Erik was not amenable to the idea. Though Wolfram was never involved directly, he heard the topic being discussed several times at the high table. Julia, Dunstan, and the chaplain, Father Everwin, all seemed to be in favour of the idea, but Erik and Ingrid were opposed. As the weeks went by, Wolfram was disheartened every time he heard Erik declaring loudly that he would not give up his family's birthright for a little extra silver. But, as Robin pointed out, the fact that the subject kept coming up at all meant it was still open to debate. If Erik wanted it off the table, they would have stopped hearing about it weeks ago.

The winter frosts gradually thawed, new flowers bloomed, and the drudgery of short

days and long nights gave way to crisp mornings and outdoor work. Wolfram continued his training, growing more confident with a weapon in his hand season by season. The duel with Aldrich had given him a new perspective on fighting, teaching him to fear the edge of a weapon more keenly than the other squires. He fought more defensively than before, inviting many an accusation of cowardice, but he was vindicated when Dunstan praised his caution. None of the other squires, even those who had more training than him, could consistently beat him with the longsword anymore. The martial forms were where Wolfram excelled, and they made up the majority of his knightly training. Lord Erik wanted soldiers, not men of court who could recite poetry and count shillings. Nevertheless, there were still lessons on finance, literacy, science, and theology taught by Father Everwin that Wolfram struggled with. Even Cat, who was learning to read and write from Lady Julia, seemed to be making more progress with her education than him.

“Your problem is not that you are stupid,” Father Everwin told him one April afternoon. He was a thin man with straight, pale hair and a bookish disposition that kept him indoors most hours of the day. “It is that you stubbornly refuse to embrace knowledge beyond its very basics. The world is a complex place, and a nobleman is expected to understand it on a deeper level than the common peasant.”

Wolfram didn't see the value in deciphering the scriptures of the saints or the phases of the moon. Most people didn't have a clue about those things, and they got by just fine. He would rather learn to get better at killing wild boar or riding a horse. Those seemed like far more important life skills.

Along with their ongoing training, the squires began leaving the castle to perform martial duties that year. Most were minor tasks, nothing nearly so dramatic as the murder investigation in Kilwick, but when an official message had to be delivered or someone needed an escort, the squires were called upon to accompany Lord Erik's men-at-arms. Wolfram rode back and forth from Tannersfield town several times that year. The round trip took several days, and it always made Wolfram feel proud to

wear the red and black surcoat of Elkinshire as he galloped across the county.

There were no more confrontations with Aldrich and his men. They haunted the public houses in Firfallow from time to time, and Aldrich sometimes attended Lord Erik's court with his mother, but Wolfram did his best to avoid him. After what had happened last time, Dunstan was adamant that they stay out of his way. The time would come for a confrontation, but not yet.

So Wolfram swallowed his resentment and tried to ignore the rumours he heard about thieves being lynched and women harassed by Aldrich's gang. The man was clever enough to avoid doing anything that would invite widespread condemnation in public. Some of the villagers—usually those with a particularly brutal sense of justice—even liked him, believing that he was doing the rough work Lord Erik and the courts were afraid to. That made him a difficult man to deal with. As long as he kept Erik's knights poor with his extortionate fees for “protection”, nothing in Elkinshire was going to change.

The steady pace of life continued, and as the months passed Wolfram began to forget about the idea he'd proposed to Lady Julia the year before. He wished he could have forgotten about Ingrid's engagement so easily. Sometimes it would begin to drift from his mind, but then the topic would resurface during a meal, or worse, Lord Ricaud would pay a visit, and the whole miserable business would be all he could think about for days. There was still no date set for the wedding. Meg and the kitchen servants suspected Ricaud was biding his time, waiting to see whether there was any indication of Lord Erik's health waning before he committed to a date. The sooner Erik died, the sooner his estate could be inherited. But if he lived for another twenty years, Ricaud would be an old man himself by the time he got his hands on Elkinshire. Wolfram prayed that Erik would stay hale and hearty for a long time. Ricaud might yet go back on his promise if he saw an opportunity to wed another eligible noblewoman whose inheritance was closer to hand.

A full year had passed by the time Lady Julia came to Wolfram with good news. The breath of winter was in the air again, and Wolfram was out in the courtyard oiling his favourite longsword, a huge old blade with a mighty crossguard that had steel rings on either side to protect the wielder's fingers. Julia had a folded square of vellum in her hand when she touched Wolfram on the shoulder to get his attention.

“I have just received a letter from Bishop Virgil of Tannersfield,” she explained. “He would like to organise an exchange of property.”

It took Wolfram a moment to remember what she was talking about. “Oh! That's wonderful news. What's the agreement?”

“The current proposition is two sheep farms and a mill near Tannersfield town in exchange for the village of Kilwick and its land.”

Wolfram's expression fell. “That doesn't seem like a lot.”

“Wool tends to be more profitable than agriculture, and the mill serves a sizeable population. The fees the locals pay to use it will be quite lucrative. It'll also be easier to manage than a whole village.”

It sounded like they were getting a fair deal at least, but the bishop was probably getting the better end of it. Wolfram didn't know how to weigh the value of a village like Kilwick against two farms and a mill, but Lady Julia was clever, so he trusted she knew what she was doing.

“Has Lord Erik agreed to it?”

“Not yet. But he's been saying he needs to see a good offer before he'll consider anything, and I have his good offer right here.” She waved the letter in the air. “If this doesn't convince him, nothing will. It helps that we'll be dealing with the church. It'll

hurt his pride less to give his land away to the bishop than it would one of his rivals.”

“When do you think it's going to happen?”

“We'll have to see. The bishop implied it might take some time to organise everything, but before the end of this coming year, hopefully.” Julia rubbed the back of her neck, suddenly looking concerned. “It's going to be a turbulent time for us.”

“Why do you say that, milady?”

“Oh, just matters of the estate. Nothing you need worry yourself over.”

She left him to oil his sword and puzzle over what had been on her mind when she left. Of all the people in the castle, Julia had always been the most forthcoming with Wolfram. It wasn't like her to keep secrets.

Once again the topic slipped from Wolfram's mind as he weathered another winter at the Lavender Castle. It was a particularly bitter one, full of cutting winds and heavy snowfall that made the path up the hill almost impassable. He spent many a cold morning shovelling snow so that deliveries from the village could get through. It was more work than he was used to doing during winter, and it often took the place of morning training. That left him with afternoons full of Father Everwin's dull lectures to look forward to. He was frequently bored, finding himself with nothing new and interesting to talk about, so he started listening in on kitchen gossip to amuse himself. Meg and her helpers liked to chatter all day. Even when there was no one around but Cat, Meg still managed to have animated conversations with her mute assistant through the elaborate series of hand signals they'd devised.

It was market day, which was usually one of Wolfram's mornings off, but more snow had fallen in the night and Lord Erik needed his path clear for the merchants. After spending all morning trying not to tumble down the slippery hillside, Wolfram was

given the afternoon off instead. He spent it warming his bottom on one of the ovens at the back of the kitchen as he picked over some pantry leftovers. He'd managed to snag the last surviving apple in the castle. It was wrinkly and cold from months in the cellar, but the flesh was still tangy and sweet in his mouth.

“How hearty do you mean?” Grace, one of the kitchen girls, was saying to Cat. Cat puffed up her cheeks and motioned the outline of a swelling belly over the front of her dress. Grace giggled. “Don't you mean Lord Erik? He's the only one I know who could get that plump.”

Cat shook her head and made the motion again.

“Who are you two talking about?” Meg asked as she walked by with a basket of eggs, swatting Wolfram's knee as she passed. “Keep those long legs out of my way, Wolf. Good God, you're almost as tall as Dunstan these days.”

“She says Lady Julia's eating too heartily,” Grace said.

Cat shook her head and stamped her foot quickly, her universal sign for “no”. She looked at Meg and repeated the swelling belly motion, then made a few signs with her hands.

“She's not saying she's plump,” Meg translated. “She saying she's in the family way.”

Grace's eyes widened. “But she's not married. Who do you suppose the father is?”

“The bishop of Tannersfield,” Meg replied sarcastically. “Who do you think?”

“Lord Erik,” said Wolfram. “They were always together when I was up there sick last year.”

“I hope you've not been listening at doors, Wolf.”

“I didn't have to listen at doors, they were that loud.”

Grace giggled and Cat grinned. Meg scratched beneath her wimple, looking more fascinated than amused. “We'll have to get one of the laundry girls in here. See if milady's been regular these last months.”

“What's regular laundry got to do with it?” Wolfram asked.

Grace laughed again.

“Nothing that you'd understand,” Meg said, “nor what you should be asking about. It's women's business.”

“Oh.” He looked down at his apple sheepishly. Pregnancy and children were a mystery to him. Was this what Lady Julia had meant when she said it would be a turbulent year?

“That silly old man,” Meg tutted. “Well, if it's true then he's going to have to marry her, no other way about it. Another heir, at his age. Hmph!” She finally let out a cluck of amusement.

“What'll that mean for the estate?” Wolfram asked.

“Everything or nothing. Milady's no spring chicken.” Meg began to count off all the things that might go wrong on her fingers, speaking with the relish of a woman who enjoyed dispensing such wisdom. “She might not be pregnant at all. Cat's only got her hunches. She might not carry the baby to term. That's common for women her age. And there's no saying the poor mite will live through their first year.”



“Even here at the castle?” Wolfram asked. Babies died all the time, everyone knew that, but people said it was usually because they were cold or underfed or because their parents had lived ungodly lives.

“Even noble babies are fragile things,” Meg said. “Lady Ingrid's mother lost two before she had her, both girls. I wonder if girls are all Erik has in him? That shouldn't be any big worry for the family; Ingrid will just have a little sister. But if it's a boy, though...” Meg shook her head with a theatrical sigh. “Boys turn noble houses on their heads, don't they?”

Wolfram sat bolt upright. “Ingrid won't inherit. Then she won't have to marry Lord Ricaud!”

“Try not to look so happy about it.”

Grace laughed at Wolfram's enthusiasm. “Lady Ingrid's not going to marry you , Wolf. Oh, don't look so upset, I didn't mean it!”

“Don't get any silly ideas,” Meg said. “This is just gossip, you hear me? Even if it's true, I wouldn't wager half a shilling on it turning out like that. Now, Lord Erik finally marrying milady, that's something I'd put a good shilling on, pregnant or not.”

The women started talking about weddings at that point, which didn't interest Wolfram nearly as much as the future of the noble family. He didn't want to get his hopes up. Meg was right; the chances of Julia being pregnant and having a boy who survived to inherit were slim. Ingrid was still probably going to marry Ricaud.

But what if she didn't?

It wasn't long before the gossip spread throughout the castle. Everyone seemed to trust that the laundresses were the only ones who would know for sure whether Julia

was pregnant, and eventually one of them confirmed it. The ensuing awkwardness made meal times in the great hall uncomfortable. Erik and Julia hadn't acknowledged the situation publicly, even though they knew everyone was talking about it. Julia carried on as if everything was normal, but her smiles and courtesy seemed overly insistent. Wolfram expected she was compensating for Lord Erik, who had grown surly and irritable. He drank more wine than usual and stayed up late talking with his men long after everyone else retired.

Wolfram was repairing the stitching in one of his felted winter boots by the hearth one night when Lord Erik's voice suddenly boomed from the high table.

“All the women out!” he called. Judging from his giddy tone, he was drunk again. “I only want my men in here. All of my men. Come up to the table, all my men, come on. No one else in here for the rest of the night.”

It was well past suppertime, and there were less than twenty people still lingering in the hall. Wolfram tried to slip into the parlour with some of the women, but Lord Erik saw him and called him over.

“Up here, Wolf, up here. You're a man of age now. You sit with us.”

Wolfram approached the high table and took a seat near the end alongside Father Everwin. Cups of wine and beer were filled and passed around to everyone.

Lord Erik nodded happily once he saw a drink in everyone's hand. “This is better, isn't it? I've so many women in my house, I forget what it's like to be with men! I do love my Julia.” He blinked hard and took another drink. “My Ingrid. But we're the ones who have to make the decisions, hm? You're my counsel. My brothers, hm?”

A chorus of hms and ayes answered him.

“So, have you made a decision?” Dunstan asked from the other end of the table.

“A decision about what?”

Dunstan left a pregnant pause that elicited a dry chuckle from Lord Erik.

“Oh, about my bastard, you mean? I know you all know.”

Father Everwin, who seemed the most sober person present, said: “It's heartening to hear you speak of it openly, my lord. Decisions will have to be made.”

“Yes, yes they will,” Erik said with a heavy sigh. “Well, what do you all suggest? You're my counsel.”

“You'll have to marry Lady Julia.”

Erik grimaced. “Regardless of what happens with the child?”

“It's the right thing to do,” said Dunstan.

“Then what about Ingrid? I'm an old man. I thought she'd be my only heir, but now I'm to be saddled with another wife and maybe even a baby boy. The three of them will fight tooth and nail over the estate when I'm gone.”

“You must alter your written will,” Father Everwin said. “Make your intentions explicit. The law will support whatever decision you make.”

Lord Erik groaned and put his face in his hands. “Julia would make a better steward. Ingrid's too young still. But we need Lord Ricaud's money. He'll never go through with the wedding if Ingrid doesn't stand to inherit.”

“And you can't name her your heir if Julia has a boy,” Dunstan said.

“Why does it always have to be like that?” Wolfram asked.

The others turned to look at him. He felt uncomfortable speaking up, but he was curious.

“Boys always inherit first,” Dunstan said bluntly.

“It's the done thing,” Erik agreed.

“It doesn't make much sense for a baby to inherit before two grown women.”

Erik laughed loudly at Wolfram's observation. “Not when you put it like that, no! If I die before the whelp's of age, I'll need a steward. Someone to take care of the estate while he grows up. Dunstan, how about you?”

Dunstan shook his head. “I'm no lord.”

“None of us are,” Father Everwin said. “It would only be proper for Lady Julia or Lady Ingrid to take up the duty.”

Erik took another long drink from his cup. By the time he put it down, his expression had grown dour. “A miserable business, isn't it, deciding what to do after one's dead. Such is our duty though, hm?” Another round of hms answered him. “Let's talk about something more heartening. Give me a story or a song. I want to feel merry before I go to bed. Everwin, mix me some of your root so I can sleep easy tonight.”

“Not after so much wine, my lord, or you may never wake again.”

Erik gave another dry chuckle. “I could use a sleep that deep.”

There was no more talk of Lady Julia and her unborn child that night, but the exchange had made one thing clear to Wolfram: regardless of the outcome of Julia's pregnancy, Ingrid's future as Lord Erik's heir was no longer certain.

It was going to be a turbulent year indeed.

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Lord Erik and Lady Julia were married that spring. It was a quiet ceremony in the castle chapel, witnessed only by those whose presence was necessary. They didn't want to make a spectacle of their scandal. Secret love affairs and bastard children were not uncommon amongst the nobility, but the manner of their handling could mean the difference between a dynasty enduring and falling into ruin. Erik and Julia seemed to be dealing with things prudently. There were many small elements of their relationship that people might find distasteful; their difference in age, their distant blood relation, and the upset it stood to cause to Lord Ricaud and Lady Ingrid's engagement. But Erik and Julia clearly loved one another. She wanted to comfort and care for the man who had taken her in after she lost everything, while he longed for warmth and companionship in his old age. Wolfram could see nothing wrong with it.

Lady Ingrid thought differently, however. When they played their board games, she was moody and testy, making no attempt to hide the fact that she thought Julia had finally succeeded in a years-long scheme to replace her dead mother. Wolfram tried to reason with her that Julia wasn't that sort of woman, but Ingrid would hear none of it. She was hurt and needed to pour her heart out to someone. So Wolfram listened, trying to be patient, hoping that Ingrid's temper would eventually cool. She liked it when people agreed with her, and if that was the price of her affections, Wolfram would agree as much as she wanted.

It was also during the springtime that the exchange of Kilwick was finalised. Lady Julia, perhaps with the aid of her new wedding vows, had persuaded Lord Erik to agree to the land swap. Sir Tancred, Kilwick's former lord, had been sent off to Tannersfield to manage the new property, while a priest was coming to Elkinshire to take over the village. In time, Kilwick might become the site of a new priory, or else its rents would go back to Tannersfield to support one of the convents there.

Wolfram met the priest in the great hall early one morning. He had just arrived from Tannersfield and was seated at the high table with Father Everwin and Lady Julia. Julia called Wolfram over when she saw him.

“Father Richard, this is young master Wolfram, one of our squires. Wolfram, I would like you to escort Father Richard to Kilwick today.”

“Of course, milady.” Wolfram bowed.

Father Richard acknowledged him with a nod. He looked to be in his late thirties, with tawny brown hair and a clean-shaven face. He was dressed in the plain robe of a monk. “I arrived in Elkinshire rather late yesterday evening. I didn't want to go searching for my new village in the dark, so I came straight to the castle.”

“Wolfram will make sure you find it,” Julia said. She'd taken to wearing shapeless gowns that obscured the growing swell of her stomach. According to Meg and the kitchen servants, she would give birth before the end of summer, but her condition was still barely noticeable to the casual eye.

Wolfram told Dunstan he'd be missing training and went to the armoury to change into his surcoat and buckle on a sword. When he came out, the stabler had a horse saddled for him alongside Father Richard's. The pair of them were about to ride off when Lady Ingrid came hurrying across the courtyard.

“Hold there!” she called, hitching up her dress so it didn't drag in the dirt. “Ready my horse, please. I shall be accompanying Father Richard and Wolfram.”

“I didn't expect such an esteemed entourage,” Richard said.

Wolfram was even more bemused. Ingrid visited Firfallow regularly, but she rarely went riding around the shire on a whim. Clearly it wasn't at Lady Julia's behest, or

she would have had her horse prepared ahead of time.

“Are you sure you want to come with us, milady?” Wolfram asked. He'd learned to talk around the questions he wanted to ask when addressing nobles, lest his directness come across as impolite.

“Would I be out here if I wasn't?”

“It isn't a particularly fine day for riding, and Kilwick is nowhere of note. I'm afraid the trip might bore you.”

Ingrid gave him a thin smile. “If anything bores me, it is when men keep insisting they know best. I wish to make sure Father Richard is well settled and understands what he is taking on.”

“That's very kind of you, my lady,” Richard said.

Wolfram didn't have anything to say to that, so he shut up. In truth, he was excited about riding with Ingrid. Why should he look a gift horse in the mouth by trying to puzzle out her motives?

As soon as Ingrid's palfrey was ready, they set out down the path to the village. Wolfram rode ahead, leaving Ingrid and Father Richard to talk as they trotted behind him. He was fond of escort duty. Any work that involved hiking somewhere or riding a horse hardly felt like work at all.

They rode through Firfallow and took the path south toward Kilwick. Despite what Wolfram had said to Ingrid, it turned out to be a pleasant day for travel. Bright sunlight soon pierced the clouds, warming the gentle breeze with all the fragrances of spring.



“There it is, Father.” Wolfram pointed to the cluster of houses when they hove into view. “Your manor's just outside the village. We'll ride up there and I'll show you.”

“It's an old farmhouse, I believe?” Richard asked.

“Yes. Well-kept, though. It hasn't been out of use for long.” In his infrequent conversations with Lady Julia, Wolfram had learned that the new lord's manor would be the farmhouse where Loddy Kilwick's cousin had been murdered nearly two years ago. In the aftermath of that incident, Percy Butcher's family had sold their swine farm to the previous owner, who had moved up the hill to take over the new business and left the farmhouse out of use. The bishop of Tannersfield had purchased it so that his representative would have somewhere to live.

“Come along then, let's not waste time,” Ingrid said, kicking her horse forward.

“I would like to introduce myself to the villagers first,” Father Richard called as he hurried to catch up.

“Nonsense, you must meet your servants and see your new house. I insist.”

Richard and Wolfram exchanged a look. Wolfram gave the priest a shrug. “Milady wants what she wants.”

They followed after Ingrid, diverting from the main road to ride up the path to the farmhouse. The back of Wolfram's neck prickled as they drew near. Something was amiss. He'd been told to expect only two servants—a housekeeper and a handyman—but there were half a dozen horses tied to the hitching post outside the farmhouse. He urged his steed forward so that he arrived first. Lounging against the side of the building was a man dressed in a green and orange surcoat. It was Dom, one of Aldrich's men.

Wolfram's hands tightened on the reins as the needling memory of his last visit to Kilwick returned, but he fought past his anxiety. This was no time to be afraid.

“What are you doing here?” he barked. It gratified him to see Dom shy back in the face of his authoritative tone. Wolfram no longer sounded like a scratchy-throated teenager. He'd learned to crack his voice like a whip.

“Come to see the new lord,” Dom muttered.

Lady Ingrid trotted up behind them. Wolfram felt the sudden urge to put himself in front of her, but she rode past before he had the chance.

“Ah, splendid. We have a warm welcome, Father Richard.”

“Milady,” Wolfram said under his breath. “He's one of Aldrich's men.”

“I'm aware of that, and I'm sure they're here for entirely cordial reasons.”

“They're dangerous folk.”

Ingrid glared at him. “And what do you suppose they're going to do? Kidnap the baron's daughter in broad daylight?” She lowered her voice and leaned over to him, reaching out to place a hand on his thigh. “Be good for me and just stand there looking tough. It's what you do best.”

Wolfram's skin warmed at her touch. He didn't like this, but she was probably right. If Aldrich tried anything with the baron's daughter, not even his family's money would be enough to protect him. It sounded like Ingrid had a plan, so he did as he was told. They dismounted and tied their horses to the hitching post, then headed inside.

The living area at the end of the farmhouse was full of people. Aldrich sat at the head

of the table dressed in a fine blue tunic and a fur-trimmed cape. He wore no sword that day, but the men around him did. Wolfram recognised two of them from the last time they'd crossed paths. Aldrich rose to his feet and greeted Ingrid and Father Richard with a bow. He didn't see Wolfram until he lifted his head, at which point his expression darkened with anger. Wolfram swallowed, resisting the urge to grip the handle of his sword. He held Aldrich's gaze, meeting the man's unspoken challenge in silence until Father Richard spoke.

“Good day to you. I am Father Richard, the new lord of Kilwick.”

Aldrich cracked a smile and tore his eyes away from Wolfram. “Good day to you , Father. I am Aldrich Merchant. My men and I came to welcome you personally to Elkinshire.”

“Aldrich's family are esteemed local traders,” Ingrid said. “I'm sure you'll be dealing with them regularly during your time here.”

Wolfram itched to say something, but he held his tongue.

“My dear lady Ingrid is quite right,” said Aldrich.

“Do you often conduct your business with a host of armed men?” Father Richard asked sceptically.

Aldrich laughed. “Only when I travel, Father. Elkinshire can be a dangerous place. Baron Erik is currently suffering a deficit of funds, so my men and I take it upon ourselves to act as constables for his vassals.”

“I am not one of his vassals. This land belongs to the church now.”

“All the more reason it should be properly protected. We'd be glad to continue the

arrangement we had with Sir Tancred. Our fees are very modest.”

“My father will expect you to make use of Aldrich's services,” Lady Ingrid said. “I'm afraid he's unable to spare many men to assist with outlaws and troublemakers.”

Wolfram stared at Ingrid in disbelief. What was she doing, siding with Aldrich? It had to be a ruse of some kind. Perhaps she was trying to trick him into something.

“I cannot imagine what sort of trouble would necessitate hiring a band of soldiers,” Father Richard said. His tone was still firm, but he seemed uncertain now, as though Ingrid's interjection had thrown him off balance. “Is it not common practice for the villagers to deal with local problems in Elkinshire?”

“Oh, not with the problems we have here, no,” said Aldrich. “Believe me, you don't want to know what goes on when my men aren't around.”

Lady Ingrid nodded solemnly. “My father may have been economical with the truth when he promised you this village, Father. A great deal of outlawry goes unpunished in Elkinshire.”

Wolfram couldn't remain silent any longer. He felt angry and hurt by Ingrid's deception, and he wouldn't stand by while Father Richard was lied to.

“That isn't true, Father. This man is an extortionist. The only trouble you'll face here will be of his own making if you refuse to pay his bribe.”

A deep frown furrowed Richard's brow. “Lady Ingrid, is this true?”

She shook her head in apparent bemusement. “It's the first I've heard of it. Aldrich is a respected man.”

Richard looked around the room. "If I ask Lord Erik, will he tell me the same thing?"

A moment of silence hung in the air before Aldrich spoke. His voice was low, devoid of its previous courtesy. "Listen, Father. My men and I take fees from all the lords here. We give them our protection, and everyone's happy. There's no reason for things to be any different with you."

"Do you want to know what kind of man he is, Father?" Wolfram said, his hand coming to rest on his sword. "The year before last, he killed three men in cold blood without a trial. He'd have tortured them first if I hadn't stood up to him. I swear it on my soul, God damn me to hell if it's a lie."

The righteous indignation in Wolfram's voice seemed to resonate with Father Richard. He rounded on Aldrich decisively.

"I don't want to see you or your men in Kilwick again. Please leave immediately."

"I wouldn't listen to him if I were you, Father. You'd be much happier with us on your side."

"Aldrich," Ingrid hissed, and to Wolfram's surprise, he fell silent. "There's no need for any hasty decisions to be made. This can all be agreed upon at a later date once Father Richard is settled. Would that not be preferable, Father?"

"I have made my decision," Richard answered. "I won't be intimidated by footpads in noble finery."

Aldrich slammed his palm on the table. "You're making a mistake."

Ingrid glared at him again, but he was furious. This obviously wasn't going how either of them had planned.

Father Richard stepped forward and raised his voice. "The mistake is yours, Master Aldrich. I am no vassal of Lord Erik's. The church owns this land now, and the wrath of God himself will be your enemy if you show your face here again."

Aldrich sneered back at him. "I've seen money solve more problems than prayer."

"Then perhaps you would prefer the wrath of the sheriff? The count of Tannersfield is a close personal friend of mine. One word from me, and he'll have the sheriff's men here in the blink of an eye."

Aldrich's sneer faltered. His eyes flicked in Ingrid's direction. She gave a tiny shake of her head.

Wolfram stepped up beside Richard. "The father told you to leave his house."

With undisguised resentment, Aldrich stepped around the table and headed for the door. As he passed Wolfram, he knocked him with his shoulder deliberately.

"One of these days, baron's boy," he said under his breath.

Wolfram didn't give him the satisfaction of a response. He kept his eyes fixed ahead until Aldrich's men had left before breathing a sigh of relief.

"If they give you any more trouble—" he began, but Richard raised a hand to silence him.

"Then I will ensure the count of Tannersfield hears of it."

"Do you really have his ear? Could he get the sheriff to intervene?"

Richard hesitated. "I do have his ear. I was a member of the count's household when I

was younger. But the sheriff is his own man, and a principled one at that. I would need hard evidence.”

“That won't be necessary,” Ingrid said. “You'll have no more trouble from Aldrich. Wolfram has a vivid imagination.”

“We shall see. Thank you for your input, my lady.” It was clear from his tone that Richard wanted her to leave. Wolfram wondered whether he should stay, but Ingrid's fingers tightened around his wrist and she tugged him toward the door. He allowed himself to be led out, resisting the urge to pull away.

“Why did you have to say that?” Ingrid demanded once they were outside. Aldrich and his men were already riding away down the path.

“Me?” Wolfram said incredulously. “You took Aldrich's side!”

“Yes, for the sake of keeping the peace! Do you want Aldrich to come back and start wrecking Richard's property? Do you want the sheriff's men to ride into the shire and make my father look like a helpless old fool? Why don't you ever think? ” She slapped Wolfram's arm. “It isn't your place to speak up in front of me!”

“I don't believe you. Aldrich was following your lead.”

“Of course he was! I'm the baron's daughter! He might have drawn his sword and killed you if I hadn't been here.”

Wolfram shook his head, wishing he could find the right words to express how he felt. Perhaps Ingrid really had been trying to keep the peace, but he still felt like he'd been deceived, and the thought of going against the woman he pined for tore at his heart. The feeling worsened when she took his hand and looked him in the eye.

“I thought you cared for me, Wolfram. Why would you make a fool of me like that?”

He stared at her, a terrible lump rising in his throat. “I don't know what you were thinking, but you can't side with someone like Aldrich.”

Ingrid stared at him, tilting her head to the side as if she was trying to peer into his soul. “Perhaps you're right,” she said at last, her tone softening. “Maybe I only made things worse. If I forgive you, will you forgive me? My father needn't hear a word of this.”

Wolfram squeezed her hand. There was something between them, he knew it. He wasn't sure if she loved him the way he loved her, but in these intimate moments, their connection was more than that of mistress and servant.

“I will if you tell me the truth. Did you plan this with Aldrich?”

“It wasn't some scheme.”

“But you ran out to get your horse as soon as you heard we were leaving. You knew Aldrich was going to be here, didn't you?”

Ingrid's eyes fell, and she nodded. “Please understand, Wolfram, it was nothing sinister. Aldrich is a respected man in Elkinshire. Our family stays with his when we visit the village. We see each other at court. I've known him since I was a child, and I don't want him and my father at odds. He said he was going to pay Father Richard a visit, and when I heard you'd be escorting him here, I knew it wouldn't go well.”

Something bitterly jealous joined the ache in Wolfram's heart. “He might be your friend, but you must know he's a wicked man.”

“Is he? He's always behaved courteously towards me.”



“It's just an act! I saw him kill those men. He would've killed me too if I hadn't fought him off.”

Ingrid shook her head. “I don't want any of you to fight.”

“Please don't be taken in by him, Ingrid. He made me think he was reasonable, too, but he only wanted my help tracking down Percy Butcher.”

Ingrid withdrew her hand, sniffing as though she was holding back tears. “It's very hurtful to hear you say such things about someone I care for.”

“He isn't your friend. He's as bad as everyone says he is.”

Ingrid looked at him for another long moment. “You are so wonderfully loyal, aren't you?”

“I care about you.”

“And I care for you. Let's not let this come between us. I'm sorry for what happened. I misjudged the situation.”

Wolfram let out a long breath. He still felt hurt, but he didn't want to continue this argument either. “And I'm sorry for speaking out of turn. Shall we head home?”

“Let's.”

They spoke of lighter topics on the ride back to Firfallow, and by the time they returned to the castle, Wolfram's disappointment in Ingrid had softened. She wasn't to blame for Aldrich's manipulations. Like so many others, she'd been taken in by his charming manner. Wolfram just had to make sure he didn't get the chance to sink his claws in any deeper.

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They heard no more troubling news from Kilwick. Father Richard's threat appeared to have worked, and Aldrich left him alone. Soon afterwards, money began trickling in from the property in Tannersfield. It wasn't a lot, but as the months passed Wolfram noticed that the pantry was no longer being restocked at the last moment. There were always full barrels on the floor and cuts of preserved meat hanging from the ceiling. A few more horses appeared in the stables, and builders started coming in to make repairs that had been neglected for months. How else might the castle transform if Lord Erik could collect his rents in full? There would be a horse for every squire, smart new surcoats and suits of mail; the cracks in the stonework would be repaired, and the lavender wall might someday live up to its namesake again. The progress they'd made emboldened Wolfram. This was the first step towards clawing back what years of mismanagement and Aldrich's interference had taken away.

It was all thanks to Lady Julia. Lord Erik was set in his ways. He didn't like change, and that was why things stagnated. But Julia's plan to trade away Kilwick had worked. Now that Erik could see the fruits of his new wife's labours, he was growing bright and eager once more. The gloom that had descended upon him following the news of Julia's pregnancy lifted. He understood that there were other paths forward now. Ingrid might not have to marry for money after all. If they could turn Elkinshire's fortunes around, there was light at the end of the tunnel.

Wolfram shared in his lord's optimism. Though he still felt the sting of Ingrid's deception in Kilwick, he was willing to put it behind him and move forward. He was eighteen now, a grown man, as tough and wiry as Dunstan, though the lanky man-at-arms still had a good inch of height over him. He and the other squires were becoming a proper household guard. They rode across Elkinshire delivering messages and summons, escorting travellers, and settling local disputes. Aldrich's men might

still have been the dominant group in the area, but Lord Erik was making his presence felt once more. There was a growing belief in Firfallow that Aldrich's leash would soon be snapped tight.

That day couldn't come soon enough for Wolfram.

When Lady Julia went into labour that summer, a midwife named Ellen Good was summoned from the village. She was middle-aged, stocky and fair-haired, and she carried herself with the air of a woman who was used to being in charge. Wolfram felt much more confident knowing she would be at Julia's bedside rather than the bookish Father Everwin.

Most of the household gathered in the great hall, too excited and nervous to carry on with their work. Every so often they heard distant groans from upstairs, and the noise stirred the rustle of conversation like a poker raking through hot coals. Groups of people took it in turns to pray for Julia in the castle chapel. Even Wolfram joined in when he was invited. Julia was well-liked by the household at large, and it was her safety more than the child's that people were concerned for. Whatever happened, life in the castle was never going to be the same after tonight.

The only person who didn't participate in the gossip was Lady Ingrid. She sat with her maidservant Petra at the end of the high table, nursing her forehead with one hand and a cup of wine with the other. A tense and dejected expression sat on her face. Eventually, Wolfram braved her temper and approached the high table.

“Milady,” he said with a small bow. “Are you feeling well?”

“What do you think?” she tried to sound impatient, but there was fear hidden behind her temper.

“Which one are you hoping for?” Wolfram tried to keep his tone jovial. “A boy or a

girl?"

"Can I have neither? I'd rather not be any more related to that woman than I already am."

"You don't mean that. It's nice, having sisters. I've two of my own. And if it's a boy, I don't expect you'll have to go through with marrying Lord Ricaud."

"No," Ingrid replied wearily. "Instead I shall look forward to Julia and her son taking over my father's castle. If you really want to help, Wolfram, then would you go to the stable and have my horse readied for me? I won't be able to sleep here with this racket going on."

"Where will you go?"

"Down to the village. I'll find a room there tonight. I'd rather not hear any more about what's happening upstairs till tomorrow."

"I can accompany you if you'd like. You should have an escort."

"I'm hardly likely to be accosted by footpads on the castle path, Wolfram." She flashed him a smile. "But your concern is touching, as always." She seemed distracted still, and Wolfram sensed she wasn't in the mood for any more conversation. He went out to the stable and passed on her instructions. The sun was already low in the sky, the shadows of the castle walls stretching from one side of the courtyard to the other. The midwife had warned that Lady Julia might be in labour all night.

When he returned to the keep, Ingrid was already leaving. He passed her on the way out and went over to Petra at the high table.

“Aren't you going with her?” It was unlike Ingrid to leave the castle overnight without her maid.

Petra shook her head. She'd always been aloof with Wolfram and the other servants, believing herself above them because of her close relationship with Ingrid. Having no particular desire to spend time with her, Wolfram went to find Robin instead. He was passing by the stairs to the solar when Ellen Good came hurrying down. She caught his eye and motioned him over.

“You're a big strong lad. Come up and help me with the water.” Then she turned to Petra. “It's time for you to come up as well.”

Petra's help must have been volunteered beforehand. She didn't look happy about it, but she got up and followed Ellen upstairs. Wolfram brought up the rear.

“Will I need to go in there?” he asked nervously.

“No, don't fret yourself,” Ellen replied. “I've got plenty of help. I just need you to bring me some fresh water. I'll give you a big basin to take down to the kitchen. I want it boiled. It's important that it's boiling. Get the basin nice and hot, too. Once it's cold enough to be carried, bring it back up here. Let it cool naturally. Don't mix in any cold water to bring down the temperature.”

Wolfram didn't understand the methods of wise women, and he was afraid to ask, so he just nodded. He heard a moan from Lady Julia's room when they reached the top of the stairs. She'd moved into Lord Erik's chamber when they got married, but her old room was more spacious, so Ellen had taken her in there tonight. Wolfram waited while the women went inside. Petra returned a moment later and passed him a heavy copper basin with handles on the sides.

“How is she?” Wolfram asked. Petra turned away as if she hadn't heard him. She was

being even ruder than usual that evening. Perhaps she resented being left to help the midwife while Ingrid spent the night in the village.

With a shake of his head, Wolfram went downstairs to boil some water in the kitchen. Meg and Cat accosted him the moment he came in.

“How is she?” Meg asked.

“I’m not sure. We’re just waiting at the moment. The midwife sent me to boil some water.”

“Oh, I should be up there, not that woman. She doesn’t even know milady.”

Wolfram filled the basin from the kitchen cistern and took it to the large covered hearth that was used for roasting and boiling. Meg stirred the coals at one end with a stick and set out a metal stand for the basin.

“Ellen’s a proper midwife,” Wolfram explained. “They say she delivers all the babies in Firfallow.”

Meg scoffed. “I’ve delivered babies. I pulled this one out of her mother myself.” She nodded at Cat.

Realising that Meg and Ellen were the sorts of women who would butt heads like bulls, Wolfram did his best to dissuade the cook from going upstairs. Fortunately the kitchen servants were busy with the evening meal, and Meg had plenty of work to keep her out of harm’s way.

Wolfram was still being pestered with questions by the time the water boiled. He was getting uncomfortable in the heat of the kitchen, so he wrapped the handles of the copper basin with a pair of washcloths and took it upstairs. It was still hot, and the

damp rags had the opposite of their intended effect. The heat went straight through them into Wolfram's palms. By the time he got to the top of the stairs, his hands were stinging. He searched frantically for a place to set the basin down before his skin blistered. The door to Lady Julia's room was shut, and the table was all the way at the other end of the solar. The door to Lord Erik's room stood ajar, and through it he could see another table. Hurrying in, he set the basin down and breathed a sigh of relief as he blew on his reddening palms. There was a gasp from the other end of the room. He turned around and saw Petra with a pestle and mortar in her hands. She was working at a cabinet next to the bed, and Wolfram's sudden appearance had startled her.

“You can't come in here!”

“I was just bringing the water. Can you let Ellen know the basin's still hot?”

“Get out!” Petra snapped.

Her temper bemused Wolfram, but he had no interest in arguing with her. He went back downstairs and sat with the other squires, putting his hands around a cool ceramic mug of ale Robin poured for him.

“Babies make everyone act strangely,” he told his friend. “Petra's so short-tempered today.”

“My sister was like that when she was pregnant.”

“Petra's not the pregnant one though, is she? I don't understand women.” Wolfram took a sip of his ale, thinking about Ingrid and her changing moods. She could be so tender sometimes and bitterly cold at others.

“Cat's alright,” Robin said. “I understand her.”

“That's because she doesn't talk. There's not a lot to understand.”

“Don't let her hear you say that.”

“She's busy in the kitchen with Meg. Oh, if Meg comes in here, don't let her go upstairs. She's spoiling for a fight with that midwife.”

The pair of them continued talking as the last of the light faded and the evening meal was served. The hours stretched by, and Lady Julia's cries eventually grew fewer and farther between. Wolfram hoped that was a good sign. Some people went to bed, but most remained awake, willing to stay up as long as it took to hear news of the baby. At what must have been close to midnight, Lord Erik came downstairs to address the household. He looked very tired.

“I have a son,” he announced. A scattering of cheers and applause rippled through the hall.

Wolfram's heart leapt. Erik had an heir! There was no way Lord Ricaud would want to marry Ingrid now.

“How's Lady Julia?” he asked.

When Erik turned to look at him, the expression on his face curdled Wolfram's excitement.

“She's not well. Father Everwin is tending her.” He held up his hand to silence any further questions. “All we can do is wait and pray.”

The atmosphere in the hall immediately became subdued. Another group of people hurried to the chapel. Wolfram rose to his feet and steadied himself against the table when a wave of giddiness swept over him. He hadn't realised how much ale he'd



drunk.

“Is there anything I can do to help?” he asked Lord Erik.

The baron shook his head despondently. “I don't know.”

“I'll come up and ask.”

Erik made no effort to stop Wolfram as he followed him upstairs. The solar was eerily silent. Every door had been shut. Petra and two other servants were seated at the far table, their hands clasped together in prayer. Wolfram felt useless. What could he do? Fetch more water? Even Ellen's helpers had been reduced to praying. Frustration itched at the back of his neck. When Lord Erik did nothing, Wolfram stepped by him, looking briefly to his lord for approval before knocking on Julia's door. Erik just stared blankly at him.

The door creaked open and Ellen Good came out. Over her shoulder, Wolfram saw Julia lying on the bed. Her skin was pale in the candlelight, her gown stuck to her body with sweat. She seemed very still. Father Everwin was seated next to her with a cloth-swaddled bundle in his arms. An infant's breathy cry sounded from within.

“How is she?” Wolfram asked.

“She's dead,” Ellen said softly. “I'm ever so sorry, my lords.”

Wolfram was stunned. He stared at Julia's body for a terribly long moment before turning away. He couldn't bear the sight of her lying there. It wasn't like the dead bodies he'd seen before. He'd known Julia. She'd been a friend to him, a mentor like Dunstan, and she'd shown him kindness and respect when others didn't. He couldn't imagine life at the castle without her.

Without a word, Lord Erik stepped past him and went into the room. He sat down beside Julia and took her hand. There were tears running down his cheeks. Wolfram wanted to cry, too, but he fought against it. He'd trained himself to bite back tears and stifle the hurt when he felt this way. It only invited mockery from the other squires. It was better to pick yourself up and turn that misery into aggression.

Wolfram marched toward the stairs. He wanted to get his favourite longsword from the armoury and swing it till his arms were numb, or run around the courtyard till he was exhausted, or kick a leather ball against the wall until its stitching fell out. But then he remembered all the people waiting downstairs, imagined their expectant faces turning toward him for news, and his step faltered. He turned around again and paced to the far end of the solar, his boots loud against the floorboards. The servants sitting at the table shied away from him. Wolfram was too upset to reassure them. He turned around and continued pacing, repeating his circuit until he was short of breath.

Eventually, other people began venturing upstairs. Dunstan came first, then Meg, then some of the laundresses. Father Everwin told them what had happened. Meg's wails of anguish filled the solar as she wept at the foot of Julia's bed. Dunstan stood by the door in silence, staring at Erik with concern.

“She's killed her!” Meg cried. “That witch—she never knew milady! I should've been here!”

Ellen Good, who had thus far endured the household's grief in silence, looked up sharply at Meg's accusation. “I did everything I could for her.”

“Then why did she die?! There's no blood! If she wasn't bleeding then what killed her?”

“Sometimes these things just happen.”

Meg turned to Lord Erik. “She gave her potions, didn't she? Tonics full of devil's magic!”

“Meg,” Father Everwin said in a soothing voice. “Nothing she gave her was anything I would not have recommended myself.”

“Then she put a curse on it, or she gave it wrong!” Meg was inconsolable, desperate to find an outlet for her grief. “She's not bleeding!” She pointed at Julia's clean gown. “The baby didn't kill her!”

“Shut up,” Lord Erik said, his voice straining as if it was about to break. “Get out. Leave me alone with her.” He looked up at Ellen with bloodshot eyes. “I never want to see you in Firfallow again.”

Ellen stood still, perhaps debating whether to protest her innocence or cut her losses and leave. But there was no reasonable argument to be had with Erik or Meg that evening. Even Wolfram could see it. Ellen picked up her satchel, fastened her cloak about her neck, and hurried downstairs.

“All of you, out!” Erik repeated.

Wolfram waited until the others had gone downstairs before following. He didn't feel like talking to anyone. His grief was a personal thing, twisting and turning in his gut, and he knew he wouldn't sleep until he found some way to quiet it. He avoided the crowd of mourners in the great hall, staying in the shadows at the edge of the room as he made his way to the door and stepped outside. Only when he was away from the keep did he let out a heavy, breathless sob. His first thought was to go to the armoury and get his sword, but it would be locked at this time of night, and he didn't want to ask Dunstan for the key. He walked to the gate instead. The moon was bright and clear, shining off the castle walls to bathe the courtyard in pale silvery light.

Ellen Good walked past him leading her pony from the stables.

“Would you help me lift the bar?” she asked, motioning to the gate door.

Wolfram nodded, swallowing the painful tightness in his throat. “Meg shouldn't have said that to you.”

“People say all sorts of things when they're grieving.”

“I'm sure you did everything you could.”

They lifted the bar down together, and Ellen said: “She was right, though. I don't know why your lady died. There was no bleeding.”

“Do women always bleed when they die in childbirth?”

Ellen nodded. “Either inside or out, and I saw no sign of either. It takes a while, too. Usually days or even weeks. I've never seen a woman go like your lady did. She just started to drift off like she was falling asleep.”

Her words didn't reassure Wolfram. He wanted there to be a reason for Julia's death—something that made sense, even if it was as simple as the same tragic explanation behind every ill-fated pregnancy. The fact that Ellen didn't know made it seem random and pointless.

“Don't mind what Lord Erik said,” Wolfram tried to reassure her. If he could reassure someone else, perhaps his own grief would be easier to bear. “He's not a cruel man. I'm sure he won't make you leave the village.”

Ellen gave him a smile. “You're a kind boy, but I know better than to test my lord's patience. I'll make myself scarce for a while. I've got other places I can go.”

“Well, goodbye.” Wolfram waved her off as she led her pony through the gate. When he turned around, he saw other people in the courtyard. They must have come out to find a moment's peace like him. He wished he had the night to himself. He wanted to sit out under the moon and weep without anyone seeing him.

The quantity of ale he'd drunk wasn't helping his frame of mind, and he needed to empty his bladder. He made his way to the latrine at the back of the castle and relieved himself into the cesspit. When he came out, he saw Petra standing by the wellhouse cistern. She was washing the copper basin he'd used to fetch water. That already felt like it had happened a lifetime ago. Still groggy from the drink, Wolfram stared at the wellhouse, wondering how long it had taken the builders to dig down through all the dirt and rock beneath the hill until they reached groundwater.

“That water must be freezing,” he said. “Why don't you wash that in the kitchen?”

For the second time that night, Wolfram made Petra jump. He was standing in the shadows beside the kitchen building, and she hadn't seen him. She bolted upright, splashing water from her pail.

“Who's there?!”

Her petulant tone frustrated Wolfram, reigniting the itch of anger behind his grief. Why did she always have to be so haughty? Even in the wake of Lady Julia's death, she still sounded annoyed that someone had interrupted her. But that wasn't all. Her eyes flitted back and forth in the moonlight, desperately searching for the source of Wolfram's voice. She wasn't just irritated—she looked terrified.

Wolfram might not have been as sharp as Robin, but he could tell when something was amiss. Perhaps it was his urge to make sense of Julia's death, or perhaps he was just looking for an outlet like Meg, but a dark thought occurred to him in that moment. He stepped out of the shadows and approached Petra.

“What were you doing in Lord Erik's room earlier?”

“Nothing!”

“You had a bowl and you were mixing something.”

“It was for the midwife!”

“Why did you go in there to do it?”

Petra looked like she might be about to bolt for the kitchen door. Wolfram grabbed her by the arms, squeezing harder than he'd meant to.

“Let go of me!” Petra cried. “I'll scream!”

“And I'll tell Lord Erik what I saw! Shall we fetch the midwife back? I'll ask her what you were doing in there. What was it?!”

Petra froze up. She stared at Wolfram like a cornered deer.

He shook her. “If you poisoned her, they'll hang you!”

“It wasn't my idea,” Petra said in a thin voice. “Lady Ingrid said I must do it.”

Wolfram stared at her in disbelief. “No she didn't.” Ingrid had never liked Julia, but he couldn't believe she'd poison her. There had to be more to it.

“She did! Ask her, not me! She told me to give Lady Julia her father's sleeping root.”

“Enough to kill her?”

Petra shook her head desperately. "I don't know!"

Wolfram couldn't tell whether she was lying. He was in turmoil, tormented by the thought that Ingrid could have a hand in something so vile. He tried to calm down and think.

"Will you tell Lord Erik?" Petra asked.

"I don't know." Wolfram knew he couldn't go to the baron right away. Erik was in no state to hear something like this. If Wolfram had misread the situation, he would be severely punished. He needed to speak with Ingrid first. If he could look her in the eye and ask for the truth, then he would know for sure. He'd know she was innocent.

"Where did Ingrid go?"

"She didn't say."

"Where does she usually stay when she's at the village?"

"With Isabella Merchant. Aldrich's mother."

Wolfram cursed and let her go. Of course Aldrich was involved. He couldn't make sense of it yet, but he could see the pieces coming together. Julia had been responsible for what happened with Kilwick. Aldrich must have known his days were numbered, and in desperation he'd done something drastic. Maybe he'd threatened Petra into poisoning Julia or tricked Ingrid into something she didn't understand. The thought of him manipulating Ingrid made Wolfram's blood boil. He definitely couldn't go to Lord Erik now. He couldn't tell anyone. He was going to Isabella Merchant's house, and if Aldrich was there, he'd do whatever it took to get the truth out of him.

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“What are you doing with that?” Robin asked as Wolfram pulled out the sword Gavin kept hidden behind the clothes chest. He tucked it beneath his cloak before anyone else saw.

“It doesn't matter.”

“Then where are you going?”

“Down to the village.”

Robin stepped in front of him, blocking his path to the parlour door. “Wolf. What are you doing?”

Wolfram didn't want to explain himself. He feared he might be talked out of it. But Robin knew him better than anyone, and he wouldn't be satisfied with a half-answer.

“Come outside and I'll tell you.” They left the keep and huddled together in the shadow of the wall. “I'm going to Aldrich's house. I think Ingrid's there.”

“What for?”

“Because I think he killed Lady Julia! He made Petra poison her. I need to see Ingrid.”

“Don't be stupid. Remember what happened the last time you ran off with Aldrich? Go and tell Lord Erik.”



Wolfram shook his head, frustrated that Robin didn't understand. "He won't listen! I just need to speak with her. And if Aldrich is there, I'm going to make him wish he wasn't."

Robin grabbed his arm. "You can't do that. By God, Wolf, you need to think. You know Lord Erik's upset. What do you suppose he'll do if he wakes up tomorrow and finds out you've been fighting in the village? What if you kill someone?"

"It won't matter if it's Aldrich."

"I won't let you do it."

Wolfram shook him off violently and made for the castle gate. Robin grabbed his arm again. Wolfram rounded on him, not knowing what he was about to do, but before he could react, Robin hit him in the ear. He staggered, and in his moment of confusion Robin twisted the sword out of his hand.

"I'm keeping this sword, alright? You can talk, but no fighting."

For a second, Wolfram felt like he might hit Robin back. He clenched his fist and took a step toward him. Robin recoiled, and Wolfram stopped. Shame and regret took hold of him, rising like a painful bubble in his chest. Instead of hitting Robin, he put an arm around his shoulder and pulled him into a rough embrace.

"I'm sorry," he huffed. He didn't know how to act in situations like this. The squires never expressed affection for one another this way. Part of him was afraid that Robin might mock him, but he couldn't believe their friendship was that fragile. He was glad Robin couldn't see his face, for when he returned the hug, Wolfram felt tears running down his face.

"I don't want you getting in trouble," Robin said gently.

“I know, I know, but I need to speak to Ingrid.”

“No fighting.”

Wolfram wiped his cheeks quickly and stepped back. “If Aldrich is there, he might start something.”

“Then I'll be around to make sure it doesn't get out of hand.”

Wolfram nodded. Despite his desire to be alone, he felt a great warmth toward Robin for being there for him. Julia's death seemed less jarring now that he had a friend by his side.

They told no one where they were going. Quickly and quietly, they lifted the bar on the gate door and slipped out of the castle. Robin had brought a covered lantern from the kitchen, and when he lifted it from beneath his cloak it cast a dim pool of light through its gauze panels. They made their way through the fir trees until they reached the winding path beneath the lavender wall. Its pale purple colour was almost visible in the moonlight that night.

Wolfram explained what had happened with Petra on the way down. Robin listened grimly, deep in thought. Even if they couldn't resolve everything tonight, Wolfram felt confident that his clever friend would figure out a solution by tomorrow. He'd know how to present their suspicions to Lord Erik in a way that made him listen.

They didn't need the light of the lantern again until they reached the foot of the hill. After a short walk, the streets of Firfallow greeted them. It was then that Wolfram had to admit he didn't know where he was going. The village was large enough that he wasn't sure who most of the houses belonged to. It was the major trading hub for miles around, and many stone buildings had been erected near the marketplace by its wealthier citizens. Any of them could've been Isabella Merchant's house. Fortunately,

Robin knew which one they were looking for. He pointed it out as they walked. It had two floors, a long roof of wooden shingles, and shuttered windows with iron bars for security. Wolfram could see chinks of light shining behind some of them. A tingling sensation crept over his body as he approached. He felt like he'd been holding a tense breath all evening, and only speaking with Ingrid could let it out. Only she could set his mind at ease.

He lifted his hand and rapped on the door. No one answered. He leaned in close and heard the sound of voices on the other side. He knocked again, harder. This time there was the rattle of a bolt being drawn back. The door swung open to reveal a brightly lit hall filled with people. Wolfram immediately tensed, as did the man opening the door. He was one of the ones from the expedition to catch Percy Butcher—the plump one with the young face.

“What the hell are you doing here?” His voice was thick as if he were drunk, but he sounded nervous. He hadn't expected the baron's men to show up in the middle of the night. Though Wolfram's head was still foggy, he had enough of his wits about him to realise that he could take advantage of that.

“Out of my way,” he said firmly, shouldering his way inside. “I'm here on behalf of Lord Erik. Is the lady Ingrid here?”

His appearance caused a stir in the room. Several of the men rose to their feet, Aldrich among them. He wore an impatient scowl.

“Ingrid's not going anywhere with you, baron's boy.”

Before things could escalate any further, a shrill laugh cut through the tension. For a moment, Wolfram didn't recognise the voice, for he had never heard it raised in such carefree mirth before. He looked across the room and saw Ingrid sitting in a cushioned chair by the hearth, a shiny metal goblet cupped in her hand.

“Are you two going to fight? You look like a pair of cocks in a ring.”

She was drunk. Wolfram had never seen her like this.

“Lady Julia's dead,” he announced.

Ingrid's smile immediately vanished. She put down her cup and rose to her feet. “And her baby?”

“A boy. He's alive and well. It looks like you won't have to marry Lord Ricaud after all.”

“Get out of here, baron's boy,” Aldrich said. “No one wants you spoiling the mood.”

“No, Aldrich,” Ingrid said quickly. She hurried over to him and leaned in to whisper something in his ear. The sight of them conversing so intimately made Wolfram's skin crawl. Whatever she said made Aldrich round on her in anger. There was a short, sharp exchange between them, then, with obvious frustration, Aldrich snatched up his mug and waved for the others to follow him.

“Come on, everyone. We're going to Daniel Brewer's for a bit.”

Wolfram stood aside so they could pass. One by one, Aldrich and his friends filed out until the house was empty. Robin hovered in the doorway, keeping a wary eye on the group as they crossed the marketplace.

“Robin, would you please wait outside?” Ingrid said. The mirth had left her voice. She sounded anxious now. “I'd like you to stand watch in case they come back.”

“Of course, my lady.”

The moment Robin shut the door, Ingrid hurried forward and threw her arms around Wolfram. “Oh, Wolf, I'm so glad you're here. I shouldn't have come, should I? Poor Julia. You must tell me everything that's happened.”

The feeling of Ingrid's slender arms around his body and her cheek on his chest made Wolfram return the embrace. His pulse quickened, but instead of desire, he felt irritated and confused. He eased her away from him.

“You're drunk,” he said.

“Yes, I suppose I am. I had to do something to get through this awful night.”

“You seemed like you were having a fine enough time with Aldrich.”

“I told you, he's a friend. Oh, please don't bring this up again, not tonight. Let's not talk here. Anyone might come in. Come upstairs and tell me what's happened.”

But Wolfram did want to bring it up again. He wanted to ask her just what the hell she thought she was doing, staying up all night drinking in a house full of unscrupulous men. But he remembered what Petra had told him, and the urgency of his purpose returned. He allowed Ingrid to lead him up a flight of wooden stairs. Candles burned in wall sconces along a landing that ran the length of the building. Ingrid took one of them and opened the nearest door. Inside there was a small bedroom with a table and a bed dressed in expensive linens. Ingrid put the candle down and made him sit beside her on the mattress.

“Now, tell me what happened.”

“Julia fell asleep, the midwife said, and she didn't wake back up. She said she's never seen a woman die like that.” He studied Ingrid's face for any change in her expression. “I saw Petra mixing something in a bowl after you left. When I asked her

about it, she said you told her to slip Julia some of your father's sleeping root. Is that true?" Wolfram gripped Ingrid's arm tight. "Did you tell her to poison Julia?"

Her brow furrowed with a deep frown. "No, Wolfram, no. Why would I ever do such a thing?"

"Because Aldrich hates her? Because he doesn't want things in Elkinshire to change? After what happened with Kilwick, he's getting scared. Did he say anything to you?"

Ingrid began to shake her head, then paused. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and nodded. "Not to me, but he's been bothering Petra. I thought he had a crush on her, so I didn't pry. It's been going on for a few months now."

Relief washed over Wolfram, carrying away his doubts like leaves in a stream. "So you had nothing to do with it? Petra was lying to me?"

"I swear it on my life. Poor Petra. He must have threatened her terribly."

"Now do you believe me about him?"

"I really don't want to think about that right now."

Wolfram's grip on her arm eased. He slid his hand down to take hers. "Come back to the castle with me. We'll talk to Petra and get the whole truth. Then, once your father's ready to hear it, we'll tell him what happened."

"I don't want Petra to get in trouble."

"We'll work something out. Aldrich can't get away with this."

"I just can't bear the thought of you two fighting. Will you let me handle this? It'll be

better if I deal with Petra myself.”

A twinge of Wolfram's unease returned, but before he could put a finger on what it was, the thought deserted him, for Ingrid had placed her palm upon his cheek.

“I am so very fond of you, Wolfram.” Her voice was a quiet tickle in his ear.

After everything else that had happened that night, Wolfram no longer had any difficulty speaking his mind.

“I love you.”

Ingrid smiled. “Oh, I know. You make it rather obvious. You've always been my loyal little pup.” She stroked his hair back behind his ear, leaned in, and kissed him on the lips. He was cold from being outside, and Ingrid's mouth was warm and eager. She was more aggressive than the baker's daughter he'd kissed at the summer fair. He didn't know how to react. He'd wanted this for so long, fantasised about it a hundred times, and now it was finally happening. He wanted to take Ingrid in his arms, kiss her back fiercely, and forget about everything else. But now wasn't the time. It was all wrong. He forced himself to pull away.

“We can't do this here. We need to go back to the castle.”

Ingrid nuzzled into his cheek, kissing him along the jaw, her lips so wonderfully soft against the sandpaper of his stubble. “I don't want to go out there in the cold. I want to do it now. Robin's keeping watch. He'll let us know if anyone comes.”

Wolfram's heart fluttered. He felt a surge of desperate arousal that tugged and twisted against the better sense that told him to leave.

“When will we have a chance like this again?” Ingrid whispered into his ear. “Not at

the castle. If we sneak off alone together, people will talk.”

“We could be married—”

“Shut up.” Ingrid pushed him down on the mattress and straddled him. Wolfram felt his chest heaving. He knew it was foolish and wrong, but he didn't want to stop. She was kissing him all over his face, holding his hand, twining her fingers between his.

“I can feel your cock getting hard,” Ingrid murmured in his ear, giggling like one of the marketplace whores who enticed their customers with lewd comments. Again Wolfram was unnerved to hear her speak in such a way, but he couldn't deny that it excited him. Ingrid straightened up to pull her dress over her head and unlace her undergarments. Wolfram could only see half of her body illuminated in the candlelight, but it was as smooth and perfect as he'd imagined. He hurried to unfasten his own clothing. Ingrid didn't wait for him to fully undress before taking his shaft in her hand, rubbing him against the tangle of hair between her legs, and pushing him inside her. The warmth of her body made Wolfram groan. He'd heard that sex could be painful for a woman, but Ingrid showed no discomfort as she leaned forward, raking her hands through his hair as she began to ride him. She was panting and eager, staring down into his eyes with a look of intensity that Wolfram was helpless to resist.

“You've always been my favourite,” she gasped, running her palm down his face until her thumb pressed against his lips. “My father's dog, chasing after me, wanting to hump my leg.”

Wolfram swallowed, a little put off by the demeaning analogy, but too caught up in the moment to say anything back.

Ingrid leaned in closer, her fingernails pricking the side of his neck as her thumb scraped over his teeth. “You big, dumb dog. You stupid mule.”



Wolfram twisted away from her hand. “Stop that. I don't like it.”

Ingrid grinned, grabbing his head in both hands so she could look at him again. “ I like it.” Her breath huffed against his face, damp on his cold skin. She smelled like strong wine. “I like you ,” she panted. “I'd put you on a leash.”

“Stop—you're drunk.”

“Don't talk back to me.” She put her thumb against his throat and pressed down. “I want it like this. Don't you love me?”

Wolfram's arousal was fading by the second, something dreadful creeping in to take its place. His body chafed against his clothing with cold sweat. This wasn't what he wanted, but he didn't know how to get Ingrid to stop without making it worse. She leaned in and kissed him, running her sticky tongue over his stubble as if she hungered for all the rough and coarse parts of his body. Wolfram felt nauseous.

“Good dog. You're my favourite. You'll do anything I want, won't you? Tell me you'll do anything.”

When Wolfram didn't respond, she worked both hands into his hair, gripping his scalp until her nails dug in. She was riding him hard, her breath shrill and erratic. “You love me,” Ingrid gasped, then her body tensed up and she began to shudder. Wolfram stared at her in horror. She looked like she was possessed by a devil, writhing and gasping as she dug her nails in so hard he felt blood trickling down the back of his neck.

“Stop it!” he exclaimed, grabbing her hands and wrenching them away. He twisted sideways so that she fell off him and dragged himself out of the bed. His stomach was in a knot. The sweat on his body was raw shame and guilt. He'd never felt so miserably confused and disgusted, not just at Ingrid, but at himself. How had

something that started so wonderfully turned so vile?

Ingrid swept her messy hair away from her face and looked up at him. “Don't be like that. I know it's what you wanted. Come on, we can do it again if you like.”

It was what he'd wanted, and that made it all the worse. He felt humiliated, like he'd blindly thrust his hand into a fire and burnt himself. None of the stories the boys told about sex were like this. Maybe there was something wrong with him. Why couldn't Ingrid just have been nice? Everything he'd felt for her was falling apart so fast it made his head spin. With shaking hands, he pulled up his undergarments and re-fastened his belt.

“I'm going back to the castle,” he said.

“Stay here tonight.”

Wolfram could think of nothing he wanted less. He'd never felt so shaken, not even after his duel with Aldrich. Ingrid had stabbed him in the heart and snapped off the blade. He stared at her, naked and beautiful in the candlelight, her expression cold as winter dusk.

“It was you, wasn't it?” he said in a dull voice. “You made Petra poison Julia.”

“Don't be silly.”

“I'm going to tell your father.”

“Why won't you believe me!” Ingrid's voice rose shrilly. “You love me, Wolfram!”

He wasn't sure anymore. No one had ever made him feel this horrible. He still couldn't believe it was true, but the dreadful feeling in his gut begged his inner eye to

turn where it had been afraid to. He remembered Ingrid laughing when he came into the house, excited at the prospect of him and Aldrich getting into a fight. Once upon a time, she'd asked about their duel, hungry to hear all the morbid details. But then in Kilwick, when she'd protested her innocence so vehemently, she'd said all she wanted was to avoid more fighting. She'd said the same thing tonight after Aldrich left. How many times had she contradicted herself without him realising? How many times had he smiled and nodded when she snapped her fingers?

“Come here,” Ingrid said. All the passion had gone from her voice. She was every bit the commanding noblewoman again.

Wolfram shook his head. “You're two-faced.”

“I don't want this to come between us.”

“You keep saying that! I'm not your stupid pet!”

Ingrid's expression darkened. She gathered up her dress and clutched it to her chest. “Don't be so cruel to me.”

Wolfram was incredulous. How could she be like this? Did she really believe that everything she did was justified, no matter how hurtful or manipulative? She'd never seemed cruel to Wolfram before, and that frightened him more than anything. His convictions had been shaken to their core that night. What else had he been blind to?

He turned away and grabbed the door handle.

“If you say a word to my father, I'll tell him what you did!” Ingrid cried. “I'll tell him you came here and made Robin stand guard while you raped me.”

Wolfram rounded on her, his face burning hot. “That's a lie!”

“Aldrich and the others all saw it. They'll tell my father the truth.”

“It's not the truth!”

“Yes it is! I'm all he has now. He'll believe me.”

Wolfram ground a thumb and forefinger into his eyes, spitting out something between a sob and a cry of anger. “Why are you doing this?!”

“Because you hurt me! You're going to tell my father lies, and I won't let you.” Her voice softened. “I don't want this to come between us. You don't have to say anything. Everything can go back to the way it was before.”

“Julia's dead!” Wolfram stared at Ingrid, searching for remorse in her expression and finding none. “Is Aldrich your dog, too?”

“He's my friend. I'm very fond of him.”

Wolfram couldn't bear to hear any more. He wrenched the door open and walked out. He was halfway down the stairs when the front door burst open and Robin came in.

“Aldrich is coming back!” he called. “He's got more of his friends with him. I think we should go.”

Wolfram glanced back down the landing. What had Ingrid whispered in Aldrich's ear to make him leave? He felt like anything could happen now. His whole world had turned upside down, and he was afraid.

“Is there a back door?”

“I don't know.”

Wolfram hurried to the bottom of the stairs and found a door at the back of the hall, but it was locked. There was no other way to go but out the front.

“What did Ingrid say?” Robin asked.

“Nothing.” Wolfram didn't want to think about it. He didn't want to think about anything. His only goal at that moment was to get out of the house and return to the castle.

Their delay looking for another exit cost them. By the time they pushed the front door open, Aldrich and his men were right outside. There were a dozen of them, and they were armed. Wolfram saw clubs, mallets, and a pair of swords. He grabbed Robin's cloak and ran to the left. They made it to the corner of the house before one of Aldrich's thugs got in their way. He had a long, flat-ended piece of wood in his hands that looked like a washing stick. Wolfram tried to dodge past him, but the man swung his improvised club and forced them back. The others closed in to surround them. Someone hit Wolfram in the side of the head, then half a dozen hands grabbed the back of his cloak, dragging him through the doorway and throwing him to the floor. A man's voice cried out in pain as Robin drew his sword and cut one of them. The next groan came from Robin as Aldrich's men set about him with clubs and fists, battering the sword out of his hand and driving him to the ground. They dragged him inside and threw him down next to Wolfram. When Wolfram tried to get up, he found the tip of Aldrich's sword at his throat. The door banged shut behind them, and the bolt rasped in its bracket.

“What do you think you're doing?” Wolfram said, trying to summon authority in his voice. “You're attacking the baron's men!”

“Are you going to arrest us?” Aldrich said mockingly. Some of his friends laughed. A chill went down Wolfram's spine.

Robin rose to one knee. "Lord Erik will hang you if you don't let us go!"

"Shut him up."

The man with the washing stick swung the flat end into Robin's face. He groaned, clapping a hand to his mouth as blood spilt through his fingers. Seeing his friend hurt enraged Wolfram. He rolled away from Aldrich's sword and put his arm around Robin, shielding him from the next blow. The washing stick cracked against Wolfram's upper arm, sending an explosion of pain through his body like nothing he'd ever felt. The entire limb went numb. Fearing for his life, he twisted away, only to find himself faced with another attacker. He threw a punch with his good arm and felt the man's nose crunch beneath his knuckles. Robin yelped in pain behind him. Whirling back around, Wolfram saw that Aldrich had Robin by the hair while another man struck him in the stomach. With a roar of anguish, Wolfram threw himself at them, but someone kicked him in the shin and he fell. A heavy boot stamped on the back of his ankle. He screamed as another burst of agony shot up his leg.

"Stop it!" Ingrid's voice called from the top of the stairs. Wolfram couldn't see through the press of bodies, but he heard the sound of feet hurrying down the steps. He felt a glimmer of hope. Despite all she'd done, Ingrid might not be completely heartless.

"Make up your mind," Aldrich snapped.

"You'll kill them, you beast!"

"No we won't. We're just going to make sure they don't say anything about tonight. You said I could have it my way if yours didn't work."

Through a gap in the crowd, Wolfram saw Ingrid staring down at him. There was remorse in her expression.

“I'm terribly sorry, Wolfram. I wish you hadn't behaved so wretchedly.”

Aldrich took a club from one of his men and hefted it in his hand. “I told you, baron's boy. One of these days.”

Wolfram tried to grit his teeth through the pain as Aldrich's boot slammed into his chest. Then the blows fell on him.

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:26 am*

He remembered Ingrid telling them not to hit him in the head. They hadn't knocked him senseless; it was the pain that made him black out. He remembered someone shoving a ball of rags into his mouth to keep him from screaming as he was dragged out of the house and thrown on the back of a cart. He remembered the wheels bumping beneath him, each jolt sending an explosion of agony through his left leg, arm and chest. The next time he was conscious, he was lying on his back. His ribs hurt when he tried to breathe. There was mud on his face and his clothes were wet. He could smell ale. Someone must have emptied half a barrel of it over him. If Robin was nearby, he couldn't see him. The clouds had hidden the moon, and he was lying in shadows. Tree branches rustled somewhere overhead. Other than that, all was silent.

“Robin,” he tried to call, but his lungs only produced a whisper of breath before his chest flared with stabbing pain. His arm and leg were in agony. He didn't dare move them. He tried to crawl with his right arm, but the instant his body shifted position he was racked with such intense pain that he involuntarily sucked in a breath to cry out. The effort made his ribs scream at him, then the pain rose until it overflowed and he lost consciousness again.

It was drizzling when he woke up. Dawn had broken. It felt like a hundred nails had been driven into his bones along the left side of his body. When he tried to move, the nails twisted. A whimper left Wolfram's lips. He was lying in a muddy ditch. Beyond the rustling trees, he could hear the distant sounds of people at work. Cows were lowing, and someone was hitting a post with a hammer. Not trusting himself to move, Wolfram turned his head to look around. There, about three paces to his left, lay Robin. He was staring up at the sky, his face pale. The dried blood on his cheeks was slowly being washed away by the rain.



“Robin,” Wolfram whispered. He stared at his friend in a daze of pain and realised that his chest wasn't moving. Panic shot through Wolfram. He hissed out a sob of agony through clenched teeth as he dragged himself forward with his right arm, his boot scraping at the mud as he pushed himself along the ditch inch by inch. He put a hand on Robin's chest. There was no heartbeat. He touched his neck and cheek. Both were cold. He put his hand over his lips, feeling for the rush of breath that would confirm he was still alive. There wasn't even a tickle.

Wolfram's body shook. He wanted to cry out, but his damaged ribs wouldn't let him. He heaved with silent tears. If he lay there, perhaps he would die, too, then he wouldn't have to be in pain any longer. He was thirsty, and he'd been bleeding all night. He didn't think he could get out of this ditch on his own.

Wolfram had never known the kind of despair that could rob a man of his will to live. It was crushing and terrible, like a prison cell so dark it stole away everything he was. He didn't feel like himself anymore. He was weak both in body and spirit. But as deep as his despair dragged him, he couldn't lie there and die. Thinking about last night stung him like the bite of a whip, drawing all the hurt and indignation back to the surface. It had to be put right. He couldn't leave Robin lying here for the crows. He had to get back to the castle and tell Lord Erik what had happened.

Bracing himself for the pain he knew was about to come, he breathed as deeply as he dared and called for help. His ribs screamed and his head swam from the effort. Once he no longer felt like he was about to black out, he called again, then again, and again, until someone called back. A young labourer appeared at the edge of the ditch, staring down at him in shock.

“Dear lord,” he whispered. “I'll fetch the monks.”

The village monks were responsible for tending most emergencies when a person fell ill or took injury. They were gentle as they lifted Wolfram out of the ditch on a

stretcher, but he still lost consciousness on the way to the church. The delirium of pain made it difficult to gauge the passage of time. Over the course of the day, his clothes were removed, his body washed, and his left leg and arm bound in wooden splints. Bandages were wrapped around his chest to prevent him from breathing too deeply. At some point—perhaps that evening, perhaps the next day—he was taken out of the priory's sickroom and carried on another stretcher. He wanted to ask why the monks were moving him, but he didn't have the breath for it, and the pain of the jolting journey made him pass out again.

The next time he woke, he was in an unfamiliar house. It smelled old and musty, but there were fresh linens on the mattress beneath him and the hearth was warm. Cat sat beside him bathing his brow with a damp cloth. When she saw he was awake, her face creased with emotion. She lifted her hands in front of her and made her gestures for: “I'm sorry,” and then, “I'll help you.”

“Are you my nurse?” Wolfram managed to whisper. She nodded. “Where's Robin?”

Cat made some more gestures. Wolfram understood a lot of basic statements in her sign language, but nothing complicated, and whatever she was trying to say eluded him. He stared up at the ceiling, remembering what had happened in Firfallow. He still couldn't reconcile himself with it. All he knew was that it had been the worst night of his life. He felt like there was a hole in his chest when he remembered that Robin and Lady Julia were dead. His skin crawled with shame when he thought of Ingrid. His wounds burned like fire when he recalled Aldrich grinning at him as he swung his club.

He tried to get up. The flare of pain along the left side of his body wasn't as raw as it had been in the ditch, but it still knocked the breath out of him. Cat eased him back down with a hand on his shoulder and shook her head.

“I need to use the latrine,” Wolfram said.

Cat shook her head once more and signed: "I'll help."

Wolfram averted his eyes in embarrassment. "I don't want you to do that for me."

There was nothing but compassion in Cat's expression as she signed: "I'll help, because, we're friends."

Later that day, Father Everwin visited. Ingrid came with him. The second she stepped into the house, a cold feeling swept over Wolfram. He couldn't look at her. He didn't want to see the pretty face he'd fallen in love with. He didn't want to remember the gut-wrenching shame of what she'd done to him. It already felt like a nightmare, twisted by the pain into something even worse than before. Love couldn't turn to hatred overnight, but what lay in between was a feeling too uncomfortable for Wolfram to put into words.

Father Everwin spoke briefly, as though he'd been told only to say specific things. He informed Wolfram that his arm, leg, and ribs were all broken, probably in multiple places, and that it would be many weeks before he was able to walk again. Whether he would be able to return to his normal duties after that, the monks couldn't say. It would all depend on how well he healed. Everwin went on to explain that Wolfram was currently in the old cottage near the castle, the same one he and Robin used to throw stones at in the summer. It had been Lady Ingrid's idea to put him here. With her father in mourning for Julia, it wouldn't be proper for Wolfram to stay in the solar. No other sick bed in the castle was appropriate for a long-term recovery, so she insisted he stay in the cottage with Cat to nurse him. Here he would have peace and quiet.

"I would like to speak with Wolfram alone," Ingrid said once Father Everwin finished.

"I don't want to talk to you," Wolfram replied, keeping his gaze fixed on the wall at

the foot of the bed.

“I know it must be difficult.” Ingrid gave Cat and Father Everwin a look, and the pair of them left the house. She shut the door behind them and came to sit beside the bed.

“Please, look at me, dear Wolfram.”

“Don't call me dear.” Wolfram struggled to hold an even tone. He was breathing hard, and his ribs were starting to burn. “I can't stand to look at you.”

“I know you didn't mean to force yourself upon me. Men can be ruled by their impulses sometimes. You'd been drinking, and so had I. But it was still a wicked thing for you to take advantage.”

“You were the one who... forced me!”

“Don't be silly. A woman can't force herself upon a man. How could I? You're so much bigger and stronger. I was afraid to say no.”

“No,” Wolfram's breath caught in his throat, his cheeks hot with shame. “It wasn't like that at all!”

“Are you sure?”

The sincerity in her voice made Wolfram hesitate. He'd been deliberately trying not to think about it. The events of that night were foggy, tarnished with pain and confusion. Had he pushed her into it? No, he couldn't have. But it had still been wrong. He'd wanted it at first, he remembered that much, but then Ingrid made it feel horrible and he hadn't known how to make her stop.

“You see?” Ingrid said when he didn't reply. She rested a hand on his splinted arm.

“But I forgive you. I know you care for me, deep down, and I care for you, too. Let's

put all this behind us.”

“Robin's dead.”

“Yes. We buried him this morning. It was terrible, what Dominic Ward did to the pair of you. Aldrich and I told my father as soon as we heard you'd been found.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Of course, it's hard for you to remember. He must have beaten you senseless. You came to the house to tell me the terrible news about poor Julia. Dominic was very rude to you about it. You had quite an argument with him. After you took me upstairs, you left to go drinking at Daniel Brewer's house. We all heard Dominic talking about how he wanted to put you in your place. He must have found you and Robin drunk and set upon you with that club of his.”

Wolfram shook his head in confusion as he tried to make sense of what she was saying. Dominic Ward—that must be the man Aldrich and his friends called Dom. A sickly feeling crept into his stomach as he realised what must have happened. Aldrich and Ingrid hadn't expected Robin to die from his injuries. Bruises and broken bones were one thing, but a squire couldn't be murdered without someone being called to account. So, to save themselves, they were putting the blame on Dominic Ward. With the testimony of the baron's daughter against him, he was as good as dead.

“You're a devil,” Wolfram said under his breath.

“I don't want to hear you saying such hurtful things to me again. You must be truthful when my father's men come to speak with you. They will bring your testimony before the court, and Dominic Ward will hang for his crime.”

“I won't lie.”

“No, you will tell the truth,” Ingrid leaned forward, her hand tightening around Wolfram's splint just enough to make his arm twinge. “If you make things difficult for me and Aldrich, I will have to tell my father what you did to me. That you raped me. That was the real reason Dominic was angry enough to attack you. Then you'll have to stand trial alongside him. Please don't make me do that.”

“I don't care if they hang me. Everyone knows what kind of man Aldrich is, and when your father hears what you did to Julia, he'll know what kind of woman you are, too.”

Ingrid shook her head, tears glistening in her eyes as she stifled a sob. “Oh, Wolfram, you must not. You know what Aldrich's friends are like. If you speak out against them, they'll do something awful. The moment they hear of it, they'll be up here in the night to take their revenge.”

“They've already done their worst.”

“But outside the castle walls, anyone could slip into this cottage. And poor Cat, I know you're fond of her.”

Wolfram's righteous indignation shrivelled up in his stomach.

“Don't you dare hurt her.”

“I'm sure all will be well as long as you tell the truth. Will you do that for me?”

Wolfram felt defeated. He would've braved Ingrid's lies if he was only putting himself in danger, but he couldn't bear the thought of Aldrich's men breaking into the cottage and doing to Cat what they'd done to him and Robin. That must have been why Ingrid insisted he stay out here. She needed to hold this threat over him. His chin fell forward against his chest. Ingrid released her grip on his arm and stroked her cold

fingers through his hair.

“You'll do the right thing, won't you, Wolfram?”

He didn't have any choice. “I'll tell them that what you said is true.”

“I knew you would. My loyal pup.”

The familiar words made Wolfram's skin crawl. Her touch disgusted him. “If you hurt anyone else over this...” He trailed off, knowing that any threat he made would be an empty one.

“I don't see why there has to be any more trouble once everything's back to normal. It'll be just like it used to. You won't go getting into any more fights with Aldrich, will you?”

Wolfram shook his head despondently. “No.”

Without Julia, what could he even do? Ingrid would be her father's closest confidant from now on. Things would go back to the way they'd been before. Aldrich could extort Erik's knights with impunity, and Ingrid would cover for him. Were the two of them lovers? Was their plan to marry so that Aldrich could become the new baron once Erik died? Or was he just another pet she'd wrapped around her finger? Wolfram didn't want to think about it. He'd been beaten.

He understood now why his parents had never wanted him to become a knight. They'd warned him of the private dramas and betrayals that could undermine noble houses. If this was the price to pay for joining the nobility, he no longer wanted any part of it. He wasn't made for such mercenary duplicity. His dreams of knighthood had been full of horse riding and battles; serving good lords and noble kings. If he became a knight now, he'd most likely end up serving Ingrid. That thought made him

want to go home and never think about Elkinshire again.

Ingrid squeezed his shoulder gently before getting up to leave. He lay there staring at the ceiling. His body throbbed and ached. He wished Robin was with him. Normally he would have gone for a run or trained with his longsword when he felt like this, but all he could do was lie still and stare at the old thatch dangling down like cobwebs between the roof beams. Cat came back in and heated up some broth over the hearth, but Wolfram didn't feel like eating. She left the bowl on the right side of his bed so he could reach it with his good arm.

Before dusk fell, Lord Erik and Dunstan came in to hear his account of events. Erik looked older than Wolfram had ever seen him. His hair was lank, and the shine in it seemed more like grease than oil. There were dark circles under his eyes. He even moved slowly.

“Poor lad,” he said sympathetically. “You had a terrible night of it. So, it was Dominic Ward?”

Wolfram forced himself to nod.

Dunstan said: “One man on his own beat the two of you that badly?”

“We were drunk.”

“Drunk enough to forget everything I taught you? Are you sure there weren't more of them?”

“That's enough, Dunstan,” Erik said. “He's suffered enough for his mistake.”

Dunstan held his tongue, but he didn't look happy about it.



“I spoke to Ingrid earlier,” said Wolfram. “It's all as she says.”

“You'd swear it?”

“Yes.”

Erik nodded. “Then we'll take your testimony to court. Dominic Ward will hang.” The baron turned to leave. Dunstan lingered a moment longer before following him out. Cat sat by the hearth looking at Wolfram with a pained expression.

“Why, lie?” she signed. Wolfram turned his head away. She came to stand in front of him. “Why, lie?” she repeated.

“I didn't.”

Cat shook her head, tapped her chest, and made a sign Wolfram didn't recognise before pointing at him. He didn't need to understand the sign to get the message. She could see right through him.

“I can't say. Someone else might get hurt. Please don't ask me again. And don't tell anyone.”

“You, upset,” Cat signed.

Wolfram felt a lump in his throat. Robin and Julia were dead. Ingrid had betrayed him. Lord Erik believed the lie. He felt painfully alone, and he didn't know what to do next. Even his strength had been robbed of him. The future seemed bleak and hopeless.

Before today, he would never have dared cry in front of Cat, but the embarrassment paled into insignificance alongside his misery. He closed his eyes as the first warm

tears spilt down his cheeks, hoping she would leave him be. If he couldn't see her signing, he wouldn't have to acknowledge anything she said. But instead of leaving, the bed creaked as she sat down beside him. Her arms slid around Wolfram's shoulders, and she held him until he had no more tears left.

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:26 am*

Wolfram tried to sleep as much as he could, for it was the only thing that gave him respite from his pain and restless thoughts. He awoke the following evening to a wonderful smell. It was his favourite meal: cuts of lamb fried crispy in their own fat. It reminded him of home, and for a moment he thought he was back at the inn, sleeping late into the morning as his mother brought in food for the guests. Then he tried to move, and the shock of pain brought everything back.

Cat was minding a pan over the hearth. That was where the delicious smell was coming from. She had a board strewn with freshly chopped herbs and vegetables on the floor next to her, and a loaf of fresh bread sat on the table. For the first time since Julia's death, Wolfram felt his appetite returning.

“How did you know lamb's my favourite?” he asked.

“You, talked,” Cat signed.

“Did I? I can't remember.”

“I,” Cat signed, then made a motion Wolfram didn't recognise. It looked like her sign for talking, but with a twist of the hand that went back past her ear.

“Does that mean remember?”

Cat nodded with a smile.

“You'll have to teach me more of your signs.”

She gave him an exasperated look. “I, show, many, years.”

“Sorry. I never remembered them very well. How did you learn?”

Cat frowned and gave an uncertain shrug.

“Did you make it up with Meg?”

She gave a slight nod, then a shake, and pointed at the floor.

“I don't understand.”

Cat shook her head again and returned her attention to the pan.

“I wish there was a way we could talk more easily. What if we asked Father Everwin for one of his books? You could find the words inside and point to them.”

That idea seemed to perk Cat up. She made a writing motion in the air.

“Oh, yes. You could try writing. But what would we use?”

She looked around and shrugged. Wolfram had learned to write using a charcoal stick and pieces of birch bark. Father Everwin had some bark he used for teaching, but it was preciously hoarded. They would have to think of something else.

The problem distracted Wolfram for a while as he ate. Cat cut his meat into pieces for him, but he insisted on feeding himself. He could still use his right arm, even if it was awkward. The meat was delicious, just the way he liked it. A little overcooked for most people's tastes, but all the crispier for it, and the herbs Cat used for seasoning added additional flavour. Despite his dismally low spirits, Wolfram felt a little better after the meal.

It was hard to find ways to occupy himself while he recovered. The worst of the pain faded within a few days, but the feeling of incapacitation was the true torture. He longed to do even the simplest things for himself. Though Wolfram had never considered himself a great talker, he began to relish every visitor he got from the castle. The other squires came by to chat, and Meg stopped in frequently with food and drink from the kitchen. She was obviously heartbroken over the loss of Julia and Robin, so she doted on Wolfram to make up for it.

“If they didn't need me in the kitchen, I'd be out here with Cat every day, bless that sweet girl. I hope you appreciate all she's doing for you.”

Wolfram did. He didn't know how he would survive without Cat, not just because of the physical care she was giving him, but because of her company. They'd painted the cottage wall at the foot of Wolfram's bed with coarse white plaster. Using sticks of fresh charcoal, Cat could write on the surface and scrub the marks off with a wet cloth at the end of the day. She was far more literate than Wolfram had thought. Her lessons with Lady Julia had clearly paid off, and she could already write faster and more clearly than he'd ever been able to. Sometimes when Wolfram woke up, he would see that she'd left messages on the wall for him: lists of what she needed to fetch from the castle that day, who was going to visit later, what she'd be cooking for today's meals. She was an excellent cook. It made sense, for she'd worked in a kitchen all her life, but Wolfram was used to the simple meals the servants ate, not the fine dishes Meg and Cat cooked up for the high table. Cat could turn even plain ingredients into a feast fit for a lord.

To Wolfram's immense relief, Ingrid didn't visit him again. His only reminder of that horrible night came when Ben, the squire who'd entered Lord Erik's service alongside him and Robin, arrived to tell him about Dominic Ward's trial.

“They hanged him.” Ben looked grimly vindicated when he said it. “All of us could tell he was guilty. He started blaming everyone when no one spoke up for him. You,

Aldrich, even Lady Ingrid. I thought Lord Erik was going to grab a sword and stab him right there.”

“So that's it, then?” Wolfram asked.

“That's it. He's paid for what he did.”

The news didn't surprise Wolfram, but it was still a bitter thing to swallow. Aldrich had had plenty of time to ensure the silence of anyone who might speak up in Dominic's defence. None of his other accomplices would have dared speak the truth, for they were all complicit. Bribes and threats would have seen to the rest. The villains had gotten away with it.

He was in a dour mood for the rest of the day. Cat tried to cheer him up by teaching him more of her hand signs. It was one of the few things keeping Wolfram sane. Every day he learned a few more. Cat would make him guess what she was saying by using an unfamiliar sign in conjunction with some he already knew, then, if he still couldn't work it out, she wrote the meaning on the plaster wall. Sometimes, when Wolfram guessed a word for which Cat had no sign, they would devise a new one together. It was odd to think that he was making up a language with someone. He wondered whether that was how all languages started. They had to come from somewhere. Did that mean there had once been a time when there were no languages at all?

“No,” Cat signed when Wolfram voiced his thoughts. “God made them.” He was fast becoming familiar with the movements of her fingers, internalising them as natural sentences rather than the fragmented statements he'd seen before. For the most part, Cat made a distinct sign for each word, but Wolfram had come to learn that some of her motions described common sounds instead. By piecing them together, she could say things she didn't yet have a proper sign for. He felt guilty that he'd known her for so long and picked up on so little of what she was saying. She might have been mute,

but she'd learned to talk just as much as anyone.

"It's alright," Cat signed when Wolfram apologised. "No one learns. It takes too long. Only me and Meg. I'm used to it."

All the same, Wolfram felt sorry for her, and he resolved to talk to her more often after he recovered. She deserved someone who would listen.

It was with that resolution that he realised he meant to stay at the Lavender Castle. Part of him thought he was mad. It would mean continuing to live alongside Ingrid, serving a woman who was responsible for the murder of two people he cared dearly for.

But Cat had reminded him that there were other things he cared about. Lord Erik was still the baron, and his young son was his new heir. After everything that had happened, Wolfram had almost forgotten about Julia's baby. According to Meg, he was strong and healthy. Ingrid would never inherit the barony if he lived. Wolfram wondered whether Ingrid would try to dispose of her half-brother the same way she'd disposed of Julia. He didn't know what she was capable of anymore. It would be a monstrous sin, but if she coveted her father's estate then she would need to re-establish her claim somehow.

Wolfram was determined to stop that from happening. Erik was his lord, and that meant his son was, too. He would serve and protect them both for as long as he could. A knight didn't abandon his duty when things became dire; that was when he was needed most of all.

As the weeks passed, Wolfram's wounds gradually healed. The pain in his chest went first, and he found himself able to breathe properly once again. Father Everwin told him his ribs were healing well, but his arm and leg would take a while longer. The splints he'd worn initially had been replaced with casts made from linen soaked in

wax and resin, and those would have to stay on for a few more weeks.

“Can I return to my duties after that?” Wolfram asked.

“No,” Father Everwin said firmly. “I’ve seen no less than three of the baron’s men break weak bones by throwing themselves back into work too quickly. You’ll need to restrict yourself to light duties for at least another month. Then we’ll see how things go.”

Wolfram’s heart sank. He wanted to get back to doing the things he loved, but the prospect of re-breaking a limb and being confined to bed all over again was so daunting that he forced himself to heed the chaplain’s advice. He would just have to get used to it.

When Everwin departed, he left Wolfram with one of his books to read. It wasn’t a stuffy volume of religious scripture, but a history of Elkinshire Castle that looked to have been penned by several stewards and chaplains over the years. Much like conversation, reading had never been a passion of Wolfram’s, but he would take what he could get while he was stuck in bed. He sat up reading aloud while Cat cooked the evening meal. She frequently had to come over and help him when he got stuck on a difficult word, then the struggle of a mute girl trying to explain pronunciation to a questionably literate boy ensued. It became a guessing game where Wolfram would try to say the word several different ways, helped on by various mimes and expressions by Cat, until he got it right. Every so often, they found a word that neither of them knew, so they had to guess at its meaning until they came up with something that made sense.

They carried on reading while they ate. Cat sat on the bed with her left knee propped up against Wolfram’s right, the open book resting in between them. It wasn’t the content of the book that Wolfram enjoyed, but the fun of piecing together its meaning with his friend. It was a problem to solve, and he liked solving problems. Time



slipped away from him until the candles began to die. They'd stayed up reading all evening. With a tug of melancholy, he realised that he hadn't been tormented by thoughts of Robin, Julia, or Ingrid for hours. It was his first good night in a long time.

He kept on reading until Cat stopped chiming in. Her head rested against his shoulder, her breathing slow and steady. She'd fallen asleep curled up against him. Wolfram felt awkward for a moment, wondering whether he should rouse her so she could go back to her own cot on the other side of the hearth, but the night was cold and there was a peaceful smile on her lips. He eased the book shut and let himself drift off too.

When Wolfram was strong enough to start walking again, he realised he still had a painfully long way to go on his path to recovery. The cast had come off his arm, allowing him to use a crutch, but his leg was still bound up tight. The breaks had been worse there, Father Everwin said, and it would be best for him to keep his weight off it for a while longer.

He hobbled down the overgrown path outside the cottage with Cat holding his arm for support. The entire left side of his body was stiff. His sword arm, once so quick and dexterous, stubbornly refused to respond without tightening up and sending cramps through his elbow. He'd been told that the discomfort would lessen with exercise, but there was no way of knowing whether it would go away entirely.

“I want to walk down the path here every day,” he told Cat.

“We will,” she signed. “I like walking here.”

“Do you walk often?”

“I used to. I remember, when I was young.”

Wolfram could see why. He never usually came down this side of the hill. It was too steep in most places, but if you followed the path to the old cottage, you could find a rambling trail that snaked between patches of wildflowers and blooming thistles. Over the tops of the fir trees, the horizon framed a great view of the old forest without a village in sight. It was beautiful here.

“You used to live in that cottage, didn't you?” Wolfram said.

Cat hesitated for a moment, then nodded. “With my parents,” she signed.

“Did they serve the baron?”

“Yes. My mother cooked with Meg. She's my aunt. My father lived here.” She pointed back at the cottage. “He was—” She paused after making a sign Wolfram didn't recognise. She made a swirling motion at the trees around them, then motioned chopping wood.

“A forester? A woodsman?”

Cat nodded.

“What happened to them?”

“My mother died. She was sick. Afterwards, my father gave me to Meg. Then he climbed,” she mimicked a pair of legs walking up the steps of her fingers, “the lavender wall, and jumped off.”

It took Wolfram a moment to make sure he'd fully grasped the meaning of her message. Cat waited patiently. Their conversations often went like this. There would be pauses where Wolfram tried to ensure he understood what she was saying, and she in turn tended to hesitate as she worked out how best to articulate herself. Wolfram

found it strangely comforting. He often needed longer than most people gave him to piece his thoughts together, but Cat afforded him all the time in the world.

“It must have been difficult for you and Meg,” he said.

“Meg, yes,” Cat signed. “Me, no. I was young. I don't remember much.”

“What do you remember?”

“Walking here. Learning signs. Looking at the lavender wall.”

“Why do you have a special sign for that? The lavender wall?”

Cat paused to think. “My father. He loved it. He named me after the wall.”

Wolfram thought he'd misunderstood. “Did you say he named you after the wall?”

She nodded.

“Did they used to call the wall Cat?”

She grinned and put a hand to her mouth as she laughed. The only time Cat's voice came out was when she laughed. It was a joyful gasping noise of escaping air, with the thinnest, quietest hint of a chuckle behind it. Wolfram smiled back, thinking he'd probably misinterpreted something very stupidly.

“Meg called me Cat,” she signed. “Because I was always in the kitchen, like a little black cat.” She tugged on a tangle of her dark hair. “My parents called me—” She made a motion that looked like her sign for the lavender wall.

“You're saying you're named after the wall again?”

Cat shook her head and pinched his arm. Now he knew he was being stupid. She repeated the sign for the lavender wall again, then the slightly different one she'd used to describe her name.

Wolfram snapped his fingers. "Lavender!"

She grinned and bobbed her head enthusiastically.

"So I should've been calling you Lavender all this time."

She shook her head. "I don't mind. Everyone calls me Cat."

"Which do you prefer?"

She stared at him, her lips twitching as she wrestled with some difficult thought. He saw, then, why her father had named her Lavender. It was odd how you could know someone for years and never notice the colour of their eyes. Cat's were a pale, purplish grey, just like the old plaster on the lavender wall.

"No one asks me that," she signed.

"Well, what do you want me to call you? It's the least I can do after all the care you've given me."

She looked away from him, hiding her face behind her hair.

"Would you prefer Lavender?" he asked.

She gave a hesitant nod.

"Then Lavender it is."

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Soon after he started walking, Wolfram began eating his midday meals in the great hall again. He was still staying at the cottage while his leg mended, but he wanted to start getting back into the swing of things. The other squires were pleased to see him. A lot had happened in his absence, and they had plenty of stories to share. The company lifted Wolfram's spirits, though a glumness lingered in his heart every time he remembered that Robin's voice would never again be part of their conversations. The high table looked noticeably different as well. Now Ingrid sat in Julia's chair, tending a Baron Erik who seemed to have little appetite for food and even less for conversation.

Wolfram tried to avoid making eye contact with Ingrid. He felt uncomfortable just being in the same room as her. Thankfully, she paid him little attention, though he doubted that would last forever. She would ask him to run an errand or invite him to play their board game sooner or later, and he was certain she would behave as if everything was normal.

“Where's Lord Erik's son?” he asked Ben as they ate.

“He sent him away with his nurse last week. They're to stay with one of his nieces on the other side of Tannersfield. He said the boy needs to be raised by a proper mother.”

“Poor Lord Erik,” Grace the kitchen girl said as she refilled a pitcher of water on their table. “I think he just couldn't bear being reminded of Lady Julia. Sent the little mite away without giving him a name or anything.”

Wolfram said nothing, but internally he was relieved. He'd been afraid of what Ingrid

might do to her half-brother if he remained in the castle. At least now he could set that worry aside. He listened more than he spoke, eager to catch up on as much news as possible. Whenever Ingrid's voice sounded behind him, his back tightened up uncomfortably. All the other noise in the room seemed to filter away until she was the only person he could hear. He didn't mean to fixate on her, but he couldn't help himself. It was a dread compulsion, equal parts anger, suspicion, and a kind of apprehensive fear.

“We must resume correspondence with Lord Ricaud,” she said to her father. “We haven't heard from him in so long. I'm beginning to think he may have soured on our engagement.”

“Of course he has,” Lord Erik said disconsolately. “He'll have heard about your brother. He won't want to marry you now that you don't stand to inherit.”

“Really, Father, must you take such a mercantile view of romance?”

Erik said nothing. Did he realise how strangely Ingrid was behaving? She'd never expressed any enthusiasm about her engagement before. Lord Ricaud's waning interest should have thrilled her. But then again, Wolfram was forced to remind himself, he'd misunderstood a great many things about the baron's daughter. Why did she want to get married again? Could it be that she'd given up on inheriting Elkinshire and wanted a husband with his own estate? That would make sense if she was unable or unwilling to dispose of her half-brother the way she'd disposed of Julia. Thinking about her motivations made Wolfram uneasy. He wasn't good at puzzles like this, yet he feared for the future of Elkinshire if he stood by and did nothing.

“Surely there must be some way of enticing Ricaud back?” Ingrid continued.

“If there is, I can't think of one,” her father replied. “We've nothing to entice him with.”

“I'm sure you'll come up with something.”

The sweetness in her voice made Wolfram shudder. He remembered the way she'd touched and kissed him, and his appetite fled. He picked up his crutch and hobbled out of the hall. If only he could find a moment to speak with Lord Erik alone, then maybe he could warn him about Ingrid without making it obvious. He wished Robin was there. He would've been able to think of something. Ingrid always seemed to be hovering around her father these days, and Wolfram didn't know how he could get him on his own without making her suspicious. The only thing he could think of was to try and talk to Erik privately when the men were out hunting, but the squires said Erik had lost his appetite for the hunt since Julia's death, and Father Everwin had warned Wolfram against any rough activity while his bones mended. He would just have to wait for now, though it irked him to sit idle when he knew Ingrid was plotting something.

“I want to go back to the castle soon,” he told Lavender that evening. “I've been away too long.”

“No,” she signed. “You need rest.”

“My cast will be off in a week or two. Don't worry, I'm not going to start training right away. I just want to sleep in the parlour and talk with the others. You'll be able to get back to the kitchen, too. I'm sure you've had enough of me.”

Lavender stirred the pot over the hearth, avoiding his gaze.

Wolfram continued: “Besides, it's getting colder. This old place must be freezing in winter.”

“Yes,” Lavender signed.

“That's settled, then.” Wolfram allowed himself a smile. It felt good to be making decisions again after weeks of helplessness. His slow recovery was finally coming to an end.

Lavender didn't feel like reading that night. They'd been working their way through most of the books in Father Everwin's library and were currently enjoying an epic poem that didn't make much sense to Wolfram, but was full of clever phrases that made Lavender laugh. Not wanting to read on without her, he closed his eyes and went to sleep early.

When he woke the next day, the cottage was empty. It was barely past dawn, and the fire had burned down to embers. Lavender usually made sure it was built up before she went out to fetch their morning bread from the kitchen. Wolfram swung his left leg out of bed and struggled upright with the aid of his crutch. Once he'd pushed some wood into the hearth, he tugged on his cloak and went outside. The air was sharp and chilly. In a month or two, the grass would be crisp with frost on mornings like this. Wolfram limped his way down the path. He liked the view of the old forest early in the morning. The light made it look different at this time of day; not better or worse, just different. There was something satisfying about things that were different.

He was surprised to find Lavender sitting on the hillside. She was perched on a mossy rock amongst the thistles, her cloak wrapped around her body with the hood up. When Wolfram called her name, she jumped and turned away from him, scrubbing at her face with her sleeve. He stopped in his tracks. Had she been crying? His first instinct was to turn away in embarrassment. He usually wanted to be left alone when he was upset. But he remembered the way Lavender had put her arms around him when he needed to weep, and how much better it had felt to share his misery with a kind friend. It would be awkward for him to leave now, so he hobbled over. His crutch struggled to find purchase in the lumpy grass as he shuffled down the hillside. When he reached Lavender, she was still facing away from him.



“What's wrong?” he asked as he eased himself down on the rock. She just shook her head. With a stiffness in his voice, he said: “You can tell me.”

“You don't know,” she signed.

“That's why I'm asking. I want to help.”

She shook her head in frustration as fresh tears spilt down her cheeks. Wolfram could feel her anguish even if he didn't understand it. It seemed like there was something she desperately wanted to say, something that might have come out in a flood if she could speak.

“I'll wait and listen,” he said, putting his crutch down deliberately. Lavender shook her head again and pressed a clenched hand to her lips. She shook with silent sobs.

At long last, she signed: “We're going back to the castle.”

“Is that why you're upset?”

She nodded.

“Why? Don't you like it there?”

She shook her head again in frustration. It was difficult for Wolfram to read her signs. Her hands were trembling, her motions erratic.

“I prefer it here.”

“Oh.” Wolfram wanted to say something comforting, but he wasn't sure what. “It's nice, having your own cottage.”

Lavender nodded, then it all began to come out. Wolfram struggled to keep up, but the sentiment of her message was clear even if he couldn't follow every sign.

“I'm just a kitchen girl. I'm an invalid. No one would have me anywhere else. They wouldn't be kind to me. Even here, I'm like a pet. I'm the kitchen cat. I try not to mind, even when it makes me sad, but it's been different here at the cottage. I've been happy. It's like I have a house and a husband to take care of. I'll never have those things.”

Wolfram's heart went out to her. He'd grown sensitive to the challenges of Lavender's life over the past month, and he couldn't bear seeing her upset. He wished there was something he could do. She was a wonderfully kind, strong-willed, talented young woman, and she didn't deserve to feel this way.

Then say it, he thought, mentally kicking himself for being so slow.

“You're wonderful, Lavender. I've never had a friend as kind as you. And you're tough, and you cook so well, and you read better than I do. You and Meg made up a whole language with your hands. I wish I was that clever.”

Lavender stared at him with a look of longing, then gripped his elbow, leaned forward, and kissed him on the lips. It was a short kiss, and in his surprise, Wolfram didn't react. Lavender pulled away, her eyes downcast as if she'd anticipated his lack of enthusiasm.

“I love you,” she signed.

“We've spent a lot of time together lately,” Wolfram said falteringly.

She shook her head. “Not lately. Always.”

“Really?”

She looked up at him with a glare, her teary eyes full of frustration. “I look after you every time you're sick. I let you into the cellar whenever you want. You're the one I always come to for help.”

“I never realised.”

Lavender jabbed a finger in the direction of the castle. “Because you're always looking at her. She's pretty and noble and rich. You never looked at me.”

Wolfram's heart twisted as he felt the sting of Ingrid's betrayal anew. “I'll never look at her that way again.”

His admission seemed to take the edge off Lavender's anguish. “Why not?” she signed.

If he was going to tell anyone the truth, now was the time. He'd kept it bottled up for weeks, trying not to think about it, hoping it would go away of its own accord. Lavender had bared her heart to him. He didn't know how to feel about what she'd said, but it had been said honestly, openly, and to the one person she felt capable of sharing something so personal with. If she could share that with him, perhaps he could share something with her.

“That night,” Wolfram said, fighting through a sudden pressure constricting his throat. “It was her. She made Petra poison Julia with her father's sleeping root. Robin and I went to confront her about it, and then—” He had to stop and swallow as a sickly feeling rose in his gut. “She's like two different people. She can act so kindly, and then be so horrible. I thought she was being kind that night. I didn't want to believe she really did it. She kissed me and took me to bed, and I thought I wanted it, but then she was cruel and selfish and she made it awful. She told me I'd raped her—I mean,

she told me as if she really believed it—and said she'd tell her father if I spoke a word of the truth. I tried to leave with Robin, but then Aldrich and his friends came in. It wasn't just Dominic Ward. There were a dozen of them.”

Lavender had taken his hand as he spoke. Wolfram immediately missed her touch when she let go to sign: “She's a liar. You'd never hurt someone like that.”

“I'm glad you believe me. I feel such a fool.”

“Me too.”

Wolfram snorted a sad laugh and squeezed her hand. They said nothing for a while, but Lavender wiped her eyes and stopped crying. They had both bared their souls, and the world hadn't ended. Even if they didn't know where that left them, it was still an important moment.

“I'm not sure how I feel,” Wolfram said eventually.

“It's alright,” Lavender signed. “You don't love me. I understand.”

Wolfram wasn't sure what to say without getting her hopes up. It was true; he didn't love her, not the way he'd loved Ingrid, at least. Lavender was more like a sister to him. They'd been friends for years, and he'd seldom thought about her the way he thought about other girls. But his love for Ingrid had been misguided. He'd fallen in love with a woman who only existed in his mind. He'd never really understood her. Was what he'd felt even love at all?

He tried to think about what it would be like being married to Lavender, but he couldn't picture it. She wasn't unattractive, but Ingrid's beauty made other women seem dull by comparison. He thought about Lavender's kiss, and then, sheepishly, wondered what it would be like to sleep with her.

His thoughts immediately returned to the night with Ingrid. He remembered her calling him a stupid dog, the scrape of her fingernails on his scalp, the way she'd shuddered and moaned like a devil. He looked away from Lavender, not wanting to taint his feelings for her by associating them with that vile memory.

“You're my dearest friend,” he said in a pained voice. “Dearer still after today.”

She squeezed his hand and leaned on his shoulder. He put his arm around her and kissed the top of her head.

They didn't leave the cottage as Wolfram had planned. He decided to stay until his cast was off, during which time he and Lavender spent their days discussing the future. Now that he'd revealed the truth about Ingrid, Lavender was worried about what might happen. Ingrid had a hold over him now, and she could twist the knife whenever she wanted.

“It's no worse than the hold she had over me before,” Wolfram said. “And I don't think she sees it that way. She's got her own world in her head. I don't know if she's pretending or if she really believes it, but I don't think she sees me as her enemy.” He grimaced. “I'm like her stupid dog. One she's very fond of. As long as I don't cause any trouble for her, I think she'll keep thinking of me that way.”

“But what will we do?” Lavender sighed. “Can we tell Lord Erik the truth?”

“I want to, but I don't see how. It'll be my word against Ingrid's. Robin was the only other person who knew what happened. If he was still alive, we could've gone to Erik together.”

“Petra knows.”

“She'd never betray her mistress. God knows what Ingrid has her believing after all

these years. Even if she told the truth, she'd be confessing to murder. The same goes for Aldrich and his men.”

Lavender paused, tapping her fingers against her palm the way she always did when she lacked a sign for something. She went to the plaster wall at the foot of Wolfram's bed, picked up a piece of charcoal, and wrote: “Midwife.”

A tingle ran down Wolfram's spine. Of course. Ellen Good was the one who'd stoked his suspicions about Petra in the first place. If they told her about Lord Erik's sleeping root, would she be willing to testify that Julia had been poisoned? The testimony of a wise woman was sometimes held in high regard when there was a lingering question over a person's death, but they could just as easily be dismissed as lunatics.

“Do people trust Ellen Good's word?” he asked.

Lavender nodded. “Why do you think they call her Good?”

“But Lord Erik threw her out of the castle that night. I don't know if he'll listen.”

“We should talk to her. It can't hurt.”

“I suppose not. If she's as wise as people say, maybe she'll have some ideas of her own.”

“You'll have to go. I can't make people in the village understand me. And I can't ask Meg. She'll want to know why, then she'll let it slip to someone.”

Wolfram gave her a half-smile. “She does like to gossip. I'll go as soon as my cast's off.”

“When you're better,” Lavender signed, her hands faltering in the process, “will you

still walk with me?”

“Yes. Every evening after we finish our chores. We can have supper in the cottage, too.”

“Won't you miss your friends?”

“I always used to spend my evenings with Robin. It'll be nice having something else to look forward to.”

Lavender smiled. She was still sad that their time at the cottage was coming to an end, but now she would have something to look forward to as well. Neither of them would have to spend too much time dwelling on the happiness they'd lost.

And perhaps, with the help of Ellen Good, their absent friends might yet see justice.

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:26 am*

The market pedlars in Firfallow hadn't seen Ellen Good in weeks. True to her word, she'd made herself scarce while Lord Erik's temper cooled. Now that Wolfram was back on his feet, he couldn't take time away from his duties to ride around Elkinshire looking for her, so he was forced to sit and wait, hoping he'd have the opportunity to continue his search soon. The saving grace was that he didn't have time to brood. Dunstan eagerly put him back to work, the taskmaster sparing little sympathy for his squire's recent hardships. Wolfram preferred it that way. Kindness and gentle treatment from Dunstan would've felt awkward. The first morning Wolfram returned to his duties, there was a brief moment when their eyes met. He saw hesitance in his mentor's expression and answered it with a challenging glare. Dunstan gave him the thinnest of smiles before starting to bark orders. Oddly, it was the first time Wolfram had felt genuinely respected by the older man.

At Father Everwin's insistence, he was restricted to light duties for another month. No sparring, no hunting, no heavy riding, and only gentle morning exercise. It rankled Wolfram less than he'd expected to be treated like an invalid. Despite the teasing from the other squires, he found himself not caring about their jokes. The lightness of his regimen was welcome, for his body was weak after spending close to two months out of practice. He found himself getting out of breath quicker than usual, and his left arm and leg were still painfully stiff. Every time he went through his usual routines with the sword and spear, he could feel his muscles reacting slowly. But as the weeks went by, some of that stiffness started melting away. Slowly but surely, he felt his strength returning. The tension in his damaged arm and leg might never vanish completely, but with practice, he felt sure it would become manageable. Aldrich hadn't broken him, and that thought gave him the determination to keep training.

“The king will need an enemy to loose you on soon,” Dunstan told him one morning.



They were training with the longsword, most of the older squires sparring in pairs while the younger ones practised basic routines on their own. Wolfram was standing at the end of the line with the youngsters. In his mind's eye, he pictured Aldrich coming at him as he focused on his footwork, advancing and retreating with strikes and parries that would intercept his opponent's blows. The movements had become so familiar to Wolfram that they threatened to bore him, so he always looked for new ways to challenge himself. Today, he'd scattered a handful of rocks about his feet. They forced him to be especially mindful of his footing, and when he tripped he tried to right himself without losing his rhythm. He was thinking about how he'd fallen into the stream during his duel with Aldrich, and how that blunder had almost cost him his life.

He lowered his blunt training sword, catching his breath as he turned toward Dunstan. "Do you think the kingdom will go to war soon?" The idea of leaving Elkinshire and riding off to face the king's enemies no longer appealed to Wolfram the way it once had. He still felt the call to glory, but the idea of leaving the castle and its lands in such a state made him uncomfortable. And he would miss Lavender.

"There's always a war somewhere, lad," Dunstan said. "Restless knights make for a restless kingdom. Just look at the trouble we have to deal with here."

"You mean Aldrich? He isn't a knight."

"He's a cocky pup with money, men, and horses. You think he wouldn't be toadying up to the king trying to win himself a title if he had the chance? A little war might be good for Elkinshire." Dunstan broke off the thought when he saw one of the sparring squires drop his sword and clutch a hand to his chest. He strode over to make sure the lad was okay, leaving Wolfram to his practise. A few minutes later, he realised he was being watched again. Theodward, one of the youngest squires, had stopped to stare at him.

“What is it?” Wolfram asked.

“You're always so fast. How do you do it like that?”

Wolfram didn't feel particularly fast with his stiff limbs. He wondered whether the boy was mocking him, but his curiosity seemed genuine.

“Well,” Wolfram considered how best to explain it, “you just train, I suppose. It's something you get used to, like wearing in a pair of boots. After a few years, the movements all fit like they're meant to go together.”

“I could never be that fast. I bet you'd kill anyone in a fight.”

Wolfram shook his head. “If you do something a thousand times, you'll be good at it, too.”

“Can you show me some tricks?”

“I suppose I could try.” Wolfram didn't think some light sparring with a novice would be too taxing on his bones. It had almost been a month, anyway. He went over to the pile of training gear and got himself and Theodward a pair of helmets. They were battered, uncomfortable things with visors that made it difficult to see, but such head protection was necessary when sparring with the longsword. While the padded jackets they wore could take the sting out of a strike to the body, a yard of steel was easily capable of cracking teeth or taking out an eye even when it was blunt. Once they'd donned their protective gear, Wolfram and Theodward stood opposite one another and raised their weapons.

“I'll attack first,” Theodward said, plainly excited to be facing off against one of the older squires. Wolfram could tell even before he moved that the attack wouldn't get through. He had a good four inches of height over the lad and longer arms to match.

Combined with the exceptional reach of the longsword, it felt like he had an eternity to react as Theodward stepped forward and lifted his arms for a sideways cut. Wolfram stepped back, lifted his blade at an angle that guided his opponent's weapon harmlessly aside, and stopped with the flattened point hovering inches from Theodward's chest. The boy froze, realising that he'd been defeated in a single move. In a real fight, he would've blundered straight onto Wolfram's sword.

“You weren't minding your guard,” Wolfram said. “Not getting hit yourself is more important than hitting your opponent.”

Theodward grinned behind his visor and tried again, though he found no more success on his subsequent attempts. Wolfram liked the young squire's enthusiasm. He reminded him of himself, too focused on improving to be frustrated by his failures. It was like the early days training with Robin again.

Wolfram's return to sparring created something of a stir among the squires. It had been a long time since any of them got to practice against him. The competitive spirit ran deep in their group, and never more deeply than when it came to sparring. Before his injuries, Wolfram had been considered one of the best with the longsword. Now that he was back, everyone wondered whether he'd be able to hold on to his crown.

Despite his pride having been blunted the night of Robin's death, Wolfram still felt the urge to prove himself. Every time they practised with the longsword, he worked his way up the line of squires, helping train the less experienced boys before challenging the older ones. The atmosphere of anticipation steadily grew. How would Wolfram fare when he put his skills to the test against Ben or Gavin? It was almost like a tournament, a melee in which the weak combatants were whittled down until only the strong remained. Even though the weather was growing colder and wetter, the training sessions still drew small crowds of onlookers. Lady Ingrid was a regular attendee, but she always stood in the shelter of the keep doorway where Wolfram could look away from her. He preferred to face the kitchen instead. If Lavender was

outside scrubbing pots or plucking fowl, they could exchange secret signs that only they understood. It was a mischievous treat to communicate in such a way, and it never failed to lift Wolfram's spirits. Lavender's silent encouragement was enough to dispel the chilly feeling of Ingrid's gaze.

A few weeks later, Wolfram finally faced Ben, the only squire he had yet to beat since his return to sparring. Ben had always been quiet and withdrawn, but he'd become a very capable swordsman over the years. He was cautious and defensive like Wolfram, patiently waiting for his opening before going in for a strike. It would've been a lie for Wolfram to say he wasn't nervous. The two of them squared off on a frosty morning in the courtyard. The cold sunk its fangs into the left side of Wolfram's body, tightening up the stiffness that still lingered in his muscles. Several of the other squires had stopped training to watch. Even Dunstan was engrossed, indulging his charges their curiosity so that he could join in as a spectator as well.

The tip of Wolfram's blade hovered near Ben's, tapping it lightly as he probed for a response. Their swords made short, quick circles and counter-circles, each searching for a feint that could lead into a strike. Realising that Ben was the only opponent he could never bait into attacking first, Wolfram went for the opening cut. He tried to flick the tip of his blade up beneath Ben's guard and sting his hands, but the other squire withdrew and angled his sword for a counterthrust, forcing Wolfram to transition into a weaker defensive strike that skated down Ben's blade as he parried and withdrew.

A soft "ooh" rose from the onlookers as their eyes followed the lightning-quick exchange.

"Very good, both of you," Dunstan said.

Wolfram didn't let himself get distracted. He felt like he had something to prove, not to the others, but to himself. He wanted to know he was still as good as he'd ever

been; that he was good enough to beat Aldrich. When he lunged in for his next attack, he circled to the side, forcing Ben to move in the opposite direction. A swell of excitement spurred Wolfram's step as Ben parried clumsily, smacking his blade aside with an inelegant strike that left him wide open. Wolfram hadn't readied himself to follow up on it, so he backed away again rather than risking a reckless lunge.

“Good, good,” Dunstan said.

Wolfram was glad he'd been practising his footwork. He didn't think he could break Ben's guard without opening himself up and forcing a draw, but he could take him off balance. Ben wasn't as confident on his feet, and Wolfram's left-handed strikes further confused the muscle memory of his responses. Wolfram circled again, this time feinting before going in for a thrust. It was almost disappointing how easily it worked. Ben, expecting a repeat of the previous attack, lifted his blade too early. His hasty attempt to correct the movement made him stumble so that when the real attack came, he swung wildly, a swordsman's last-ditch effort to defend himself. Wolfram caught Ben's blade on the guard of his sword, angling it harmlessly aside as he pushed in. The blunted tip struck Ben near the kidney, crumbling his gambeson and forcing him to one knee with a gasp. It was a clean, clear hit.

Theodward let out a whooping cheer as a patter of applause sounded from the onlookers. Lavender clapped hardest of all. Wolfram felt himself grin behind his visor as he lowered his sword and offered a hand to Ben.

“I'm alright,” the other squire gasped. “Just knocked the wind out of me.”

“Well, you're the cock of the coop now, Wolf,” Dunstan said. “Nowhere else to go but down.”

“Trust you to find a cloud in every silver lining,” Wolfram teased.

The corner of Dunstan's mouth perked up as he grumbled something under his breath.

Wolfram was about to go back to practising with Ben when Lady Ingrid's voice called across the courtyard, tripping up his good mood.

“Why don't you fight him, Dunstan? Let's see if our Wolf can get the better of his old teacher.”

To Wolfram's dismay, several of the onlookers laughed, and their jovial mood spread to the others.

“Go on, Wolf!” Theodward said excitedly. “Let's see if you can do it.”

“Dunstan made a fool of him the day he arrived,” Gavin added less amicably.

Dunstan didn't seem to share the others' enthusiasm, but when Lady Ingrid repeated herself he held out a hand to Ben and took the training sword from him.

“If it's what the lady wants,” he conceded. Donning a practise helm, he stood in front of Wolfram and raised his blade.

Anxiety tightened Wolfram's body. He'd sparred with Dunstan before, all of them had, but never seriously. The instructor only ever crossed swords with his charges to demonstrate specific techniques. If anyone tried to land an unexpected hit on him, they were swiftly rebuked and put in their place. Wolfram had experienced that on his first day of training when he'd tried to catch Dunstan off guard with the spear. He rolled the stiffness out of his left shoulder, running the tip of his tongue over his lips. He was glad his helm hid his face from the onlookers. If he could beat Dunstan, even just land a single hit on him, then he would feel like he finally had the skills worthy of a knight. But Dunstan was no squire. He'd learned how to fight in a real war, and his experience spanned decades. As Wolfram's eyes followed the tip of Dunstan's

blade down to the guard, he was reminded of another powerful advantage the man-at-arms held over him: his lanky build. A few weeks ago, Wolfram had felt invincible against Theodward and his short arms. Now his position was reversed. Dunstan had the advantage both in height and reach, and Wolfram didn't think fancy footwork would trip up such an experienced swordsman.

“Ready?” Dunstan asked.

Wolfram nodded. “Ready.”

The word had barely left his lips before Dunstan's attack came. It was plain in an instant that the man-at-arms was holding nothing back. He was fighting to win, and Wolfram would succeed or fail on his own merits. He stepped back, guarded, and avoided the stab, but he had no time to make an offensive move before Dunstan attacked again, flicking a swift cut up at his shoulder. Wolfram managed to guard once more and tried to cut back at Dunstan, but Dunstan feinted and Wolfram's sword swiped harmlessly through the air.

This wasn't like any fight he'd been in before. Dunstan was relentless, matching offence and defence with the effortless skill of a master. Wolfram felt like he was barely keeping up. Any moment now, he would make a mistake and lose. The aggressive attacks had thrown him off balance after Ben's slower, more guarded fighting style. He needed time to adjust, but Dunstan wasn't giving it to him.

The crowd of squires spread apart like a herd of sheep as Wolfram backed up into them. Dunstan advanced, but not so quickly that Wolfram wasn't ready for him this time. He dodged Dunstan's thrust and circled, continuing to back away.

“Oh, don't be a coward, Wolf!” Ingrid called. A few more voices jeered their disapproval, but Wolfram was deaf to them. He and Dunstan both knew that retreating was his best move. The older man had one disadvantage, and that was his

agility. He wasn't as spry as Wolfram. Each retreat, dodge, and chase gave Wolfram time to anticipate the next attack. Now that Dunstan wasn't overwhelming him with a flurry of blows, he felt like he at least stood a chance. The next time Dunstan raised his sword, Wolfram went in for a high stab. Dunstan knocked it aside with his strike. Wolfram pivoted away, holding his longsword up at an angle over his shoulder so that it caught the next cut Dunstan threw at his exposed arm. The snappy sound of steel banging and rasping punctuated the air like the strikes of a hammer; two, three times in a row, then silence as the combatants broke apart.

Wolfram's breath panted heavily against the inside of his visor. He could see Dunstan's shoulders heaving. Once fatigue set in, even the most experienced swordsman started to make mistakes. It was just a question of who would tire first. Wolfram's gloved hands wrung the handle of his sword in search of a better grip. There was a warm ache in his wrists.

Dunstan attacked again. In a spurt of recklessness, Wolfram threw an equally aggressive strike straight back at him. Dunstan's sword almost grazed Wolfram's bicep, a cut that would've shorn through gambeson and muscle alike in a real fight, but it missed by a hair's breadth. Wolfram's sword came dangerously close to hitting Dunstan's chest, forcing him to jerk back rather than following up on his attack. Finally sensing that he had an opening, Wolfram lunged. Dunstan parried, but he was in a poor position to counter. Wolfram took a sudden step forward, then another. He moved so quickly that Dunstan stumbled. In less than a heartbeat, Wolfram knew it was now or never. He made a diagonal cut upwards, lunging in past the reach of Dunstan's sword—but an instant too late. His blade struck against his instructor's forearm just as the hard tip of Dunstan's sword thudded into Wolfram's chest beneath the collarbone.

It was a simultaneous hit. A draw.

“You're dead,” Dunstan panted.



Wolfram hung his head in exhaustion and lowered his weapon. “And you lost your sword arm to kill me.”

“On the battlefield, we'd both be done for.” Dunstan rested his longsword up against his shoulder and held out his hand. Wolfram took it. Dunstan squeezed hard, then clapped him on the shoulder. “You'll do in a fight. Glad to see I taught you well.”

The squires, having spread out to give them space, came over to congratulate Wolfram on his performance. The onlookers clapped once more. Wolfram saw Lavender grinning as she applauded. He took off his helmet and smiled back.

He'd landed a hit on the best swordsman he knew. That was enough for him. Now he knew that the next time he fought Aldrich, he could win.

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:26 am*

Buoyed up by his success, Wolfram decided to take a horse and go searching for Ellen Good on his day off. The malaise left by Robin and Julia's deaths felt like it was finally clearing. He'd recovered from his injuries, proven his swordsmanship, and while the future of the castle remained murky, he didn't believe it was without hope. Lord Erik had several well-trained men now, more than enough to challenge Aldrich's thugs. The problem was Ingrid. She continued to push for her engagement to Lord Ricaud, insisting that there was no other way to set Elkinshire's finances to rights. Dunstan and Father Everwin counselled otherwise. They, like Wolfram, saw that the castle now had the manpower to assert the baron's will by force, and Robin's death had galvanised them to take a stronger stance against the extortionists. But Ingrid, in a sickeningly genuine affectation of gentleness, played the part of the peacekeeper, even going so far as to protest that Julia wouldn't have wanted the shire to be ruled by violence. With his wife gone, Erik had no other kin but his daughter by his side, and so it was her voice that he listened to. Wolfram could only imagine what other manipulations Ingrid was whispering into his ear when they were alone in the solar.

The wind was roaring through the trees when Wolfram went out to fetch a horse from the stable. Flecks of cold rain were already beginning to sting his face, hinting at a coming storm. When he asked for a mount, the stable master flatly refused.

“Not today. This wind's only going to get worse. You'll blow right off the path on your way down.”

“Oh, come on,” Wolfram pressed. “No gale can knock over a horse.”

“Either way, this rain's going to make the path slippery. Might be ice by the time you get back. I'll not risk it. I'm sorry, Wolf. You'll have to go riding next week.”

“I’ll never get to look for Ellen at this rate,” Wolfram told Lavender later on in the kitchen. “If it’s not one thing, it’s another.”

Lavender took her hands out of a bowl of flour, little white swirls dancing from her fingertips as she signed: “You will, eventually.”

“Maybe I can check on the cottage instead. It’s really blowing out there. It wouldn’t surprise me if the roof comes off.”

“I’ll come with you.”

“Oh no you won’t,” Meg cut in. “Yes, I see you lovebirds chattering away in your secret language. Everyone’s going to be in the hall tonight with weather like this. I need you here to make sure there’s supper for all of them. Lord knows how I got anything done while you were away.”

Wolfram’s face warmed when Meg called them lovebirds. Rumours had been circulating ever since his return. Normally, an unwed man and woman sharing a house for weeks on end would have been scandalous. It was only because of Ingrid’s insistence that it had been allowed in the first place. Wolfram’s injuries, and the fact that most people saw Lavender as an invalid, had subdued the usual gossipmongering, but Meg and a few others had noticed their closeness.

It was true that Wolfram did enjoy spending time with her. When he wasn’t training or working, there was no place he’d rather be than in the kitchen talking to Lavender. Yet still, he resisted the urge to think of her as anything more than a friend. He didn’t like joining in with the squires’ conversations about girls anymore. All talk of romance made him uncomfortable. It kept drawing him back to his foolish infatuation with Ingrid and the horrible night that had ended it all. That was something he wanted to shut away and never think about again. When he was out in the courtyard with a weapon in his hand, he felt confident and sure of himself. When thought about love,

he felt like a kicked puppy.

As if reading his thoughts, Meg clicked her tongue and shuffled back to the ovens. “Alright, alright. If it turns you red as a poppy, I’ll look the other way.”

The roof creaked suddenly as a mighty gust rattled the timbers. Lavender started, gripping Wolfram's arm and leaving a handprint of flour on his sleeve.

“Imagine how bad it must be outside the castle,” Wolfram said when the gust died down. “I wouldn't want to be a farmer tonight.”

“It's worse up here,” Lavender signed. “Wind blows harder on top of hills.”

“I'm going to check the cottage, then. I'll bring back the blankets and anything else we left out there.”

“Be careful.”

Wolfram smiled. “I won't blow away.”

He was glad the stable master had denied his request when he went outside. If ever there was a gale that could knock over a horse, it was this one. The sky was dark grey, making it look like night was falling even though it was still early. Wolfram had to turn into the wind and put his head down, leaning into it so he wasn't pushed backwards. His cloak whipped and snapped behind him, tugging the clasp tight against his chest. When he looked over the castle wall, he saw fir trees heaving in the gale, their heavy trunks dancing like blades of grass. He wondered how they could stay standing in such weather.

He passed by Dunstan, who was helping the stable master get the horses inside, and asked: “Do you think any of the trees will blow down?”

“I'd wager a gold crown on it,” Dunstan yelled over the wind. “We'll be chopping them off the castle walls tomorrow.”

That sounded like a satisfying day's work to Wolfram. He liked the idea of shimmying up a fallen tree and hacking off branches. He headed out of the castle, making his way down the path where the trees shielded him from the wind until he reached the cottage. The gale wasn't as bad with the heavy undergrowth breaking up the gusts, but a few strands of thatch still jittered wildly on the cottage roof. Wolfram decided to err on the side of caution and untied the rope holding the door shut. There were some rolled blankets inside that he and Lavender used when they ate supper here. He gathered them up along with a couple of cooking utensils and made his way back to the castle. When he reached the courtyard, he stopped, joining a knot of people who had gathered outside the stable. They were staring at a pair of trees that sprouted over the top of the north wall where the hill dropped down next to the cesspit. They were yawning wildly in the wind, branches creaking and cracking as if they were about to tear loose at any moment.

“Those two are gone,” a stablehand named Edmund said.

“It doesn't look like they'll hit the wall, at least,” Wolfram replied.

“No, they grow right out of the hillside. They'll drop down somewhere below. Hope nobody's taking a stroll down there.”

“Not in this weather.” Wolfram stayed to watch, entranced by the spectacle. There was something mesmerising about seeing the raw force of the elements at work, knowing that roots were about to tear and branches splinter with nothing to be done about it. It was a few minutes before the first tree went. It seemed to drop suddenly, hang for a moment, and then follow the wind to one side as it plummeted out of sight behind the castle wall. Lord Erik, who had been making his way from the kitchen to the latrine, stopped in his tracks as the sound of rattling branches gave way to a

muffled crash. A second crash followed, this one more distant, then nothing more.

“We'll have to go up the wall and see where it landed tomorrow,” Edmund said.

Wolfram nodded, still watching the remaining tree. There was no question of climbing the wall right now. The battlements were low, and they had a reputation for crumbling when people leaned on them. The top of the north wall looked like a mouth full of worn-down teeth.

It wasn't long before the second tree followed. Wolfram was shivering in the wind, but he didn't want to go inside until the spectacle was over. This time the sound of tearing roots was audible all the way across the courtyard. The tree's position shifted abruptly, followed by a distant rattling noise like an avalanche of pebbles.

“Here it goes,” Wolfram said. The next time the wind gusted, the tree lurched out of sight. Then the whole wall moved. The sight was so alien to Wolfram that he didn't understand what was happening at first. A roar of falling earth and rock sounded from the far side of the wall as its stones sagged outwards two-thirds of the way along. The old mortar split apart as the rubble core began to tumble free, dragging more stones along with it until an entire section of the battlements caved in.

“Oh, God,” Wolfram said, taking a step forward as he stared in horror. The tree's roots must have disturbed the ground near the wall's foundation. Now the old stones were crashing like thunder as they fell down the hill, the wall twisting outward and inward in two different directions at once. Most of the masonry went over the edge of the hill, but towards the castle's northeastern corner it began plummeting into the courtyard. Wolfram's heart leapt with fear as a huge stone fell, rolled, and smashed one of the corners off the wellhouse. Another cascade of masonry followed, demolishing the pantry and the eastern end of the kitchen in an instant. A cry of anguish burst from Wolfram's throat as he ran forward. Lavender and the others were in there! He stopped short before his haste got the better of him, realising he would be

killed if he went near the wall while it was still collapsing. An enormous v-shaped hole had opened up in the stonework, spanning from the midpoint to the cesspit at the east corner. The keep at the west end of the wall had survived untouched, but the kitchen building was in shambles. Some of the falling stones had punched holes in the roof, but most had rolled into the back wall and smashed it apart, causing the structure to slump downwards at one end like a flattened loaf.

Wolfram could still hear stones rattling down the hillside, but he couldn't wait any longer. He dropped his bundle and ran towards what had once been the kitchen door. The frame still stood, but the door itself had been smashed to splinters when a heavy roof beam fell across it. Wolfram ducked beneath the beam and coughed as a mouthful of dust and smoke entered his lungs. He could hear people calling out in confusion to his left. Someone was wailing in pain. If Lavender was hurt, she wouldn't be able to call for help.

Trying not to panic, Wolfram stumbled his way forward, keeping his head low to avoid the sagging ceiling that sloped across this part of the building. It was hard to see anything with so much smoke and dust in the air. Glowing coals from the cooking hearth had scattered all over the floor, sparking murky fires where they'd found things to ignite

“Who's hurt?” he called into the fog. When no one answered him, he hurried forward, kicking burning coals out of his way as he made for the undamaged end of the building. “Meg? Are you in here?”

A plump hand grabbed his arm.

“Wolf, oh hell and heavens!”

“Was anyone in the pantry?”

“I don't think so.”

Now that his eyes were adjusting, Wolfram could see some of the kitchen servants near the keep passageway. The woman crying in pain was being helped to her feet by the others. From the way she was clutching her arm, it looked like it was broken. There was no sign of Lavender.

“Where's Lavender?” he asked, fighting his rising fear.

“What?”

“Cat!” Wolfram had to shout to be heard. The wind was still shaking the roof hard, and with the building damaged, he suspected there was a very real chance of it collapsing completely.

Meg went to the others, touching each of their shoulders in turn as they helped their injured companion into the passageway.

“She's not here. Her and Grace. Oh, I think they were down the other end!” There was disbelief in her voice. Wolfram didn't want to believe it either, but he knew he had to act fast if there was any hope of saving them.

“Go and get some help,” he told Meg, then covered his mouth with his cloak and hurried back into the smoky, dusty collapse. While the walls of the kitchen were stone, the roof was a wooden vault covered in slate tiles. The beams had fallen in when the wall came down, jutting in all directions as they propped up bits of the ceiling like stilts beneath a misshapen stage. Wolfram climbed over a fallen beam, navigating via a shaft of light that shone through a tear in the roof. He had to duck down to go any further. A fallen tile snapped beneath his boot. One of the beams shifted unsettlingly when he put his hand against it. He drew back, fearing that the ceiling might come down on him. When it didn't, he edged forward again. A banging



noise drew his attention to the left. He'd been hearing it for a while now, but he'd assumed it was the rattle of falling tiles or more debris from the wall. But this noise was steady and rhythmic, and it was coming from within the kitchen. He got down on his hands and knees and peered beneath a beam that had fallen diagonally against the collapsed wall.

There, hunched beside a pile of rubble, was Lavender, one of her boots clutched in her hand as she rapped the heel on the floor. Her fearful eyes stared back at Wolfram as he crawled closer, pressing his body flat against the floor to reach her. There was no time for his relief to register. Lavender was trapped in a hunched position, her shoulders pushing up against a beam that had toppled against the rubble. From the way it was shifting, it looked like it would fall the second she moved.

Wolfram held out his hand to her. "Do you think you can get out?"

She shook her head rapidly. There was just enough light for Wolfram to make out the sign she made with her fingers: "Not me." She pointed beneath her elbow into the space behind her. Wolfram edged closer and saw another person trapped in the collapse. It was Grace.

"Is she alive?"

"I don't know."

There was no way Lavender could move without the beam crushing Grace. Her shoulders were shaking with the effort, her expression pained and her breathing laboured. Wolfram squeezed himself into the space beside her and took the weight of the beam on his shoulder. There was a rattling sound as the roof shifted above them.

"Let me take the weight," Wolfram said. "See if you can pull Grace out past me."

Lavender gripped his thigh for support as she worked her body out of the cramped space, struggling to get herself free without disturbing the wreckage any further. The full length of the beam pressed down on Wolfram's shoulders. Its weight drove a huff of breath from his lungs, but he braced his knees and pushed back.

Unable to guide him verbally, Lavender tugged at his arms and legs, adjusting his position until she had room to squeeze past and get hold of Grace's shoulders. Supporting the other woman's head with one arm, she hooked the other around her torso and wiggled backwards through the gap between Wolfram's legs.

“Take her to the other end of the kitchen,” Wolfram said. “You'll be safe in the passageway.”

Lavender shook her head, unwilling to leave him. She grabbed a loose stone from the fallen wall and pushed it across the floor, wedging it beneath the low end of the beam. The support took a little strain off Wolfram's muscles, but it wasn't enough for him to let go.

A sudden clamour of voices broke out on the other side of the wreckage.

“Who's in here? Does anyone need help?”

“Over here!” Wolfram yelled. “Be careful! Don't touch anything, or the roof will fall!”

A face appeared behind Lavender. It was Edmund the stablehand. He reached forward and helped Lavender lift Grace free of the wreckage. Dunstan and another man crawled into the low space alongside Wolfram.

“Is there anyone else in here?” Dunstan asked.

“No, just Lavender and Grace.”

“That beam's going to fall. Hold it a moment longer. The rest of you, get clear!” Dunstan began following Lavender's example, collecting stones small enough to wedge beneath the fallen beam so there would be something to support it when Wolfram let go. Wolfram's muscles were burning by the time he was done. Carefully, he lowered his shoulders a fraction of an inch. He felt some greater weight shifting at the other end of the beam, but there was no rattle of rubble or groaning wood. Dunstan backed away and held out a hand to him. Wolfram grasped it, then lowered his shoulders until the piled stones took the weight of the beam. He gave Dunstan a nod, and with a mighty heave, he pulled him out of the cramped space. Wolfram's knees skidded through broken tiles and powdered mortar as the roof sagged behind him. They wasted no time seeing whether the pile of stones would hold. Staggering to their feet, they hurried back through the mess of fallen beams until they reached the far end of the kitchen. Lavender and the others had Grace sitting upright against the wall. She looked dazed and in pain, but her eyes were open. When Lavender saw Wolfram, she threw her arms around him.

“Everyone out,” Dunstan barked. “It isn't safe in here.”

Wolfram squeezed Lavender against his chest. She felt so slight in his arms. He was amazed she'd been able to hold the beam as long as she did. The others had doused the scattered coals, so there was no more risk of the building igniting. The group made their way down the passageway to the keep where a small crowd tended the injured. There were several cuts, bruises, and a couple of broken bones, but by some miracle no one had been killed.

Lavender was still clinging to Wolfram when they reached the great hall. Her dark hair was covered in a powder of yellowish-grey mortar dust. Wolfram expected he looked much the same. People were staring, but he didn't want to let go of her. After the shock of what had just happened, he needed her comfort. He needed to hold her in

his arms and remind himself that she was still alive. From the way she was holding him, she felt the same way. When the stones fell on the kitchen, Wolfram had felt like the world was slipping out from under him, threatening another bereavement like Robin and Julia all over again. But Lavender was still here. They still had each other.

A stir of commotion drew Wolfram's attention to the main door. The drapes flew aside as the rest of the stablers came in carrying a body on a large cloak. He was breathing, but there was blood on his tunic, and when they set him down he let out a miserably weak groan of pain.

It was Lord Erik.

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:26 am*

Father Everwin and the physician monks from the village didn't know whether Lord Erik would survive. He'd been on his way back from the latrine when the wall fell, directly beneath the eastern end of the collapse. None of the big stones hit him, but a battering of rubble from the wall's core had knocked him to the ground and broken his ribs. Father Everwin said there might be internal damage, for the baron had been coughing blood when they found him. If that were the case, it was in God's hands whether he lived or died.

The castle seemed paralysed for the next few days, much as it had been the night of Lady Julia's death. No one knew what was going to happen next. Everyone set to work clearing the rubble and trying to make the damaged kitchen safe, but it was an immense undertaking. A new temporary kitchen was set up in the parlour where the squires slept, forcing them to move out into the great hall. A mason came up from the village to survey the damage and quoted them a daunting fee for repairs. It was well beyond Lord Erik's means to pay. There was a danger, the mason said, of the ground on the north side of the hill eroding further now that it had shifted. He would have to examine the foundations of the entire wall and shore them up if necessary. If they got started right away, the wall could be made temporarily safe before the weather turned any colder, but proper repairs would have to wait until the next building season. It was difficult to get mortar to set firmly in winter, and that wasn't a risk worth taking on a project as important as a castle wall.

Wolfram kept himself busy carting barrow after barrow of rubble out of the castle and dumping it on the far side of the hill. He missed the privacy of the parlour. Now that he was sleeping in the great hall, there was nowhere for him to escape Ingrid. With her father incapacitated, she was now lady of the manor. If he died, she would most likely become the castle's steward until her infant brother came of age. That wasn't a

thought Wolfram liked to contemplate, so he focused on his work. Meg was keeping Lavender busy as well, and with both of them occupied, their hillside walks and meals in the cottage became few and far between.

As a means of avoiding Ingrid, Wolfram joined the others praying for Lord Erik's health in the chapel some evenings. After a few days, whether by prayer or by nature, the baron's condition seemed to stabilise. Ingrid and Father Everwin were the only ones seeing him regularly since he was moved to his room. They said he was in great pain, but conscious and lucid. His condition hadn't deteriorated, which was a good sign. Father Everwin was tentatively hopeful that he might recover, though he would be confined to the solar for several more weeks.

With news of the baron's health sparking the castle back to life, all efforts turned toward repairing and rebuilding. A few volunteers from the village helped clear the wreckage, and piece by piece, the ruined kitchen was made safe and dismantled. Several of the precious stone ovens had survived the catastrophe, but they couldn't be used until the building was repaired. The pantry was completely destroyed, and the cellar beneath filled with broken stone and splintered wood. It would be a long time before things got back to normal.

A little over a week later, Wolfram was sitting with Dunstan and some of the other men near the hearth in the great hall. The squires' table was always packed now that they didn't have the parlour to retreat to. Wolfram had taken to joining the older men, and had been pleased to find that Dunstan welcomed him. If their longsword duel had proven him a worthy squire, his swift action in the kitchen had proven him a worthy man.

"The sooner we get our lord back the better," Dunstan said over a cup of warm wine. "Not that I'd speak ill of Lady Ingrid, but she isn't her father."

"She's not Lady Julia, either," Wolfram said, biting back some of his own ill opinions

about their mistress.

“True enough. She's been on about Lord Ricaud again. Seems set on marrying him. Pompous ass, that man, but I can think of worse solutions to our problems.”

“I don't think he's interested in her anymore. He'd have visited if he was.”

The thread of discussion trailed off as the men began discussing the logistics of rebuilding the fallen wall, only to resurface when Father Everwin joined them with a troubling piece of news.

“Lord Erik wishes to disinherit his own son!” the chaplain announced with indignation. He spoke softly so that only the men around the table could hear, but there was a hiss in his voice that suggested it was taking all of his composure not to yell. He poured himself a cup of wine and downed it in one gulp.

“Why does he want to do that?” Dunstan asked.

“To secure Lord Ricaud's engagement, he says. It's been a sticking point ever since the boy was born. Ricaud won't go forward with the marriage unless he stands to inherit Elkinshire. It's against all propriety!”

“Makes sense though, doesn't it?” Dunstan grunted. “If Ingrid doesn't bring in Ricaud's money, there won't be a castle left to inherit by the time the boy's of age.”

“You can't possibly tell me you approve, Dunstan.”

The man-at-arms worked his jaw back and forth with a glower. “No, I can't say I do. But it's not for me to have an opinion, is it?”

Wolfram felt a growing urge to interject, for a bitter realisation had stolen up on him

in the wake of Father Everwin's announcement. It made sense now, why Ingrid had taken a renewed interest in marrying Lord Ricaud. She must have known he would never agree while Lord Erik had a male heir. If she wanted Elkinshire for herself, she needed her infant brother out of the way, so she'd pressed her father into striking a bargain with Ricaud to disinherit the boy and name Ingrid his sole heir. He would've been resistant, but the wall collapsing was a crisis he couldn't ignore. If he didn't do something now, the ruin of his house would be literal as well as figurative. The disaster had played perfectly into Ingrid's plans, and she hadn't wasted a second in capitalising on it.

Wolfram was hesitant to voice his suspicions aloud, but if Father Everwin and Dunstan were as indignant as they seemed, there might be no better time than this.

“I don't think this is what Lord Erik wants,” he said. “It's all Lady Ingrid.”

They stared at him for a moment, then Everwin said: “I'm inclined to agree.”

“Can we change his mind?”

“Not without a sack full of silver to pay the builders.”

Wolfram turned to Dunstan. “Then why don't we go and get one for him?”

“What do you mean by that?” Everwin asked.

“He means we collect the money Erik's knights owe him,” Dunstan said. “Demand as much as they can give and scare off anyone who tries to stop us. We'll have to be careful. As soon as Aldrich and his gang find out what's going on, they're sure to start some kind of trouble.” Dunstan's eyes flicked in Wolfram's direction. “Reckon you and the boys are ready to handle them?”



“More than ready.”

Father Everwin compressed his lips. “But what of Aldrich's money? You can rest assured that his mother will find a way to hurt Lord Erik's coffers if you try and arrest her son.”

“I think we're beyond that now, don't you? It's time Erik took back control of his lands. A baron disinheriting his son just to keep his castle from crumbling is a disgrace.”

The appeal to Father Everwin's sense of propriety worked. “Very well. I shall broach the idea to him tomorrow.”

“I don't know if that's a good idea,” Wolfram said quickly. “Lady Ingrid won't like it.”

“Why do you say that?”

“She's friends with Aldrich.”

“He's right,” Dunstan said. “She's the one who's been telling Erik not to upset the apple cart these past months. If she can get him to disinherit his son, she can make him hold off on confronting Aldrich.”

Father Everwin raised his palms in front of him. “I'll not play any part in going behind the baron's back.”

“Come on, Everwin,” Dunstan growled. “You know he would've agreed to it when Julia was alive. She'd have said the same thing. Our lord hasn't been himself lately.”

“Besides, it's not as if we'd be doing anything wrong,” Wolfram said. “The knights

are due to pay their tithes about a week from now, aren't they? We'll just ride out and make sure they hand over the full amount. If we go early, we can make sure Aldrich hasn't emptied their purses before we get there.”

“You know full well that this reeks of dishonesty, Wolfram.”

Impatiently, Dunstan retorted: “Well there's no rule against a lord collecting his taxes in your scriptures, is there? Just keep your mouth shut and we'll do the rest. Erik will have his money, and he won't have to cast his son out to get it.”

And Ingrid won't get her hands on the barony, Wolfram thought.

Father Everwin poured himself another cup of wine and drank it with a look of consternation. Principled though he was, Wolfram hoped he could see the sense in their idea. After pouring a third cup, he went back upstairs to the solar.

“Do you think he'll say anything to Erik?” Wolfram asked.

“We'll find out tomorrow,” Dunstan said. “Unless Lady Ingrid stops us, we're taking some horses and leaving at the crack of dawn.”

No one attempted to stop them as they donned their gear and saddled up a dozen horses the next day. Wolfram kept glancing in the direction of the keep, expecting a furious Ingrid to storm out at any moment, but Lavender was the only person who came to see them off. She handed Wolfram a warm oatcake fresh from the pan along with a satchel containing a flask of cider and a wheel of cheese. He popped the oatcake into his mouth with a grin. Not wanting to speak with his mouth full, he signed, “Thank you.”

Gavin made a mocking wolf whistle behind them, but Wolfram ignored it. Dunstan and the castle's four other men-at-arms were with them along with the oldest and

most experienced of the squires. Most of them wore shirts of mail beneath their colourful surcoats that day, having emptied the armoury of its best equipment. Along with a dagger and an arming sword at his belt, Wolfram had his favourite longsword strapped to the back of his saddle. Every man either wore an iron cap or carried a greathelm in his saddlebags. A more formidable entourage had not ridden out from the Lavender Castle in years.

The procession caused a stir in Firfallow. People hurried out of the road to make way for them, clutching at doorframes and peering through window shutters. An odd mixture of fearful silence and encouraging cheers greeted them on each street. If Aldrich was in the village, it wouldn't be long before he heard the news.

It would take a couple of days to complete their circuit of the knights' estates. To save time, they would be splitting up into smaller groups when it made sense, but for the most part they would travel together. If Aldrich or anyone else tried to challenge them, they needed to back up their show of force. Part of Wolfram itched for his arrogant enemy to make an appearance. He wanted justice for Robin's death. Money and powerful connections wouldn't keep Aldrich safe if he tried to attack the baron's men again.

But as the day wore on, Wolfram's itch was not satiated. He didn't know whether to feel relieved or disappointed. They rode into each village, made their way to the lord's manor house, and demanded Lord Erik's tithe in full. Whenever they could, they pressed for more than they were due. Dunstan did a fine job laying down the law. Most of the knights were reluctant at first, but all of them paid in the end. Some were indignant that Lord Erik had sent a band of soldiers to intimidate them. Others were easily cowed. More than a couple were plainly afraid of what would happen to their estates if they couldn't pay Aldrich's protection fee. His name was never spoken aloud, but everyone knew his shadow loomed large over each exchange.

“Warn your people to keep an eye out,” Wolfram told one doddering old knight who

looked particularly frightened. “If there's any trouble, send for us right away. We'll make sure the culprits never bother you again.”

Whenever he had the chance, Wolfram asked after Ellen Good. Not many people recognised her name, but there were a few tales here and there. Some folk remembered her passing through their village a few weeks ago. Others had relatives who'd gone to see her in Firfallow and found her house empty. But no one seemed to know where she'd gone since. Once again, Wolfram's search turned up nothing.

That night they slept in the hall of one of Erik's more loyal knights, a middle-aged soldier named Robert Whitehead who was gruffly pleased to see his lord's men out in force once more. When he heard they planned to put an end to Aldrich's extortion, he paid them twice the tithe they were due and insisted they share his home and stables that night. It had been a long day of riding in armour, and Wolfram was happy to give his sore body a rest.

He found himself a spot on a fur-swaddled chair in the corner of the hall as he sipped the last of Lavender's cider and finished off the cheese wheel. One of Sir Robert's servants, a seamstress with a young girl clinging to her leg, kept giving him dirty looks when she glanced up from her sewing. He ignored her at first, guessing that she was simply uncomfortable with the presence of soldiers in her master's house, but when she persisted, he offered her a smile.

“Are those looks just for me, or does everyone get one?”

The woman pressed her lips together as if contemplating the wisdom of insulting one of the baron's men, but when Wolfram held her gaze, she said: “You don't even know who I am, do you?”

“I don't think we've met before.”

“You met my husband, though.” She sniffed and stood up, gathering her sewing and making as if to leave, but instead of exiting the hall she stooped over next to Wolfram and whispered: “You got him hanged.”

He was confused for a moment before realisation dawned. “You're Dominic Ward's wife.”

“Aye, now he remembers,” she half-said to the child clinging to her skirt. “You left me without a husband and her without a papa, you and Aldrich Merchant and that noble bitch. Damn you all.”

Wolfram stood up quickly. The woman's expression became fearful and she shied away. Wolfram held up a hand to indicate that he meant no harm. “Can we talk outside?”

“I've nothing to say to you.”

“Well I've got something to say to you, and I'd rather not say it where everyone can listen.”

“If you try anything, I'll scream.”

“I'm not going to try anything.”

She scowled at him before bending down to pry her daughter off her skirt. “Go and sit by the fire.”

Wolfram held the door open for her. It was dark and chilly when they stepped outside.

“Go on, then,” she said, folding her arms tight against the wind. “Say your piece.”

“I won't tell you I feel bad about what happened to your husband,” Wolfram began, recalling the pain and anger of that night, “but Aldrich was the one who sent him to the noose, not me.”

“You all did. Not one of you told the truth about what happened. Dom told me everything—how Aldrich had the boys beat you and that other lad. They never meant for nobody to die, but the others went and overdid it, and my poor Dom got the blame. You and your lady went along with the lie. You're both just as bad as Aldrich.” She was angry, but more than that, she was hurt. She needed someone to blame. “How can you live up there in that castle? My Dom wasn't a bad sort. He was the village watchman. Everyone liked him. But Aldrich started buying him things, getting him drunk, going off all night doing who knows what, and I couldn't make him say no to a man like that!”

“All of that's going to stop,” Wolfram said, weathering her anger. “That's why we're here. Aldrich isn't going to get away with it much longer.”

“I'll believe it when I see it. Where was that conscience of yours when you lied to the court, hm?”

Wolfram felt the warmth of shame rising behind his face. “I didn't want to lie. I wanted Aldrich and the others to pay for what they did. But they threatened someone I care about. If I'd said anything, they might've killed her too.”

For the first time since they'd begun talking, the woman's demeanour softened. Instead of outright hostility, there was bitterness in her voice now. “There'll be no decent folk left in Firfallow if this keeps up. The baron's a feeble old fool, and his daughter's even worse. The only good thing that came of Dom's death was Sir Robert taking me in. At least now I'm away from that place.”

“You'll see justice for what happened, I promise.”

The woman sniffed again. "I'm going back inside."

"Before you do," Wolfram said, struck by a thought. "When you lived in Firfallow, did you know a woman called Ellen Good?"

"Aye. She delivered my daughter."

"I don't suppose she's been by this way recently, has she? No one's seen her in Firfallow for months."

She frowned at him. "Why?"

"I need to speak with her. She knows something that might help us bring Aldrich to justice." When he received no response, he added: "Please. You and I are two of the only people who know the truth."

"She's staying with her sister and brother-in-law over in Beckstead. She comes by every couple of weeks to sell Sir Robert's wife her remedies."

"Thank you." Wolfram knew the village of Beckstead. It was less than an hour's walk away; the first place they would be visiting tomorrow morning. If he could convince Ellen Good to come back with him, this trip might kill two birds with one stone.

When they arrived in Beckstead, Wolfram headed off by himself while the others went to deal with the lord of the manor. The village was a tiny place, unlikely to provide more than a few shillings for Lord Erik's tithe, and he doubted his presence would be necessary to cajole its lord into handing over the money. Wolfram asked the first person he saw where Ellen Good was staying. They pointed him to a cottage at the edge of some nearby woods. He found Ellen and another woman, presumably her sister, stripping birch bark when he ducked in through the open door. They looked up in alarm when they saw the tall young soldier step into their house.

Wolfram made a quick bow. “Miss Ellen. I've come from the castle. Do you remember me?”

She relaxed, nodding. “You're one of the baron's squires.”

“My name's Wolfram. We spoke the night you left. Do you think I could have a moment of your time?”

“Very well.” She set her birch branch down and accompanied him outside. Wolfram scanned the village, apprehensive that they might be overheard, but nobody was within earshot and the rest of Erik's men had disappeared behind the manor house.

“Would you consider coming back to the castle with me?” he asked.

“That depends,” Ellen said guardedly. She had a knowing look about her that made Wolfram feel like a young boy. This was an intelligent woman who wouldn't be coerced into doing anything she didn't want to. “Is Lord Erik ready to welcome me back?”

Wolfram decided it would be a poor idea to lie to her. “Not in so many words, but I'm sure he won't punish you. I meant what I said the night you left. He isn't a cruel man.”

“All the same, I'd rather keep my distance. I'm quite comfortable where I am. Why are you really here?”

Wolfram drew a tense breath. “Lady Julia was poisoned. You said yourself that you'd never seen a woman die in childbirth that way before. It was Lady Ingrid. She had her servant put some sleeping root into the remedies you were giving Julia.”

Ellen didn't look particularly surprised by the revelation. “That makes sense to me. I suspected something of the sort.”



“Why didn't you say anything?”

“For the same reason I'm out here; I know when to keep my mouth shut. The baron wasn't in any mood to hear my suspicions the night Julia died, and if his daughter was the one behind it, she'd have had my head. I'm just a simple midwife. My business is helping people, that's all.”

Wolfram realised he would have to appeal to Ellen's sense of decency. She was a kind sort. She wouldn't be interested in things like money or revenge. He explained what had happened since the day of the storm and how Lady Ingrid was poised to inherit the barony unless something could be done to stop her.

“If you could swear to Lord Erik about what happened with Julia, he might believe you. I'd back you up. I don't think things are going to get any better in Elkinshire if Ingrid ends up in charge.”

Ellen shook her head. “But if he doesn't believe me, I'll suffer worse than temporary exile. The same goes for you. I don't think it's worth it.”

“What if I could get Petra to confess? The castle chaplain would listen to us, and some of the other servants, too. If we all went to Lord Erik together, he'd be obliged to listen. And there wouldn't be any one person to single out if he took it badly.”

Ellen frowned and turned away to face the woods. She wasn't convinced. Wolfram was asking her to put her life on the line for a plan that was still nebulous at best. The truth was, he didn't have any watertight scheme to hold Ingrid to account. He wasn't clever enough to come up with something like that on his own. He'd always needed people like Julia and Robin to help him, and now they were gone. But he couldn't just give up now that he'd finally tracked Ellen down.

“Alright,” he said. “I won't ask you to say anything to Lord Erik. Not unless we're

certain we can convince him. But will you at least come back to the castle with me? Some people were injured when the wall came down, and the baron's still in poor health. They'd all welcome a wise woman's healing touch. The monks just recommend prayer when people are in pain.”

That finally seemed to get through to her.

“Are you sure the baron will welcome me?”

“If he doesn't, I'll pay you for your trouble and see you safely back here myself.”

“Very well,” Ellen said with a sigh. “Let me pack my things. I'll be ready to leave by noon.”

Wolfram couldn't dawdle while Ellen said her goodbyes, so they met up in Firfallow that afternoon after the final knight's tithe had been collected. A box of silver coins rattled on the back of Dunstan's horse. It might not be enough to pay the builders in full, but it would certainly get them started. If the knights continued paying their tithes in the seasons to come, the castle's financial troubles would finally be at an end.

Though Wolfram was disappointed not to have gotten the chance to confront Aldrich, the trip had been a success. They had the money, and Ellen Good had come back with them. If all went well, they could persuade Lord Erik to reject Ingrid's plan. Then perhaps Wolfram could find a way to tell him the truth about the night of Julia's death. He still didn't know how he was going to manage that without putting himself or someone else in danger, but he was a step closer than he'd been yesterday.

The squires were in high spirits when they rode up the castle hill. After two days of travelling, they were eager to settle down in the great hall and share the news of their success. Like knights returning from a crusade, they felt like they'd earned themselves a little revelry.

The merriment ebbed as they rounded the bend in the path and came up to the castle gates. They were always left wide open during the daytime so that people could come and go freely, but today, they were shut tight.

“What idiot's closed the gates early,” Dunstan grumbled, kicking his horse forward and calling over the wall: “Open the gates!”

They received no response. Dunstan hammered his fist against the small door and squinted up at the arrow slit looking out from the gatehouse. Wolfram shifted in his saddle, unnerved by the silence. Dunstan banged on the door and called out again. Another minute passed before two figures appeared on the battlements. The first was Lady Ingrid; the second was Aldrich. He wore a mail shirt and a satisfied smile. Wolfram felt his stomach drop as their eyes met.

“My lady!” Dunstan called up. “We've returned with Lord Erik's tithe.”

“You emptied the castle of its fighting men without my consent!” Ingrid said sharply. “I won't stand for this disobedience, Dunstan.”

“Forgive me, my lady. I thought it prudent. If I may speak with your father, I'm sure he'll agree.”

“You may not!” Ingrid retorted with a look of cold fury. Wolfram had seen that look before. She wasn't putting on an act; it was never an act with Ingrid. She must have spent the past day convincing herself that Dunstan had betrayed her. “You and your men are no longer required. You are hereby dismissed from my father's service.”

Dunstan's jaw tightened in anger. “Only the baron can dismiss me.”

“He has. You will hand over your horses and equipment and leave immediately.”

“What about our wages?”

“They will be sent to you.”

“Are the squires dismissed, too?” Wolfram asked.

Ingrid's coldness melted into a sympathetic look that threatened to turn his stomach.

“Of course not. You are wards of my father's household.”

Aldrich leaned forward on the battlements and spoke for the first time: “But you'll be listening to me from now on. My men and I are taking over Dunstan's duties.”

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Wolfram didn't believe for a second that Lord Erik had consented to any of this. Ingrid must have taken advantage of his bedridden state to start making decisions by herself. With Aldrich and his cronies replacing Erik's loyal men, there would be no one left in the castle who could reasonably challenge her. She'd worked fast. How long had she been planning this? Since her father's injury? Or had she moved to take advantage of the situation the moment she realised Dunstan was gone? Wolfram's skin itched with irritation as the others dismounted and removed their mail.

“You can't leave, Dunstan.”

“Then what should I do?” the older man muttered back at him. “Break down the gate and throw Aldrich off the battlements?”

Wolfram liked that idea more than he cared to admit, but he knew it was foolish. “What'll you do?”

“We'll have to stay in the village.” Dunstan gripped Wolfram's shoulder and looked him in the eye. “You need to speak with the baron. Get him to put a stop to this.”

Wolfram glanced up at Ingrid and Aldrich on the wall. “I don't think it's going to be that easy, but I'll try.”

They were interrupted by the sound of the gates creaking open, revealing half a dozen of Aldrich's men wearing shiny new mail and the black-and-red surcoats of Elkinshire.

“Bring in the horses,” Ingrid called.

Wolfram exchanged one last look with Dunstan before taking the bridle of his instructor's horse. He felt like he was stepping into a wolf's den as he walked through the gate. His gut told him to defy Ingrid and leave with Dunstan, but he didn't know what that would achieve. Their best hope now was to speak with Lord Erik.

Once all the squires were inside, they handed their horses to the stablers and waited in a line. Ingrid and Aldrich came down from the wall to address them. Most of the young men looked humbled, like disobedient children caught out by their parents, but Wolfram refused to be cowed by Ingrid's stern gaze.

“Unlike Dunstan, you are not hired soldiers,” she said. “You are valued wards of this house. Yours are positions of honour and privilege. In exchange for your service, you shall have estates and titles of your own someday. For the most loyal among you, that day may come very soon indeed.” Her eyes lingered on Wolfram. “But there must be no more disobedience. From now on, Aldrich Merchant will serve as my father's marshal. You are to do as he says. Is that understood?”

“Yes, my lady,” Gavin said. Most of the others chorused their agreement. Wolfram remained silent. He was reeling at how quickly Ingrid had moved to stamp out dissent among the squires. She'd dangled the temptation of land and knighthood in front of them before they'd had so much as a chance to discuss what just happened. And by implying that only the loyal would receive their titles, she'd sown fresh new seeds of competition. Not everyone would blindly accept these radical changes, but enough of them would. Wolfram had been mulling the idea of rallying his friends and forcibly demanding an audience with Lord Erik, but that seemed unlikely now. Those willing to rock the boat would be outnumbered by those who weren't.

“Is that the money from my father's vassals?” Ingrid said, pointing to the box on the back of Dunstan's horse.

“Yes, my lady,” Wolfram answered.

Aldrich stepped forward and unfastened the box, giving it an experimental rattle before handing it to one of his men.

“Aldrich will be taking that money in repayment for the most generous loan his mother has provided to repair our wall,” Ingrid said, gesturing in the direction of the collapse. A group of builders had appeared and were already constructing a scaffold. “What are you doing here?” She asked Ellen Good.

“I’m Ellen Good, milady. You might recall I tended your stepmother a few months ago. I was told your father needed a healer.”

Wolfram held his breath as Ingrid's eyes narrowed.

“My father is well cared for. Your services are not required.”

“Might I stay in the bailey all the same? Carpenters and masons always have spare pennies for a wise woman during projects like this.”

“Very well, as long as you keep them hard at work.”

Wolfram let out his breath. Ingrid didn't suspect anything. Ellen took her pony to the stable and the squires broke off one by one to go inside. Aldrich put a hand on Wolfram's arm to stop him when he turned to leave.

“Lady Ingrid wants a word with you,” he said. Wolfram stared at him, itching to make some scathing remark. For once he was glad he wasn't sharp-tongued and quick-witted, for it would have done him no good to speak his mind at a time like this. Aldrich gave him a smile that seemed almost genuine. “We had a rough start, but it's all settled now, isn't it? You did me a bad turn, and I did the same back to you. I think we're even.”

“You murdered my friend,” Wolfram said under his breath.

“Not I. That was Dominic Ward, and he hanged for it.” Aldrich let go and tapped his index finger deliberately against Wolfram's chest. “It's all in the past. I'm willing to start afresh. If I were you, I'd start thinking the same way.”

Wolfram wanted to tell him to go to hell, but he forced himself to say nothing. Aldrich clapped him on the shoulder and sauntered off after the squires, leaving Wolfram alone with Lady Ingrid.

“Would you walk with me?” she asked, extending a gloved hand. A few months ago, Wolfram would have leapt at the opportunity to feel her delicate fingers grasping his arm. Now the thought of her touch repulsed him. It seemed like silence was still his best option, so he mutely offered his arm, and she took it.

“It feels like an age since we last talked,” Ingrid said with a contented sigh. “I hope you and Aldrich will be able to get along. It breaks my heart every time the two of you are at odds.”

“Of course, my lady.”

Ingrid gave him a warm smile. “My loyal wolf. I told him you wouldn't be any trouble.”

Any further discomfort on Wolfram's part was forestalled by a sudden realisation: Ingrid was too good at believing her lies. She still saw him as a stupid dog she could keep at heel. Why wouldn't she? She'd cowed him into silence about Robin and Julia, and he'd caused no trouble for her since. As much as it shamed Wolfram to admit it, it was the greatest advantage he had against her right now. Ingrid wouldn't think a dumb mutt capable of plotting with Ellen Good to expose her. He knew he was no genius, but the last few months had given him a fresh perspective on things. He



needed to play along.

“I wouldn't want to upset you, my lady.”

“It makes me very happy to hear you say that. You know I've always been very fond of you.”

“So you always say.” Wolfram hoped he was being convincing. He'd never engaged in such a grand lie before, especially not one that warred against everything he believed in. But Robin had told him that the best lies often came from a kernel of truth, and that gave him an idea. “Did you mean what you said about some of us gaining our knighthoods soon?”

“Of course. My poor father is in ailing health, but once I am wed many things will change. Our family will have new wealth and new land. I will find some of that land just for you, my dear Wolfram.”

“I'd be very grateful.”

“I thought you might. You needn't worry about a thing. Aldrich and his men will be your new brothers-in-arms, and I shall be your lady. We'll have the kitchen and the wall rebuilt stronger than ever.” She gazed across the courtyard with a look of satisfaction. “Everything will be just as it should.” Her face was sweet and serene, her eyes shining with optimism. She really believed it. Were all the people she'd hurt just memories she could sweep away like dirt under a rug? “Will you attend me in my chamber tonight? I would love to share a cup of wine with you over a few board games.”

Playing along was one thing, but Wolfram didn't think he could stomach a friendly evening in Ingrid's room. He remembered the last time they'd been alone together and where that had led.

“I'm afraid I wouldn't be very good company. It's been two long days of riding. I'd probably fall asleep after my first sip of wine.”

Ingrid laughed. “Very well. Another time, then?”

“Of course, my lady.”

Wolfram prayed he would get the chance to speak with Lord Erik before then.

No one was allowed to see the baron without Ingrid's permission. He'd been moved out of his bedchamber into a room at the far end of the solar near the door that led to the top of the lavender wall. That way, none of the servants had any reason to look in when they passed by. One of Aldrich's men stood guard day and night. Even Father Everwin, to his great outrage, was only permitted fleeting visits to check on his patient.

The priest confided this to Wolfram in the chapel two days after his return. It was one of the few places Aldrich's men rarely ventured. The pair of them knelt side by side before the altar, Everwin wringing a heavy signet ring on his finger.

“Lady Ingrid and Petra are the baron's nurses now,” he explained. “Normally I wouldn't complain. Lord Erik is healing well. But he sleeps constantly, and even when he's awake he is barely lucid. It's because they insist on giving him his sleeping root with every meal.”

“He can't object to Ingrid's decisions if he's asleep,” Wolfram said.

“I fear so. I can't believe she's doing this. She was always an enigmatic young woman, but to usurp her father!” His voice had grown loud, and he had to stifle himself before continuing. “I am thinking of going to the count of Tannersfield with my concerns. I can't stay silent if this continues.”

“I wouldn't blame you, Father.”

The atmosphere in the castle had become cloying since Wolfram's return. All the servants were walking on eggshells. Aldrich's men acted like they owned the place, getting in everyone's way during the day and turning the great hall into a rowdy alehouse at night. Thus far, Ingrid and Aldrich had kept them in check, but they still got away with far too much. Lord Erik would never have stood for it.

“Would you ride with me as my escort?” Everwin asked.

“I don't want to leave the castle,” Wolfram said. “We just need to get to Lord Erik while he's lucid. The second we tell him what's happening, he'll put a stop to it. If he orders Aldrich and his men out of the castle, the other squires will help me get rid of them.”

“If you'd seen the state the baron is in, you'd know that's easier said than done. Our poor lord is not himself. It isn't just his injuries or the sleeping root. He's losing all of his vigour. He's like an old man resigned to his deathbed. It's little wonder Ingrid can persuade him of anything she wants.”

Wolfram stared at the altar, wondering how much he could confide in the priest. Until now, he'd believed that Father Everwin's loyalty to the noble family would prevent him from accepting the truth about Lady Julia's murder, but recent events seemed to have shaken his faith.

“Can I confess something to you, Father?”

“I already feel like enough of a conspirator that one more confession cannot hurt.”

In hushed tones, Wolfram told him what he'd seen Petra doing the night of Julia's death. He explained how he'd gone to the village to confront Ingrid, and why he'd lied

about the circumstances of Robin's death afterwards. The only part he left out was what had happened in the bedroom. When he finished, Father Everwin didn't speak for a long time.

“Do you believe me?” Wolfram asked.

“I don't believe someone like you would concoct such an elaborate lie.”

“I want to bring Ellen to see Lord Erik so she can tell him the truth. If anything can rouse him from his stupor, it's this. I don't know if he'd believe mine and Ellen's word alone, but he trusts you. The three of us together might stand a chance.”

Everwin nodded. Wolfram was relieved to have an intelligent man on his side. He felt like he'd been floundering for the past few days, success slipping further beyond his reach as Ingrid and Aldrich tightened their grip on the castle.

After a moment's contemplation, Everwin said: “We would need Petra's confession. Erik has always been a stubborn man. Even when good sense stares him in the face, he prefers to keep hold of his convictions. An emotional plea from a woman, however, has a habit of slipping past his guard. That's why Julia and Ingrid were his closest confidants, and his wife before them. If we can make Petra confess and throw herself upon his mercy, I think he might be swayed.”

“I wish we could be certain.”

“The hearts of men are never certain, but we must have faith that Lord Erik will do what is right. Even if he believes Ingrid is innocent of murder, his doubts may be enough to keep him from naming her his heir.”

“We'll have to pick our moment.”

Everwin nodded. “Do nothing rash. Petra often comes here to pray. I expect her guilty conscience weighs heavily on her. I will encourage her to confess and face judgement if she wishes to be free of it. Then, when the time is right, we will take her and the midwife to see Lord Erik.”

“If you need anything from me, just say the word. I'm not much for schemes, but I can deal with men like Aldrich.”

Father Everwin placed his hand on Wolfram's shoulder and made a sign of blessing. “Loyalty is not always a virtue. In many men, it can be wickedly misplaced. But you embody the virtue it should be, Wolfram. I will sleep easier knowing you are my paladin.”

It was difficult for Wolfram to find peace of mind while he waited. The routines of castle life had been overturned. Like the collapse of the north wall, something permanent had been shattered, and life could not return to normal until it was repaired. He felt sure that within the next few weeks, either order would be restored to the Lavender Castle, or he would no longer find himself living there. Putting up with Ingrid was one thing, but Aldrich and his men were unbearable. They trained with the squires at first, Aldrich taking the lead, but he was no teacher, and his men lacked the discipline to commit themselves to the routines. They preferred boisterous sparring which inevitably devolved into boredom within an hour or two. When they realised that Wolfram and the older squires were leagues ahead of them in martial skill, they stopped training with them and started picking on the younger lads. The morning routines quickly fell apart after that. Wolfram and some of the others continued going through the exercises on their own, but without Dunstan to yell at them, it no longer felt like real training.

Without his morning routine to keep him busy, Wolfram found himself with a great deal of free time on his hands. Every day he waited patiently to hear from Father Everwin, but the priest was a cautious man, and he preferred to bide his time. On one

of his visits to Firfallow, Wolfram learned that Dunstan and the other men-at-arms were staying at a public house working odd jobs for the villagers. Dunstan said they would wait there till the end of the month, but if the situation at the castle hadn't improved by then, they would have to seek employment elsewhere.

One windy evening about a week after Aldrich's arrival, Wolfram sat at the edge of the damaged north wall looking down at the builders. They'd constructed a sloping series of scaffolds up the hillside, each tier layered with planks so they could work on the wall and its foundations without falling. Earth and rubble were still being removed from the place where the second tree had torn loose. Once the builders had determined the extent of the damage to the foundations, they would be able to put together a proper repair plan. The wind tugged at Wolfram's hair as he watched a labourer wheel a barrow down a precarious board that led from the lowest scaffold to the path around the cesspit. Watching the builders was one of the few things that could distract him these days. Aldrich and his men rarely came out here, and there was a methodical rhythm to the work that entranced Wolfram.

A light pinch on his shoulder snapped him back to reality. He turned and saw Lavender standing there. She could creep up on him like a mouse when she wanted to.

"Come away," she signed with a frown.

"I'm not going to fall."

"If the wind can blow down a tree, it can blow down you."

Wolfram didn't like her to worry, so he did as he was told. He'd kept his conversations with Father Everwin to himself so far, but Lavender had noticed something was on his mind, and it seemed like she was in the mood to confront him about it.

“I'm worried,” she signed.

“I think everybody is. No one likes this.”

“I'm worried for you . You're going to do something.”

“How did you guess?”

She gave him a wry look. “You're you.”

Wolfram sighed. “And you know me so well.” He looked around to make sure nobody was within earshot, then said: “Father Everwin and I want to get Petra to confess to Lord Erik. Between her, Ellen Good, and the two of us, we think he might listen.”

“If he doesn't, he'll throw you out of the castle.”

“Well, that might be better than staying.” The hurt look Lavender gave him provoked a sudden tug at his heart. He stepped forward and took her hands in his. “Come with me. We'll stay with my parents. You could work in my mother's kitchen.”

Lavender shook her head and pulled away. “This is my home.”

“Would you want to stay, even with Ingrid and Aldrich in charge?”

“I won't leave Meg.”

The tug in Wolfram's chest grew stronger. The thought of leaving had seemed simple a few moments ago, but now he was impossibly torn. Despite everything, Elkinshire had become his home, too. He didn't want to leave. He didn't want to say goodbye to Lavender. She was the beating heart at the centre of his world. Month by month,

she'd come to occupy his thoughts more and more. She was the one he went to when he needed cheering up. She was the one he wanted to share his news with at the end of the day. He wondered for the hundredth time whether he loved her, but again the comparison to Ingrid seemed impossible. He'd lain awake at night flustered by erotic fantasies about Ingrid. He'd yearned for her unattainable beauty. Every time he tried to picture Lavender the same way, all he could think about was Ingrid straddling him, desire turning to disgust, and the cold shock of confusion that had followed. He was afraid. What if the same thing happened with Lavender? It would destroy their friendship, and that was a thought he couldn't bear.

"I don't want to leave, either," he said in a stiff voice. "I want to set things right here."

"Would you risk your life for Lord Erik?"

Wolfram paused to think. He wanted to believe so. He wanted to be the sort of knight who would lay down his life for his lord.

"No," he admitted. "But I would for you."

Lavender stepped forward, her face upturned. She put her arms around him. He returned the hug, but turned his face away at the last moment when her lips edged closer. He resisted the urge to turn back, not wanting to see the look of disappointment he knew was on her face.



*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:26 am*

The sound of a ceramic jug shattering jerked Wolfram awake. He'd gone to bed an hour ago, but the night was ever young when Aldrich and his men were drinking. With the parlour taken over by the kitchen servants, Wolfram and the other squires were sleeping in a corner of the great hall. It was dark where they lay, but the hearth still burned bright in the middle of the room and the high table gloved with the light of a dozen candles. Aldrich and Ingrid sat giggling over goblets of wine while a dozen people played a game of hoodman-blind in front of them. Most were Aldrich's men, but some of the squires and servants had joined in as well. The tables had been pushed back against the walls to make room while a smouldering brazier provided extra light. The person currently wearing the hood was drunkenly fumbling after the others, and in their stumbles they'd knocked a jug off one of the benches. There was some annoyed grumbling from the people trying to sleep, but the merrymakers paid them no attention.

Wolfram sat up, no longer feeling weary. Ever since Aldrich arrived, he often woke in the night. Normally he would have gone for a walk, hoping for the commotion to die down by the time he returned, but a frigid draft from the door changed his mind. Winter really was around the corner. He decided to go to the chapel and pretend to pray instead. At least it would be warm in there. Picking up his cloak, he tried to avoid the merrymakers as he shuffled down the left side of the hall, heading for the door that led to the chambers where Father Everwin kept his room alongside the chapel and treasury.

No one paid any mind to Wolfram as he went. Aldrich, no doubt at Ingrid's insistence, seemed resolved to ignore him. There was still a lingering tension between them, but otherwise their rivalry had grown cold. Wolfram was a hard person to bully. He weathered insults well, and since he was not sharp-tongued enough to argue

back, Aldrich and his men quickly grew bored of trying to goad him. But Wolfram remembered what they'd done. Cold though the rivalry was, it simmered with righteous indignation beneath the surface. The second he had his chance, he would see them face justice for Robin's murder.

Perhaps it was because his temper was up that Wolfram reacted so strongly when another crash filled the hall. It wasn't a jug this time, but the brazier full of hot coals. Pieces of burning wood bounced across the stone floor, some of them skidding so close to Wolfram that he had to lift his cloak and take a step back.

“Watch what you're doing!” he called. There was little risk of fire in the great hall, but loose coals were never a good thing. He picked up one of the rush mats that already had black scorch marks on the surface and used it to scoop the scattered coals out of harm's way.

“Oh, don't be an old woman, Wolfram!” Ingrid laughed from the high table. “It makes it more exciting when there's a little danger.”

“Those could've burned the keep down.”

“Relax,” Aldrich said. “We moved everything out of the way.”

“Come and join us.” Ingrid beckoned Wolfram over.

He turned away and went through the door before she could ask him again. The laughter of the merrymakers echoed behind him. They really would burn the keep down if someone didn't stop them. They were like a gaggle of youngsters who'd broken into their father's wine cellar, except this gaggle were supposed to be in charge of the castle. Instead of going to the chapel like he'd planned, Wolfram walked past and knocked on Father Everwin's door. The chaplain must have been awake, for he answered quickly.

“Wolfram. There isn't any trouble, is there?”

Wolfram gestured to the great hall. “They're playing hoodman-blind and knocking everything over. If someone doesn't get hurt, something's going to catch fire.”

“Stupid children,” Everwin muttered. “I will speak with them. No one can sleep with this racket.”

“Lord Erik's alone right now. We should go and speak to him. I can fetch Petra—”

“Not the time, Wolfram, not the time!” Everwin said under his breath.

Wolfram bit back a response. When would be the time? He didn't know what he could say to change the chaplain's mind, so he followed him back to the great hall.

“Enough is enough,” Everwin announced, adopting the oratory tone he used when conducting service. “My lady, it is past time we were all abed. Your father will not be able to rest with this noise beneath him, to say nothing of everyone else.”

There were a few murmurs of agreement from the people trying to sleep. Aldrich looked like he was about to make a sarcastic remark, but he held his tongue and looked to Ingrid. It didn't escape Wolfram's notice that his hand touched her arm when he did so.

“Please, Father,” Ingrid said. “I am not a child. It is bedtime when I say it is bedtime, and I have a mind to stay up a while longer.”

“This behaviour is unfitting of a lady.”

Ingrid looked guilty for a moment before looking at Aldrich. A snort of laughter escaped her nose as if their shared glance revealed some hidden mirth in the situation.

“If you can't sleep then you should join us.”

“Don't be absurd.”

“Come on, Father,” Aldrich called. “Put on the hood. I bet you're better than all of us.” He began beating the table with his palm, looking to the others to follow his lead as he began to chant: “Fa-ther! Fa-ther!”

The squires and servants joined in, drunkenly elated by the idea of making their stuffy priest join the game. Ingrid seemed reluctant, but as the chant grew, she took it up as well. To most of them, perhaps Ingrid included, it was a spot of good-natured fun, but Wolfram knew Aldrich and his men didn't see it that way. They wanted to humiliate Everwin in front of the castle. The chaplain stood still, his face growing red until Aldrich dragged him forward.

“Leave him be!” Wolfram said, but he was ignored. Everwin, unwilling to embarrass himself further by fighting back, was manhandled into the centre of the group and had the hood thrust over his head. The chanting and table pounding rose in volume, drowning out Everwin's protests. When he tried to remove the hood, Aldrich grabbed his hands and used a squire's belt to tie them behind his back. This was going beyond a game, but anyone who might have objected was either too drunk or too afraid to put a stop to it.

“The hood doesn't come off till you catch one of us!” Aldrich called, clapping his hands together in front of him like a houndmaster calling a dog. Everwin stumbled about in the middle of the group, struggling against his bonds as his voice rose shrilly in anger.

Wolfram noticed that Lavender had come out of the parlour to investigate the commotion. He began moving toward her when Ingrid accosted him.

“You'll have a turn next, Wolfram! I want to see you catch Aldrich. Let's see how quickly you can manage it.”

“No, thank you, milady.”

“But I insist.”

Once again Wolfram turned away without saying anything.

“You're being very rude tonight!” Ingrid shouted, the mirth in her voice giving way to anger. Wolfram ignored her and went to Lavender.

“This is going too far,” he said under his breath. “They're going to hurt him.”

Lavender nodded. She looked tense and fearful. Wolfram put his arm around her and stepped behind one of the pillars, but before he could say anything Ingrid's voice rose again:

“Stop hiding there with Cat! Willulf, fetch them out here.”

Willulf, Aldrich's plump-faced young crony, grinned and stepped around the pillar. He seized Lavender roughly by the arm.

“Let's make the dumb girl play next!” he called to his friends.

Willulf's pugnacious grin and the way Lavender flinched away from his touch lit a spark of anger inside Wolfram. He seized the man's hand, balled his fist, and punched him in the face. Willulf recoiled with a cry, sprawling on his back as he toppled over.

As his anger cleared, Wolfram realised there was no way of de-escalating the situation. It was only going to get worse. Aldrich and Ingrid laughed at the sight of

Willulf on his back, but soon their laughter would give way to more cruelty.

Tugging Lavender after him, Wolfram hurried through the parlour door. They ran down the passageway into the ruined kitchen and stepped out into the night. The freezing air chilled Wolfram's skin, but his blood was up and his pulse pounded.

“I'm going to find Ellen and Petra and take them to see Lord Erik,” he said. “This can't go on any longer. It ends tonight.”

If Lavender had been shaken by what happened, she quickly recovered herself. Nodding, she tugged Wolfram out from the shadows of the half-demolished roof so that he could see her hands in the moonlight. “That man's been bothering Grace,” she signed. “She's afraid of him.”

“Willulf?”

Lavender nodded.

“He hasn't done anything, has he?”

“Not yet.”

Wolfram grimaced. On nights like this, Aldrich's men were capable of anything. He had to confront Erik now, while everyone was drunk and distracted. But how was he going to get into the solar without Ingrid and the others stopping him? He might have gone unnoticed if he'd slipped up there earlier with Father Everwin, but he doubted it would be that easy after what had just happened. He shared his thoughts with Lavender, hoping she might have an idea.

“Fetch Dunstan from the village,” she signed, “and the other soldiers. Ingrid can bully Everwin, but not them.”

Wolfram nodded slowly. "Once Dunstan hears about what's happening, he won't stand for it. There might be a fight."

"You're brave," Lavender signed. "Please be careful."

"I will. We can get weapons and mail from the armoury. Aldrich always leaves it unlocked. Stay somewhere safe till it's over. You can go to the stable house." Wolfram turned in the direction of the castle gate, but Lavender tugged on his hand.

"The night watchman," she signed, then pointed at the scaffolds leading down the ruined wall. "Go that way."

He was grateful he had her good sense to guide him that night. He never would've thought to use the scaffold. That way he could sneak in and out without Aldrich's watchman raising the alarm.

Before he left, Lavender pulled at his hand one more time. She rose up on her toes and kissed him. Without thinking, he put his hand in her hair and kissed her back. There was no time for him to worry about what it meant. They broke apart a moment later, and Wolfram hurried out through the gap in the ruined wall.

The moonlight guided him down the planks and ladders on the hillside. It hadn't rained for several days, and the ground was firm and easy underfoot. It didn't take long for him to cross the path around the cesspit and clamber up the slope beyond. The trees blacked out the moonlight when he reached the castle wall, but he'd made this journey before the night he and Lavender went to rescue young Ralph. He did what he'd done that night and followed the wall with his palm until he reached the end. The open path in front of the castle gates gleamed silvery-white in the moonlight. On the off chance the night watchman might look out of his arrow slit, Wolfram stuck to the trees and crept through the undergrowth. Once he was past the gate, he began to hurry. The path down the hillside twisted back and forth beneath his

boots as the lights in Firfallow drew nearer. He hoped Dunstan and the others were still staying at the same public house. Would they believe him when he told them the truth? It would all have to come out. Everything that had happened the night of Julia's death. The thought of it made Wolfram's heart race. Less than half an hour ago, he'd been sleeping quietly on the keep floor. Now he was racing down the hill, certain that this was about to become one of the most pivotal nights of his life.

His pace should have left him panting by the time he reached the village, but he was barely out of breath. He silently thanked Dunstan for his years of hard training. He would be able to run all the way back up the hill and still have energy left to fight.

The public house owner was about to lock the door when he arrived. A couple of men sat talking at one of the benches inside the building, but the other guests had all curled up on mattresses at the far end of the room. Wolfram was relieved to spot Dunstan and the others amongst them. He hurried over to his instructor and shook him by the shoulder till he stirred.

“Dunstan, wake up. It's Wolfram.”

Dunstan swatted his arm away angrily. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“I need you to get up and listen to me.”

“What's happening?”

“Aldrich has Father Everwin tied up with a hood over his head.”

That roused Dunstan from his stupor. He didn't seem like he'd been drinking, but he was obviously tired. Wolfram hoped that wouldn't be a problem later.

“Tell me,” Dunstan said, picking himself up and dragging over a bench.



Wolfram roused the other men and explained what was happening at the castle. Anger quickly dispelled their weariness. All of Erik's men were proud and loyal, and they were outraged to hear what Aldrich was doing to their household.

“You know what I'd do to that spoiled little runt if I had the chance,” Dunstan said. “But I can't. We've been dismissed.”

“You know Lord Erik wouldn't stand for this if he wasn't drugged out of his mind. I need you to come back with me. We can sneak up the scaffolds and get weapons from the armoury. Then we'll make sure Erik ends up back in charge.”

Dunstan shook his head with a scowl. “What you're talking about is treason, lad.”

“Ingrid's the one guilty of turning against her father. It's her fault Julia and Robin are dead, and now she wants the barony for herself.”

Dunstan's expression hardened. “What?”

Wolfram explained it all to them: the conversations he'd had with Ellen, the confession from Petra, the fight at Aldrich's house, and the threats from Ingrid that had followed. Dunstan's incredulity resolved into bitter acceptance as the tale went on.

“I knew you weren't telling the whole truth about that night,” he said in a low voice. “That explains why she was so eager to get her brother disinherited. She doesn't mean to marry Ricaud at all; that's just the excuse she's giving her father. It's Aldrich she wants.”

“I'll be damned if I have that man as my baron,” one of the others said.

“We need to put a stop to it,” said Wolfram. “Come back to the castle with me. Most

of them are drunk right now. We'll take Father Everwin and Ellen Good to see Lord Erik, and we'll get Petra to confess about what happened."

"I'd rather see Ingrid confess."

Wolfram frowned. "I doubt she even thinks she did anything wrong."

"Alright," Dunstan said. "The other squires—they're not all in step with Aldrich now, are they?"

"No. Some of them get along with him, but I doubt they'll try and stop us."

"Still, we might end up drawing swords. Drunk men are reckless."

"We can handle them."

Dunstan gave him a grim smile. "Aye, I think we can." He looked to the others. "Are you all with us?"

They were.

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:26 am*

As Wolfram crept up the moonlit hill, he recalled how he'd once imagined attackers struggling up this path as stones and arrows rained down on them from the lavender wall. There were no defenders pelting them with projectiles that night, but it was unnerving to approach in full view of the battlements all the same. The Lavender Castle had never been taken in battle. Wolfram wondered whether that was about to change. Was this going to be a battle? He was an attacker infiltrating his lord's manor to supplant an occupying force, but his fantasies of soldiering had never been like this. He'd expected his first battle to take place on a grassy field surrounded by hundreds of knights bearing the colours of every county in the kingdom. That seemed a distant fantasy now.

Dunstan and the other four men weren't familiar with the way up the scaffolds, so Wolfram led the way. Between them they had two swords, four gambeson jackets, and a knife apiece. Not much of an arsenal to intimidate Aldrich and his dozen men. First they would need to sneak into the armoury and equip themselves, then force their way into the keep before anyone barred the doors.

They crept through the undergrowth, avoiding the castle gate until they were well away from the night watchman's window. Then they followed the east wall and retraced Wolfram's path down the hillside. It was harder climbing up the scaffolds than going down. The ladders shook and the boards bounced when subjected to the weight of multiple men, and Wolfram felt sure the rattling would alert someone to their approach. He kept glancing up at the ruined wall. Anyone might walk by on their way to the latrine and see them sneaking up like brigands. He told himself he was being paranoid; no one would brave the frigid wind when they could stay inside and use a night bucket. But perhaps a little paranoia served a soldier well at times like this.

When he reached the top of the scaffold, he crouched in the shadows of the ruined kitchen. Nothing moved in the courtyard's moonlight. To reach the armoury, they would have to cross to the other side of the bailey. The only way to get there without making themselves visible would be to sneak across in the shadow of the keep. That meant going right past the great hall.

“Go and stand by the doors,” Dunstan said as he came to crouch beside Wolfram. “If anyone comes out while we're crossing, walk into them and pretend it was an accident. That should buy us a moment.”

“Alright,” Wolfram whispered. Sticking to the shadows, he crept along the wall of the kitchen passage until he reached the keep, then stopped by the doors. He motioned for Dunstan and the others to follow before realising they couldn't see him. The shadows had swallowed up all the light. He stood there, tense and apprehensive, his mind flashing back to the kiss he'd given Lavender. He hoped she was in the stable house, safely away from the commotion that was about to erupt. If the plan failed, he would be dismissed from the castle at best, put on trial or killed at worst. If that happened, he didn't want anyone to think Lavender had been involved.

A rustle of movement told him the other men were approaching.

“Go on,” he whispered, letting them know where he was. He held his breath until they were all past, then followed at the rear. He heard a muffled laugh from inside the keep. Aldrich and the others were still awake.

Following the shadow of the lavender wall, they reached the armoury and tried the door. A warded iron lock and a wooden latch held it shut. When Dunstan pushed the ring handle, the door shifted and rattled, indicating that it was latched, but not locked. He gave a snort of distaste.

“Aldrich never bothers to lock it properly,” Wolfram said.

Drawing his sword, Dunstan slipped the narrow blade into the gap between the door and its frame, then pushed upward. The latch lifted, and the door swung open. Had the castle been fully staffed, a guard might have been stationed inside at all hours, but that precaution had fallen by the wayside as Lord Erik's garrison dwindled. The armoury was cold and empty, pitch black in the darkness. Wolfram followed the right wall with his palm, moving carefully so as not to trip over anything. He heard a creak and a rattle behind him as Dunstan opened the chest containing the mail shirts. Wolfram's fingers touched an icy metal pommel as his foot knocked against the frame of the longsword stand. He felt his way carefully along the row of hilts until he found the sword with the rings on the guard. His favourite. He'd carried it with him several times when he was abroad in Elkinshire, but it had never been drawn in battle. He hadn't even sparred with it, for the wickedly keen edge was sharpened to kill. Wolfram lifted the sword out of the rack and held it close to his side. The other men armed themselves one at a time before donning the mail Dunstan passed out. Wolfram was sure anyone walking by would hear them. The noisy mail rattled with every movement as they groped awkwardly in the dark, and there was a thunderous crash when someone dropped a helmet on the floor. Dunstan cursed the man out under his breath, but, after several tense moments of silence, it appeared the noise had gone unnoticed.

Once he had his armour on, Wolfram's racing heart steadied a little. Mail covered his chest, arms, and thighs over a sturdy gambeson. He wore a pair of thick gloves with metal rings sewn into the backs of the hands and fingers. His breath steamed against his face behind the visor of a pot-shaped greathelm. A man clad like this could take a dozen strikes from a sword and suffer no more than a few nicks and bruises. He almost wanted a fight now. He'd been waiting years for his chance to face Aldrich. Equipped as he was, he didn't see how he could lose.

No sooner had the thought occurred to him than he chastised himself for it. He shouldn't be so eager to throw himself into harm's way. Armour did not make a man invincible, especially not when he was outnumbered. He would need all his wits

about him if it came to a fight. He would need his soldier's paranoia.

A sudden rattle at the door made everyone start. Wolfram didn't have time to step back into the shadows before the door swung open and the light of a lantern shone on him. Illuminated by the flame, he saw Ben huddled in his winter cloak. Wolfram exhaled a tense breath. Ben hated Aldrich as much as anyone. He wouldn't side against them.

Too late, Wolfram realised his relief had been premature. Ben's eyes widened and his mouth opened in a cry of alarm as he saw a group of men in helmets arming themselves in the dead of night.

“Ben!” Wolfram hissed. “It's me! Shh! I'm here with Dunstan.”

Ben hesitated at the sound of Wolfram's voice. He raised the lantern higher. “Wolf? What in god's name are you doing?”

They didn't have time to explain. Behind Ben, one of the keep doors cast a shaft of light into the courtyard as it swung open. Two men stepped out. Wolfram tried to move out of the lantern light, but he wasn't fast enough.

“Who's yelling?” one of the figures called. He grabbed his companion's arm when he saw Wolfram standing in the doorway. Ben, utterly bewildered, looked between them in confusion.

They had to act now. Wolfram heard the other men moving behind him like hounds poised to strike. They needed to get inside the keep before Aldrich's men barred the doors. Clutching the sheathed blade of his longsword in one hand, he dashed past Ben. Dunstan and the others followed. The man nearest the keep yelled in fear and tried to yank his companion inside. Wolfram's boots slammed into the earth, the heavy mail dragging at his thighs as he sprinted. The first man managed to get inside,

but the other drunkenly stumbled and fell to his knees.

He only had a second to reach them. The fallen man picked himself up and the door began to close. Wolfram wouldn't make it. The door was halfway shut already. With one last burst of energy, he threw himself forward, shoving his boot into the crack and seizing the handle. The weight of the door hurt his foot, but it seemed to confuse the men on the other side. It took them a moment to realise what was happening, and that gave Wolfram the second he needed to wedge his body deeper into the crack. His muscles strained as he pushed back against the heavy oak, feeling its metal studs pinch his knee painfully. One of Aldrich's men yelled and hit him in the arm, but Wolfram barely felt it through his mail and jacket. The door shuddered as Dunstan threw his body against it. Hands reached in to shove at Wolfram's back, the other men adding their weight to his as they forced their way in like a human battering ram. Shouting erupted within the great hall. The element of surprise was still with them, but Wolfram knew this delay would cost them dearly. Instead of catching Aldrich completely unawares, he would have time to arm himself.

With a great heave, the resistance suddenly gave, and Wolfram stumbled through the doorway into the hall. The two men who'd been pushing back scrambled toward the high table where Aldrich stood with his sword in hand. Four other men had armed themselves, but everyone else still seemed confused by what was happening. Wolfram immediately turned toward the squires' corner. It gave him a glimmer of satisfaction to see that most of his brothers-in-arms were already on their feet and ready to defend themselves. They'd been trained well. He held up his free hand and lifted his visor.

“It's me and Dunstan!” he shouted over the ruckus. “We're getting rid of Aldrich and putting Lord Erik back in charge. You don't have to help us, but don't get in our way.”

The squires looked even more confused. Only Gavin, who was holding a jug like he

was ready to hurl it at someone, gave Wolfram a hesitant nod.

Father Everwin's voice rose over the commotion: "Everyone, lower your arms! There is no need for violence! Wolfram fetched Dunstan from the village at my insistence!"

Wolfram wondered how the chaplain knew where he'd gone, then his heart sank when he saw Meg and Lavender standing next to him. He should've known she'd try to help rather than keeping her head down. There was nothing to be done about it now, so he advanced with Dunstan and the others, keeping a wary eye on the squires in case the dynamic shifted. They were in a tense standoff, the squires in one corner, Aldrich and his men at the high table, and everyone else in between. The servants retreated to the walls as Dunstan stepped forward.

"What is the meaning of this?!" Ingrid shouted from her chair. "Put down your weapons and take those helmets off immediately!"

"I will," Dunstan replied evenly, "If your father commands me."

"I am the lady of this castle and I order you to lay down your arms!"

"We serve your father, not you." Dunstan's voice rose to address the hall. "And I think everyone here knows damned well that his authority isn't being respected. If he orders us to leave, then we'll leave, but I want to hear it from his own lips."

To Wolfram's relief, he heard murmurs of agreement from the onlookers. The tide was in their favour.

"Aldrich," Ingrid said, her voice quavering hysterically. "Arrest these men."

"My lady, stop this madness," Father Everwin said.



“Shut up!”

Aldrich advanced on Dunstan with his sword held ready. “Come on, old man. Put it down. We've got you outnumbered.”

Dunstan didn't move. Aldrich licked his lips nervously. His men didn't have mail on, but they always wore gambesons and carried swords to remind everyone of their status. Those who hadn't been ready when the intruders burst in quickly armed themselves, though a few hesitated in their drunkenness. One man staggered foolishly as he tried to step forward. Another pair exchanged nervous grins as though they thought this was all a big joke. The rest seemed to have their wits about them, however. All told, they were six against twelve. Poor odds, but surmountable. The armour, training, and the clear heads of Dunstan and his men gave them an edge. Wolfram felt fear as he drew his longsword from its sheath, but it was controlled, wound tight like a spindle by the focus of his training.

Dunstan spoke up in one last attempt to avoid a fight: “Do you want to get yourselves killed?!”

Aldrich answered him with a forward step and an aggressive lunge. He wasn't close enough to hit, but the move made his intentions clear. He was too proud to back down. Dunstan retreated and raised his weapon. The four other men-at-arms, equipped with shields and arming swords, stepped forward to block the way. The sudden wall of wood and metal made Aldrich hesitate.

“Come on!” he called to his men. “There's only six of them!”

Wolfram spared one last glance at the squires. None of them had moved from the corner. He'd been hoping a few might fight by their side, but they were staying out of the way. He circled around as Aldrich's men crept forward to menace Dunstan's with their swords. Most of them were ignoring him, focusing on the small phalanx of

shields instead. Only Willulf caught his eye and turned to meet him. Realising that he could distract the others and give Dunstan an opening to take the offensive, Wolfram yelled: “Yield!” and struck at Willulf with his longsword.

Then the fighting began.

Willulf yelped in surprise as the tip of Wolfram's blade swiped past him. The feint hadn't been intended to connect, but it provoked a wild counterattack from the plump-faced man that forced Wolfram to raise his blade in a high guard. He stepped back, knowing the reach of his weapon was his greatest advantage. Steel thumped on wood as Aldrich and his men laid into Dunstan's shields. There was a clash of metal and a cry of pain, then half a dozen screams as the servants fled the great hall. Wolfram could spare no attention on any of it—he needed his mind on his opponent—but as Willulf advanced again, he caught sight of Lavender running across the hall. His guard was slow, and Willulf's cut skated down his blade to catch on one of the steel rings at the hilt. Wolfram backed up again as the rush mats threatened to slip beneath his boots. Wary of his footing, he realised without thinking that he would stumble into one of the tables if he backed up again.

He took the offensive, throwing an aggressive cut at Willulf's torso. His opponent jumped back. Wolfram could have followed up, but he hesitated, favouring his defensive style over reckless aggression. Willulf attacked once more. Wolfram parried, countered, and again failed to connect. Despite his size, Willulf was surprisingly agile.

One of Dunstan's men let out a bellowing cry. Wolfram couldn't tell whether it was a shout of pain or triumph, but it reminded him that time was not on their side. They were outnumbered and needed to even the odds fast. He had armour; now was not the time to be cautious. The next time Willulf attacked, Wolfram threw a parry, turned his sword, and struck again. His heart leapt into his throat as he felt Willulf's sword slam into his arm, but his blood was up and if the blade met skin, he didn't feel it.

Swinging straight through the cut, he brought his blade down on Willulf's shoulder and drew it backwards, splitting open his opponent's gambeson and the flesh beneath. Willulf screamed and fell, his sword rattling to the floor beside him. He was out of the fight. Wolfram stepped over him and advanced on the men attacking Dunstan.

Two more of their opponents had fallen, and some were still hanging back. Aldrich pressed on fearlessly, dodging a stab from Dunstan's longsword and kicking him hard in the knee. Dunstan's leg collapsed beneath him and he fell to the ground with a gasp of pain. Aldrich raised his sword for a killing blow, but before he could bring it down, he saw Wolfram coming from the side. He pivoted away, skipping backwards at the last second as Wolfram's sword flickered through the air inches from his face. Wolfram had put himself in a dangerous spot between the two groups of combatants, but he'd bought Dunstan a moment. He could either back off or press on. Dunstan still hadn't recovered himself, so Wolfram took the offensive. He turned to his left, swinging his sword in a wide arc as two of Aldrich's men advanced on him. The left-handed swing took them off guard. One backed away, but the other had his arm clipped and gasped in pain.

Trusting that they would leave him alone for a second, Wolfram raised a guard in front of himself and took a step forward. He hadn't even seen the attack coming from Aldrich, but he knew he'd left himself open. The instincts Dunstan had drilled into him served him well. A stab that would have driven the point of Aldrich's sword straight through his chest caught on the angle of his blade instead, deflecting it to the side where it ripped into the mail over his right bicep.

Aldrich retreated toward the parlour door. Wolfram knew he would leave his back exposed if he gave chase, but he trusted Dunstan and the others to protect him. He swung at Aldrich, driving him back with the deadly reach of his blade. Unlike their first fight, Wolfram was the one with better equipment and another two years of training behind him, but Aldrich had been training, too. He adapted quickly to Wolfram's left-handed attacks, minding the reach of the longsword as he backed

away. The wine he'd been drinking didn't seem to have affected his ability to fight. He swirled his blade in the air, searching for a way past Wolfram's guard, and when he struck, it was with lightning speed. Wolfram had to take a step back as he parried, countered, was parried himself, and dodged out of the way of the riposte. The one-two clatter of steel on steel was nerve-wracking. One mistake, and it would all be over. Wolfram put his faith in his armour again, even though his arm was hurting where Aldrich ripped the mail. Advancing forward, he tried to push his opponent into the wall, but Aldrich was wary of his positioning and made for the parlour door before he could be backed into a corner. Wolfram felt a lurch of dismay when he thought of the people hiding inside. He pressed on, angling his sword for a thrust as Aldrich moved through the narrow doorway, but his opponent turned and ran before he could advance.

A hesitant thought tickled in the back of Wolfram's mind, telling him to turn back, that the fight in the hall was what mattered, but the anger he felt toward the man who'd killed his friend snuffed out the distraction. The parlour was packed with people stumbling to get out of the way as the two swordsmen came crashing through. Meg screamed as Aldrich grabbed her and shoved her in Wolfram's direction. He held the tip of his sword up toward the ceiling so he wouldn't cut anyone. Meg stumbled past him, and Aldrich used the opportunity to swing at Wolfram's chest. With no room to parry, he was forced to step back. The cut missed, but it gave Aldrich the space he needed to retreat again. He ran down the passageway to the kitchen. Wolfram chased after him. It would be difficult to fight in the dark stone corridor. Aldrich could see him more easily with the light from the parlour framing his silhouette, while Wolfram had to stare into blackness.

He was only a few paces into the passageway before Aldrich's sword came at him again. He moved to block, but the tip of his blade caught against the wall, making for an awkward guard that just barely intercepted the cut before it connected with his helmet. Wolfram could feel himself sweating. Aldrich knew what he was doing. He'd manoeuvred himself into a tight space where the length of Wolfram's sword was a

hindrance, and the darkness made the limited visibility of his visor even worse. He had to guess as much as see where Aldrich's sword was coming from. Wolfram's fear coiled tight as he guarded again. Aldrich was in a good position now, attacking more aggressively, anticipating the thrusts of Wolfram's longsword because he knew there was no room for any wider attacks.

Wolfram tried to back up, but Aldrich didn't take the bait. Instead he retreated further into the darkness, taunting Wolfram to follow him.

“Come on.” Aldrich's breathless words echoed in the confined space. “I'll get your mute little sweetheart when I'm done with you. Whip the skin off her back and set a couple of hunting hounds on her.”

The tickle in the back of Wolfram's mind returned, urging him not to press on in this unnecessary fight, but again his anger at Aldrich overwhelmed it. He couldn't let him get away.

Wolfram stepped forward and lunged with the full length of his sword, but Aldrich was ready. He knocked the thrust aside and cut in at the same time, striking Wolfram's arm again where he'd torn the mail. Pain shot through Wolfram's bicep. His sword grip faltered, and when he brought his blade back up, the muscles in his arm burned. He couldn't fight like this. He was wounded, tired from the climb up the hill, and his strength was flagging. Aldrich retreated again, becoming almost invisible in the deepening shadows. The freedom of movement his shorter sword afforded him was making this easy. Wolfram tried to search for an opening, but every movement worsened the stinging burn in his arm.

Before his confidence deserted him, Wolfram let out a yell and threw himself forward. He didn't attempt to attack. The diagonal sweep of his blade was purely defensive, intended to knock Aldrich's sword aside so that it didn't impale him. There was a clatter of steel in the dark as their weapons collided. They twisted awkwardly,

and once again Wolfram felt the end of his sword catching against the wall. He let go and allowed it to fall, continuing his reckless charge. Aldrich's sword arm was out of the way, and that was all he needed.

His opponent couldn't retreat fast enough to avoid the mad rush. Their bodies struck together with a rattle of mail. Wolfram drove his good shoulder into Aldrich's chest, then swung his head blindly. There was a thump as his helmet struck Aldrich's skull. The two of them fell to the ground, their swords ringing on the stone floor behind them. Wolfram couldn't see anything, but he could feel Aldrich's body beneath him. He punched and headbutted at the other man in a frenzy. Aldrich drove his knee up into Wolfram's groin. The sudden burst of pain threatened to wind him. Aldrich made a sudden movement, and the sharp point of a knife dug into Wolfram's side. He groped frantically for the other man's wrist, knowing that his mail might not save him from another stab. He felt Aldrich's hot breath gasping at him through his visor. His face was clammy, his palms sweaty, and his arm burned like fire. They writhed on the passage floor, kicking at clawing at each other like animals. Wolfram had Aldrich's wrist pinned, but he struggled to fight back with his injured arm. Aldrich managed to twist out from under him, turning the momentum in his favour.

Another body fell on them in the darkness. Wolfram saw a flail of long hair silhouetted in the parlour's light. Lavender's voice—the barely audible hiss of breath that only came out when she laughed or screamed—touched Wolfram's ears. Aldrich screamed in pain. Lavender's arm went up, pulling out the kitchen knife she'd driven into his back. She stabbed him again, then a third time, and his cry cut off in a wet gurgle as blood welled up in his throat. He writhed desperately, but Wolfram clutched his wrist as tight as he could, keeping the knife pinned so he couldn't attack Lavender.

It took a long time before Aldrich's body went lax and the gurgling stopped. His struggles grew weaker until he flopped to the floor beside Wolfram and the knife rattled out of his grasp. He was dead.

Wolfram picked himself up and unbuckled the strap of his helmet. He let it hit the floor as Lavender put an arm around him and helped him back to the parlour. Her free hand patted all over his body, searching for wounds she couldn't see.

“I think I'm alright,” he panted. “He just got me in the arm.”

Wolfram stooped to retrieve his sword as they went, though he no longer knew how well he would be able to use it. His arm hurt badly and his groin ached. To his surprise, it brought him no pleasure to know that Aldrich was dead, only relief. There was one less evil man in the world today.

As they approached the parlour, Wolfram's pace quickened. The sounds of fighting had stopped. One way or another, the violence seemed to be over. Lavender clung to him tightly as they looked out through the parlour door. Four of Aldrich's men, Willulf included, lay bleeding on the rush mats, either dead or too badly wounded to stand. Dunstan sat on a bench nursing his knee. The other men-at-arms had corralled their opponents into a corner where they'd thrown down their weapons and surrendered. The fight must have gone out of them after Aldrich fled.

Dunstan looked up when Wolfram came in. “Where's Aldrich?”

“Dead.”

“Good. Bastard cracked my knee.”

Wolfram looked around the hall. “What about Ingrid?”

“I don't know. She ran off somewhere when the fight started.”

Wolfram's arm tensed around Lavender. “She might be with Lord Erik.” He and Dunstan exchanged a grim look. Everything they'd done that night could only be

justified as the actions of soldiers defending their lord. If Erik died, Ingrid's account of events would be all that mattered. She could appeal to the sheriff of Tannersfield and have them all hanged. She'd already poisoned her mother-in-law. Patricide didn't seem beyond her.

Wolfram let go of Lavender and ran for the stairs. She and Father Everwin followed close behind. They sprinted up the steps and found the solar door ajar. Wolfram's heart pounded against his ribs as he hurried to the far end of the hall and threw open the door to Lord Erik's sickroom. The baron lay on the floor beside his bed, the sheets tangled around his body.

“My lord,” Father Everwin groaned, pushing past Wolfram as he hurried to Erik's side.

The baron stirred.

“Everwin,” Erik mumbled. “Fell out of... my damned bed. I heard yelling.”

Wolfram slumped against the door and grasped Lavender's hand, overwhelmed with relief. They hadn't been too late.

Everwin helped Erik up and sat him down on the edge of the mattress. He looked pale and sickly, his hair clinging to his face with sweat. Little wonder, if Ingrid had been keeping him drugged with sleeping remedies for days on end.

“What's going on?” he slurred, blinking hard and knuckling at his eyes.

“We have grim news for you, my lord,” Father Everwin said. “But rest a moment. Cat, would you fetch us a basin of water and some hot tea?”

Lavender nodded and turned to go. Wolfram clung to her hand a moment longer.



“Be careful. We don't know where Ingrid went. Bring someone else with you when you come back.”

She gave him a pained look and gestured at his arm. He tugged the damaged mail so he could see through it. There was a lot of blood on the skin underneath. The cut didn't look like it was too bad, but he'd probably made it worse by continuing to fight.

“Would you fetch Ellen for me? I think I'm going to need stitching. And see if you can get Dunstan to find Petra.” He glanced back into Lord Erik's room. “We'll need her.”

Lavender nodded and kissed his cheek before turning to go. Wolfram touched the spot where the warmth of her lips lingered. He felt the sudden urge to go with her. He didn't want to leave her side again. But the ache of his arm and the sense of duty he felt to Lord Erik kept him where he was. The night wasn't over yet. There was still every chance he would wake up a criminal tomorrow morning.

It would all depend on how the baron reacted to what they were about to tell him.

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:26 am*

Wolfram sat on the bench outside Lord Erik's sickroom with his longsword across his knees, ready to guard the door against anyone who tried to get in. But Ingrid didn't appear in the solar, nor did any of Aldrich's men. Gavin and Ben arrived carrying swords, sent up on Dunstan's instructions. They didn't understand what was going on, but Wolfram explained that it would make sense soon. All they needed to know for now was that Aldrich had been dealt with.

Lavender returned with a bowl of water soon after. Ellen Good followed her with a cup of steaming tea in her hands and her satchel over her shoulder. Lavender took the water and tea in for Father Everwin while Ellen set about stitching Wolfram's arm. She bathed the wound in warm wine to clean it before sewing the flesh together with a curved needle and applying a dressing. Oddly, it hurt more than the cut had in the middle of the fight. By the time she was done, Dunstan had arrived, limping up the stairs with a mortified-looking Petra in tow. He sent Gavin and Ben back down to the hall.

“Well then,” he said gruffly. “Are we all ready for this?”

Wolfram nodded.

Dunstan looked at Lavender. “Does she need to be here?”

She made a series of signs that Wolfram roughly translated: “I told her everything when I was recovering in the cottage. She can testify that I didn't make it up a few days ago.”

“Alright then. Is the baron sober enough to hear us out, Everwin?”

“As sober as he reasonably can be.”

“That'll have to do.”

They filed into the room and stood at the foot of Lord Erik's bed. He was looking more presentable now, sitting up against the headboard with his face washed and his hair combed back. He still seemed groggy, but the hand clutching his cup of tea was steady when he brought it to his lips.

“Everwin tells me there was a fight. What's been going on?”

They explained it. It was a complex story to put together, and there were many sides that needed telling. They began with Aldrich's presence in the castle and the trouble he'd been causing. Lord Erik's face coloured with anger as he listened. Whatever Ingrid had been telling him, it clearly hadn't been the truth. Then came the difficult part of explaining his daughter's betrayal. Ellen described her suspicions about the circumstances of Julia's death and the implausibility of a woman dying in such an unusual manner after she gave birth. Petra began to weep when Dunstan prompted her to confess. She fell to her knees at the foot of the bed and begged for forgiveness. She claimed she hadn't known the sleeping root would kill Julia; she'd only done as Lady Ingrid instructed. She had prayed ever since, and her conscience could no longer bear the burden.

Wolfram suspected her conscience would have endured just fine had Father Everwin not agitated it, but he still felt pity for the girl. Stuck-up though she was, Petra's only real crime was being loyal to a fault. He believed her when she said she hadn't understood what she was doing.

Erik was not so forgiving. “How dare you try to blame this on my daughter! Your own mistress!”

“My lord,” Father Everwin said. “She is telling the truth. There is more yet to tell.”

“I don't believe it. Ingrid would never do something so vile.”

Wolfram wondered whether he heard doubt in Erik's voice, or if the baron was just upset and confused. Petra's confession had moved him, just as Father Everwin anticipated, but would it be enough?

Wolfram gave his account next. Lord Erik's gaze felt like a sword hanging over his neck. He seemed to be growing angrier by the second, but he didn't interrupt. Wolfram refrained from mentioning exactly what had happened in the bedroom of Aldrich's house, but he did admit that Ingrid had tried to seduce him. It was a necessary detail to corroborate the threats she'd made later.

“This is nonsense, all nonsense!” Erik exclaimed when Wolfram reached the end of his story. “You have misunderstood. This reeks of Aldrich Merchant's scheming. I want him brought up here immediately.”

“I'm afraid we can't do that, my lord.” Wolfram's mouth felt dry. “He's dead.”

“Then fetch my daughter so she can defend herself!”

“We're looking for her,” said Dunstan, “but she's run off somewhere. That isn't the act of an innocent woman.”

“It is the act of a woman whose home has been invaded by armed men!”

Wolfram's hopes were dimming fast. The baron's denial was stronger than he'd expected. Perhaps that was where Ingrid got it from. He seemed resolved to believe in his daughter's innocence no matter how many trusted subjects told him otherwise. He was an ageing man, lonely and disconsolate, and he couldn't accept that his closest

living relative had betrayed him.

“I won't hear another word of this until I speak with Ingrid. Find her and bring her to me.”

“You're not listening to sense—” Dunstan began, but Erik shouted over him.

“Don't speak to me about sense, Dunstan! Is it not sensible for a lord to hear all sides of a story before he passes judgement?”

“Anything she tells you will be a lie,” Wolfram said. “She twists things around. She makes you think she cares, then she thrusts in the knife.”

“Get out!” Erik bellowed.

Father Everwin ushered them all back into the solar. Wolfram's spirits were as low as they'd ever been. Nothing Ingrid said to her father could possibly improve the situation. She knew exactly how to pull his strings. She'd find a way to plead her innocence, probably by pinning the blame on Petra and Aldrich. Perhaps Dunstan and the others would be forgiven for their reckless actions that night, but Ingrid would tell her own version of what had happened at Aldrich's house, and it would be her word against Wolfram's. If she got the chance to speak to her father alone, he was done for. He paced up and down the solar, not knowing what to do.

Lavender touched his shoulder. “Sit down,” she signed. “You'll make your arm worse.”

“I can't.”

She put herself in front of him and tugged resolutely on his sleeve until he did it anyway.

“Cat,” Dunstan said. “Come and help us search. We need to find Lady Ingrid. Wolf, you stay here and watch the baron.”

“I can help too.”

“Wounded men get guard duty. I'll be keeping an eye on Aldrich's lot downstairs.”

Lavender squeezed Wolfram's hand and gave him a kiss on the cheek before getting up to leave. “It'll be alright,” she signed.

Wolfram forced a half-smile. He couldn't see how, but he didn't want her worrying about him.

“Ellen,” Father Everwin said. “Do you have anything that might sober the baron up more quickly?”

“I could make some more tea.”

“Please do. I fear this will be a long night.”

Soon Wolfram was alone in the solar. Everwin checked on Lord Erik once more, then went downstairs to tend the men who'd been injured in the fighting. Wolfram got up and began pacing again. He'd taken off his mail and gambeson when Ellen stitched him, but the material of his shirt still rubbed on the dressing uncomfortably. He couldn't stand guard at a time like this. He wanted to search for Ingrid with the others. It looked like the upstairs rooms had already been checked, for every door in the solar was ajar, but he searched them just in case. Most of the rooms were unfamiliar to him. Erik's main bedchamber was thick with furs and hunting trophies, while Ingrid's had a beautiful tapestry of a horse on the wall and silk curtains around the bed. Julia's, dusty and neglected, was far humbler. A book still lay on the table. Perhaps she'd been reading it the day she died. Close to the stairs, there was a second small

chapel for the noble family, a separate parlour with a long table, and several guest rooms; far too much space for a household as small as Erik's. Perhaps one day the castle would be packed and bustling again. Wolfram would have liked to see that, but he doubted it would happen now.

To keep himself busy, he went through all the rooms once more, checking under beds, behind screens, even lifting some of the wall hangings. He'd almost exhausted his search when he heard Lord Erik calling from the sickroom. He hurried back through the solar and cracked the door open.

“Yes, my lord?”

“Is that Wolfram?”

“It is.”

“Come in here where I can see you.”

He entered, avoiding eye contact as he stood a few paces away from the bed, hands clasped behind his back. To his relief, Lord Erik seemed to have calmed down.

“We'll get to the bottom of this, Wolfram,” the baron said slowly. “I don't believe Everwin and Dunstan would lie to me, but they're not infallible. Where are they, anyway?”

“Downstairs, my lord. Would you like me to fetch them?”

Erik looked like he might be about to say yes, but instead he sighed. “Never mind.”

When he was not immediately dismissed, Wolfram worked up the courage to say: “Lady Ingrid isn't infallible, either.”

“I know. She's a wily girl. But she's no murderer.”

“I'm sure she thinks so, too. Robin always said the best lies are the ones people believe when they tell them.”

“I told you I don't want to hear any more of this until I've spoken to Ingrid.”

It was all Wolfram could do to hold his tongue. He could see the doubt written all over Erik's face. He seemed terrified by the possibility that Wolfram and the others might be telling the truth, and behind that fear was a dark and terrible anger. Wolfram had heard tales of mad kings committing unspeakable acts when their subjects betrayed them. Was the truth too much for a beaten and bloodied man like Erik to bear?

“I've changed my mind,” the baron said at length. “Send me Everwin.”

“Right away, my lord.” Wolfram bowed and backed out of the room.

He was about to close the door when a rattle sounded from his left. Someone was unlocking the door that led to the top of the lavender wall. At this time of year, it was covered with a heavy drape to keep out the draft. Wolfram picked up his sword and moved quickly to the other side. No one had any reason to be sneaking in that way, not unless they wanted to get into Erik's room without going through the great hall.

Wolfram held very still as the door opened. The drape lifted, and Lady Ingrid stepped through. She was shivering, her wind-tangled hair dancing about her shoulders as the draft followed her in. She must have been hiding out on the wall this whole time. In her hand, she clutched a soft leather bag tied shut with a drawstring. It looked like the ones Ellen kept her remedies in.

Wolfram took a step towards her, and a board creaked beneath his boot. Ingrid spun



around, her eyes widening with fright. The bag fell to the floor and a knife appeared in her hand.

“Ingrid!” Wolfram exclaimed as she took a panicked swipe at him. He snatched at her wrist, caught it, and twisted. She dropped the knife with a cry of pain. Her free hand came up to claw at his face. Not wanting to use his sword, he let go of her and stepped back before her nails could dig in. She turned and ran back through the door.

“Ingrid!” Wolfram repeated as he followed her onto the ramparts. “What are you doing?!”

Brilliant moonlight illuminated the top of the wall as Ingrid ran a dozen paces and climbed up into the gap between two of the battlements. She looked back at Wolfram, her whole body swaying in the wind. Tears ran down her face.

“Don't come any closer, or I'll jump!”

Wolfram stopped where he was. The lavender wall dropped away sharply beneath Ingrid's feet, meeting the steep, rocky hillside where it ended. No one could survive such a fall. For all he despised Ingrid, Wolfram wasn't sure he wanted her to die. Perhaps it was pity, fear, or a twinge of the infatuation he'd once felt for her, but he put down his sword and held up his hands in front of him.

“Don't be foolish, my lady.”

“You've ruined everything!” she sobbed. “I thought you loved me!”

“Do you really believe that?”

The moonlight glistened on her tears. She looked out despairingly over the precipice before her. It was now or never. If she could admit what she'd done, there might yet

be hope for both of them.

“We told your father everything,” Wolfram said. “He knows what happened the night Julia died. Petra's going to take the blame if you don't.”

“I don't care!”

“She doesn't deserve that.”

“I don't care! What about what I deserve?!” Her face was full of bitterness as she clung to the crenelations. “He was going to make me marry Lord Ricaud! I'd have had to leave my home and have that awful man's children, just so that Julia could take over my castle!”

“Julia wasn't trying to do that.”

“Shut up, Wolfram! You don't know! I love Aldrich, and I'm going to marry him no matter what any of them say!”

Wolfram inched a half-pace forward, his thoughts racing. He desperately wanted to understand Ingrid. Perhaps that was the only way he could get through to her. “So, you only pretended you were interested in marrying Ricaud so that Erik would disinherit Julia's son?”

“That's right. Then Aldrich and I could've been baron and baroness. But you've spoilt it!”

“You didn't have to do all this. You could've told your father you didn't want to marry Ricaud.”

“You don't know! ” Ingrid wailed at him. “He never wanted me spending time with

Aldrich ever since we were children! Oh, it was alright for me to play with the quaint little merchant's son when we were visiting the village, but he was never allowed up to the castle, was he? Not unless he was petitioning my father at court. But Aldrich showed him. He showed my father how a man should take charge of his estate."

"He hurt a lot of people. Do you think that's fair?"

"I don't know—I never had anything to do with that!"

Wolfram felt his face warming with indignation. "What about Robin?"

"I told them not to go too far! If I hadn't been there, it would've been far worse!"

"If you hadn't been there, it never would've happened at all! And the way you treated me?" His temper was getting the better of him, all the buried feelings of that night rushing back to the surface, cutting into him like needles in the freezing wind. "Do you know how that feels? To think you love someone, and then have them treat you like a dog?"

He wanted an admission of guilt, a twinge of remorse, but Ingrid only scowled at him.

"I thought you'd be grateful. I really liked you, Wolfram. But you're too stupid to understand anything."

He let out a short breath, shaking his head in disbelief. "You're a wicked person."

"And you really are just a dog."

Wolfram's fury seemed hopeless. Ingrid couldn't admit she was wrong. He could rush forward right now, push her off the edge, and end it all. People might even think she'd

done it herself.

His anger shrivelled up in an instant. The thought of doing something so selfish sickened him. That was the sort of cowardice people like Ingrid and Aldrich resorted to when things didn't go their way. Did they have to live with that sickening feeling day in, day out? Or were they somehow immune to it? Somewhere, deep down, he felt sure that Ingrid must be in turmoil. He wanted to pity her, but what was the point in pitying someone who refused to change?

The sound of shuffling feet behind him tore his attention away from Ingrid. Leaning heavily on the wall, Lord Erik emerged from the shadows around the solar door. How long had he been standing there? His face was cast in shadow, his expression unreadable. He approached until he was level with Wolfram and gripped his arm for support.

“So, it's all true, then?” His voice was dull and heavy.

Ingrid's eyes darted about like a cornered animal.

“Answer me!” Erik shouted over the wind.

Ingrid flinched. “What do you think?!”

“I didn't hear you deny anything Wolfram just said. You've been lying to me. You want your little brother out of the way and the shire for yourself.”

“He's not my brother! I want Elkinshire for me and Aldrich both! He deserves it more than you ever did. You never had to work for your money like him. No one told you who you could and couldn't marry!” Ingrid spat each word with unwavering malice. “You'll be dead in a few years, then I'll marry him. We'll have the estate no matter what. Even if you disown me, we'll find a way.”

“Your brother will inherit the estate,” Erik said, taking another step forward. Wolfram was tense as a whipcord. He hadn't been able to sway Ingrid into a change of heart, but he'd inadvertently exposed her in front of her father.

“I hate being your daughter! When you're dead, I'll have your body dumped in a river. There won't even be a priest to perform the rites!”

“That's enough, Ingrid.”

She laughed in Lord Erik's face. “You're not really powerful, you know! You're a weak old man. It's only idiots like Wolfram who keep you in charge. I could've slipped you some extra sleeping root any time I wanted. No one would've suspected a thing. I'm the lord of this castle now, not you.”

Erik stopped in front of her. She stared down from her step on the battlements. Even with her hair tangling in the wind and her face marred by anger, there was still a cold beauty to her. It made Wolfram sad to think it had been wasted on such an ugly soul.

Erik reached out his hand. Ingrid slapped it away and spat in his face. Erik grabbed her by the wrist.

Wolfram would never be certain of what happened next. Someone pushed, and someone pulled. For a heartbeat, one of them had wanted Ingrid to fall. A heartbeat was all it took. Ingrid's foot slipped from the battlements. Erik's grip on her wrist faltered, and her hand twisted free. She fell from the lavender wall without a sound. For a second, only the gusting of the wind could be heard, then there was a dull thump.

Wolfram looked at Erik, frozen in shock. The baron stared over the battlements, gazing down at the spot where his daughter had fallen. The night seemed to stand still, only the fir branches rustling in the wind.

When Erik eventually spoke, he sounded dazed, like a man waking from a long sleep.

“Would you help me downstairs, Wolfram?”

Wolfram stepped forward and offered the baron his arm. There was no mistaking the look Erik gave him.

Neither of them could ever speak of what had happened out here on the wall.

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:26 am*

Lady Ingrid's body was buried the following afternoon. She had run off in the chaos and taken a fall down the hillside; that was what Lord Erik told the monks, and no one presumed to question him. Wolfram declined to attend the funeral. He was too weary, and his arm ached. Ingrid had already caused him enough restlessness to last a lifetime. Whether or not she'd deserved his pity in the end wasn't a question he could answer. He wasn't made for such complex thoughts. For once, everything was simple again, and it was like lying down at the end of a long day.

There were many difficult questions to be answered in the following weeks. Was there to be an inquest into the deaths of the men who'd been killed? Who did the money belong to that was now being used to repair the wall? Would Aldrich's mother raise hell over what had happened?

Fortunately for Wolfram, wiser men than him were tasked with navigating those issues. Lord Erik assured him that he would face no charges for his part in the fighting. He'd been a soldier defending his lord's castle from an attempted insurrection. No court would convict him, not even if Aldrich's mother bribed every official in the county.

There were several court meetings held at the castle and down in the village, but Wolfram's presence was only ever required to confirm Dunstan's accounts of what had happened. With his arm in a sling, he went back to cleaning swords, mending mail, brushing horses, and helping in the parlour kitchen. Lavender cut up all his meals for him, even though he insisted he could do it himself. She fussed over him whenever she wasn't busy, and eventually he stopped caring about the ribbing the other squires gave him for it. He didn't mind being teased for something he secretly enjoyed.

By the time Wolfram's wound healed, most of the chaos had been resolved. Aldrich's mother planned to leave Elkinshire and take her business with her. His surviving accomplices had all been tried, some of them for further crimes in addition to what had happened at the castle. They'd been preying on the people of Elkinshire for a long time now, and without Aldrich to protect them, many past grievances resurfaced. There were numerous fines, several floggings, and a few hangings. One way or another, it didn't seem like Aldrich's cronies would be causing any more trouble in Elkinshire.

The financial damage of losing Isabella Merchant's business would be a bitter blow to the estate, Father Everwin said, but now that Lord Erik's rents were being collected in full, they could recover from it. Over the next few years, the castle would begin to prosper again.

Lord Erik himself had changed, there was no denying that. Everyone who spoke to him noted the difference. There was a coldness in him now, a lack of joviality that concerned some, but it was undercut with the focus of a man determined to see one last duty through to the end.

Julia's son was brought back to the castle along with his nurse. Erik named the infant Julian, after his mother, and spent a great deal of time making preparations for the boy's future. He was adamant that Julian should have a fine estate and a strong legacy to inherit when he came of age. Perhaps he felt guilty over Ingrid's death. Perhaps he resented her for what she'd tried to do. Perhaps he was just ready to embrace the one part of Julia that was still with him. Again, those were questions Wolfram was content to let other people ponder. He was just glad that Lord Erik had some of his old fire back. Even a man who had lost everything could still find fresh purpose in life.

The next year was a good one. Spring arrived early, and Wolfram's duties began taking him away from the castle again. He still trained and exercised with the other squires, but for all intents and purposes, he now served as one of the baron's men-at-



arms. When the rents were due, he rode out to collect them. When Erik's knights had grievances that required intervention, he donned his mail and put himself at their disposal. Twice that year he rode out to track down thieves who had made outlaws of themselves. Unlike his ill-fated expedition with Aldrich, the culprits were apprehended without violence and made to stand fair trial. Wolfram felt proud to be upholding justice in the shire, and Lavender was equally proud of him when he came home to tell her about it.

Since the kiss they'd shared, Wolfram couldn't deny their relationship any longer. He and Lavender were a courting couple. Everyone in the castle knew it. As the months passed, Meg talked often about how they would be obliged to marry as soon as Wolfram was knighted. It was her way of implying that she would never forgive him if he broke her niece's heart.

Truthfully, he was glad that his knighthood still seemed a long way off, for his feelings about Lavender remained muddled. He felt very tenderly towards her. There was no one in the world he preferred spending time with. When the weather was fine, they had supper and played board games in the old cottage. They walked hand in hand on the hillside. When Wolfram could sneak her away from the castle, they went riding across the countryside and perused the village markets, spending spare pennies on treats and trinkets for each other.

And yet, Wolfram couldn't feel the same maddening passion for Lavender that he'd felt for Ingrid. He didn't think he could feel that way about anyone anymore. As the seasons passed, he began to believe that Ingrid had ruined his ability to love. As happy as he was, that thought remained a constant weight in the pit of his stomach. It was as if she'd left a curse on him the night she fell from the wall. He and Lavender still hadn't slept together, even though they'd had many opportunities. He could tell she wanted to. Some evenings in the cottage, she would cuddle up against him, kiss his neck, and touch him through his clothing. It did excite him, but it felt different somehow, and that was confusing. He was afraid of repeating what had happened with Ingrid, so he contented himself with kisses and nothing more, and Lavender

seemed to accept that they wouldn't make love until they were married. Men and women weren't supposed to, after all, even though that standard of spiritual purity was rarely adhered to in practice.

When winter came around again, a little over a year since the night of Ingrid's death, Wolfram returned from an errand he'd been running for Sir Robert to find an important summons waiting for him at the castle. It was a snowy day, one of the first that season, and soft white domes had appeared on every upward-facing surface in the courtyard. Wolfram reined his horse in near the stable and brushed the powder of snowflakes from his cloak. The scaffolds around the north wall weren't being worked on at the moment, and with the snow lying undisturbed, every pole and plank looked like part of a delicate white sculpture perched over the new kitchen. It would be at least another year before the wall was repaired, but the kitchen had been finished a few months ago. Lavender would be in there now, working hard with Meg to prepare supper.

“Baron wants to see you, Wolf,” Dunstan said as he walked by, tugging at the fingers of a pair of mittens young Julian's nurse had made for him.

Wolfram swung himself out of the saddle and felt the satisfying crunch of his boots sinking into inch-deep snow. “What about?”

“Go in and find out. You won't want to keep him waiting.”

Intrigued, Wolfram decided to forgo warming himself up by the kitchen ovens and headed straight for the keep. The great hall was noisy with chatter. Most people were inside due to the weather, but the squires were hurrying through their chores so they could go outside and have snowball fights later.

Lord Erik stood at the high table alongside Father Everwin and a neatly dressed man Wolfram vaguely remembered seeing at court. They were perusing a collection of documents laid out in front of them while Everwin and the other man wrote

something with quills. Ink and parchment only came out when important matters were afoot. Wolfram stepped forward, resting a hand on his sword belt as he made a bow at the foot of the high table.

“You wanted to see me, my lord?”

“Come up here,” Erik motioned him over. Wolfram approached and looked at the documents. It was difficult to make out what they said from the far side of the table, but one seemed to be a list of property with valuations attached.

Father Everwin said: “Sir Daniel from Crescentfield passed away two days ago. We’ve been considering the future of his estate.”

“That can't be,” Wolfram said. “I saw him just last week. He seemed healthy as ever.”

“But he was old,” said Erik. “Old men can drop dead on a whim, especially in weather like this. The point is, he's gone, and I need someone to take over his estate.”

A tickle of excitement flared in Wolfram's chest. “Doesn't he have any family?”

“A wife and two daughters, neither of them wed. We shan't leave them out in the cold, but that estate needs a lord. They'll be dependents of the manor for the foreseeable future. It's not a rich holding. Not much to manage there, either. I expect you'll only need to visit when the villagers hold court.”

“I'm to be the new lord of Crescentfield?” Wolfram asked, still not daring to believe it.

Erik looked up at him. “Who else?”

“I'm not the eldest of your squires.”

“But you're the one who saved my castle, aren't you?”

“I'd credit that more to Dunstan.”

“Well I can't make him a knight, can I?” Erik said impatiently. “If the king needs men to go to war, I'll be sending you, and for that you'll need money. You're my choice, Wolfram. We'll make a ceremony of it sometime in the spring. Something to let the county know Elkinshire has fresh young blood in the saddle. Until then, you can start familiarising yourself with Crescentfield and your new duties. Jack here can furnish you with the details.” He gestured to the neatly dressed man, who looked up from his quill and offered Wolfram a deferential smile.

“You'll be entitled to a tithe from the village and the manor house there.”

“I'd prefer to let Sir Daniel's family keep their home,” Wolfram said.

“That is your right. As Lord Erik said, you shouldn't be obliged to visit very often if you would prefer to live elsewhere.”

“I can't have a knight sleeping in my parlour,” said Erik. “You'll have to take a house for yourself.”

Wolfram nodded absentmindedly, still too overwhelmed by the news to worry about where he'd be living. All his aspirations were finally coming true. He was going to be a knight by the time he was twenty. He couldn't wait to tell Lavender. When Erik dismissed him, he hurried out through the parlour, grinning at the other squires as they congratulated him on his knighthood. The news must have gotten around before he returned. Some of the older lads seemed a little jealous, but they offered their best wishes all the same. They knew Wolfram had distinguished himself in a way no one else could compete with.

Once he'd extricated himself from the group of wellwishers, he hurried down the

passageway to the kitchen. He found Lavender chopping leeks with her back to him. He waited till she put down her knife, then grabbed her around the waist from behind.

“Guess who it is,” he said, unable to restrain the excitement in his voice. Lavender squirmed out of his grasp and gave him an exasperated look. “Go on, guess.”

Adding a universally rude gesture to the motion, she signed: “Wolfram.”

He shook his head. “Try again.”

“An idiot.”

“That's no way to address Sir Wolfram of Elkinshire.”

“We don't have to call you milord just yet,” Meg put in. From her tone, it sounded like she'd heard the news as well. “Not till it's official.”

“I wouldn't want you calling me that anyway. It'd be strange.”

“No stranger than calling little Cat milady.”

“Can I borrow her for a bit? She's finished chopping her leeks.”

Meg waved them off. “Go on, then. It's not as if I'll be able to say no to you much longer.”

Wolfram took Lavender's hand and led her outside. The snow was falling again, but there was no wind. It was a beautiful winter's day.

“Can you believe it's finally happened?” he said.

Lavender was all smiles. “When will we be married?” she signed.

For the first time since receiving the good news, Wolfram's enthusiasm curdled. He'd forgotten. Now he was going to have to confront the one thing that had been bothering him all year. Lavender noticed his change in mood, and her expression fell.

“Will you marry me?” she signed.

“Yes,” Wolfram said firmly. “It's the right thing to do.” He realised too late that he'd made it sound like an obligation. Lavender looked heartbroken.

“Don't you love me?”

Wolfram opened his mouth to speak, but the answer was too complicated to put into words. He needed time to think, but his silence only made it worse.

“Am I too humble?” Lavender signed. “Too plain?”

“No, I don't care about that.”

Lavender stamped her foot in the snow. “Then what? Explain yourself.”

Wolfram took a deep breath and tried to gather his thoughts. Lavender gave him time. He had to be honest with her. It was the only way.

“I do love you,” he began. “I love you like you're my best friend. You are. And I'd love you as a wife, too, as best I could. But I don't know if that's enough. It isn't—” He started to falter, looking away from her as his face warmed with shame. “I used to think about sleeping with Ingrid all the time. It kept me awake at night. But after what happened with her, I can't think about women that way. I wouldn't want to think about you like that. I'm afraid it would all go wrong.”

Lavender took his hand and made him meet her gaze. She gave him a very patient look as if she was struggling not to reprimand him for saying something stupid.

“What do you think love is?” she signed.

He opened his mouth to reply, then shrugged. How could he put something like that into words?

“Did you ever think about taking walks with Ingrid? Going to market with her? Telling her about your day? Or did you only think about sex?”

Wolfram finally started to see what she was getting at. She seemed far older than him in that moment, mature in ways he was not.

“Your first crush isn't love,” Lavender explained. “What we have is. I know it. I wouldn't want a man who thought about me the way you used to think about Ingrid. You should marry me because you want to live your life with me, not because you want to sleep with me.”

Relief washed over Wolfram, so powerful and unexpected that he felt foolish for ever having doubted himself. “That is what I want.”

Lavender smiled fondly at him. “You're very brave. But you can be so sweet and silly.”

“Well, I suppose that's why I need you. To tell me when I'm being an idiot.”

They embraced. Speckles of snow fell upon Lavender's dark hair as she buried herself in the warmth of his cloak. Just like that, with a few simple words, she'd taken the edge off a pain that had been needling him for months. He resolved never to hide anything from her again. A person could build walls in their mind that seemed impassable from the inside, yet a single tap from a friend was all it took to break them down. Lavender always had a way of making him feel better about himself.

He still doubted. He worried that he wouldn't make a good husband, that he wouldn't

love Lavender the way she deserved, that their romance might somehow be false because it wasn't like the boyish fantasies he'd had about Ingrid. But he trusted Lavender, and she said what they had was enough. When Wolfram thought about it that way, he felt the same. He wasn't sure how long it would take for his doubts to fade entirely, but he wanted to believe that they would. He was tired of being afraid of something that might not exist.

“I'm so glad to have you,” he said softly.

Lavender drew away and sighed: “Me too.” Her eyes were dewy with emotion. “I never thought I could have a husband like you.”

“Well, you deserve it, Lady Lavender of Elkinshire.”

She brought her hand to her mouth, rocking back and forth with a thin rush of laughter. Wolfram grinned. They would be a lord and lady.

“I haven't a clue where we're going to live,” he said. “Lord Erik says I need a house of my own. I suppose we'll have to find something in Firfallow. I don't want to move all the way to Crescentfield.”

“What about the cottage?” Lavender sighed.

“That's not much of a lord's manor.”

“We could get it repaired. Build new rooms and a little garden. We'd have the money. It could be a proper manor house in time.”

Wolfram nodded, already liking the idea. “I don't think Lord Erik would object. We'd still basically be living at the castle.”

“And that way I could stay with Meg and help in the kitchen.”



“Are you sure?”

Lavender nodded firmly. “Plenty of knight's wives help with things like that. I enjoy cooking.”

“If that's what you want. Maybe we'll have a kitchen and servants of our own someday, then you can be the one in charge of everyone.”

“I'd have to teach them to understand me first.”

“You could do it. You taught me, didn't you? They'd have to listen to the lady of the manor.”

They took a little walk as they talked, leaving twin trails of footprints behind them as they made a circuit of the courtyard. They passed by Dunstan and Gavin, who were busy pulling nails out of a rotten old fence by the armoury so it could be dismantled. Dunstan handed his pair of pliers to Gavin and gave Wolfram an almost nonchalant nod. The thinnest of smiles hid behind his stubble. As casually as if he'd been addressing any passing noble, he acknowledged Wolfram with a simple: “Milord.”

Gavin didn't even look up to see who it was. A grin spread across Wolfram's face, but Dunstan was already turning away, gripping the top of a post with his mittens so Gavin could yank out another plank. Wolfram resisted the urge to say anything. Dunstan was a man of few words. Just one had been enough.

They climbed the steps that led to the top of the lavender wall. They were away from the keep end, far from the place Ingrid had fallen. From where they stood, they could see all of Firfallow covered in snow. They watched in silence for a while, enjoying the beautiful patterns of the snowflakes twirling in the air around them.

“What do you think our wedding will be like?” Lavender signed.

“I haven't thought about it.”

“We could do it tomorrow. Father Everwin could marry us.”

Wolfram shook his head, but not because he was reluctant this time. “It should be a proper wedding.”

Lavender looked pleased. “I didn't think you'd want anything special.”

“I don't, really, but you do. You took such good care of me when I was hurt. I want to do something special for you now. I'll save up some money after I'm knighted. We'll have a feast and a minstrel and fine new clothes.”

“And your family should be there, too.”

“Oh, yes! I want you to meet my mother. She'd like you.”

“I want to meet them all.”

Wolfram put his arm around her, and she leaned in against his side.

“Don't be too eager to run off to war,” Lavender signed. “You've got other things to care about now.”

She was right. Wolfram still had his aspirations of riding into battle against the king's enemies; his years at the Lavender Castle had proven that knighthood was his calling. But it was no longer the only thing that mattered to him. He wanted to be a good friend, a loyal servant, and a loving husband.

“I know.” He kissed her snow-flecked hair. “I'm all yours.”