

Holly and Iron

GARTH NIX

Here's a spooky, suspenseful, and exciting adventure set in a time when two worlds and two races, and two ancient systems of magic, have collided, one pitched in a deadly battle against the other—with some surprising results.

Australian writer Garth Nix has worked as a book publicist, editor, marketing consultant, public relations man, and literary agent while also writing books, including the bestselling Old Kingdom series, which consists of Sabriel, Lirael: Daughter of the Clayr, Abhorsen, and The Creature in the Case. His other books include the Seventh Tower series, consisting of The Fall, Castle, Aenir, Above the Veil, Into Battle, and The Violet Keystone; the Keys to the Kingdom series, consisting of Mister Monday, Grim Tuesday, Drowned Wednesday, Sir Thursday, Lady Friday and two more titles yet to be published; as well as stand-alone novels such as The Ragwitch and Shade's Children. His most recent book is the collection Across the Wall: A Tale of Abhorsen and Other Stories. Born in Melbourne, he grew up in Canberra and now lives in Sydney, Australia.

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IX men-at-arms, all mounted,” reported Jack. He paused to spit out some nutshells, a remnant of his transition from squirrel-shape to human form, before he added, “Three in front of the litter, three behind.”

“And the litter-bearers?” asked Merewyn. She didn’t look at Jack as he put his clothes back on, her sharp blue eyes intent on the party that was making its way along the old Roman road that cut straight through the valley, only a hundred yards below their hiding-place high on the densely wooded slope.

“Slaves,” said Jack. “Our folk, from the look of them. They all wear braided holly-charms on their ankles. So there is no ironmaster hiding amongst them.”

“An ironmaster can stand holly for a short time, longer if it is not

against his skin,” corrected Merewyn. “Or they might make false holly from paper or painted wood. You’re absolutely sure?”

Jack nodded. He was a big man, six feet tall and very broad in the shoulder. Even in his smallest squirrel-form, he was almost two feet tall, and he could also shape himself as a large boar or bear. Even so, he was a head shorter and fifty pounds lighter than his younger brother, known as Doublejack, who stood silently by, awaiting Merewyn’s instructions. Doublejack would probably take the shape of a *cralle* dog—a huge beast the size of a pony—if they were to attack the Norman in the litter and his guards.

Jack and Doublejack were the only shape-shifters in Merewyn’s band. It was a very rare talent, not often used as shifters needed to eat a huge amount of fresh meat upon returning to their human form, something not easily obtained. Even now, Jack was eyeing the freshly dressed deer hanging by its hind leg from a nearby branch. Going down in size made him less hungry than going up, but he would still eat a haunch or two, leaving the rest for Doublejack to gorge on later.

“Six men-at-arms,” mused Merewyn aloud. “A curious number. Why only six? Everyone knows we’re in these woods. They look sun-dark too, maybe pullani mercenaries . . . not household troops, which is also curious. And there is something strange about that litter. I cannot truly say I sense it, but I suspect some Norman magic is at work. Something of cold iron . . . yet I cannot be sure . . . Robin?”

Robin shook her head impatiently, indicating she felt no Norman magic at work. She did not want to feel any, so she did not focus her full concentration on the litter.

“Do we attack or not?” asked Robin impatiently.

Like the men and her half-sister Merewyn, Robin was dressed in a heavy woollen tunic over leather-booted hose, but apart from the clothes neither she nor Merewyn tried to disguise their femininity. Both had long hair, braided back and pinned with silver and amber, offering some protection against Norman magic workings and helpful for their own English magic.

Silver and amber looked perfectly normal against Merewyn’s blonde hair. She was all English, tall and muscular, a fair-faced warrior woman who could wrestle down a stag and stab it in the neck, or send a cloth-yard shaft from her longbow two hundred yards through a Norman man-at-arms,

brigantine and all.

Robin, to her eternal embarrassment and shame, looked more Norman than English herself. She was shorter and stockier than her sister, dark-haired and grey-eyed, and always very brown from their outdoor life. She took after her mother, her father's second wife. The one he had stolen from her Norman father, unwittingly setting in train not only his own death but also the loss of his kingdom to that selfsame Norman, and the chain of events that led to his two daughters lurking in the fringe of trees above a valley, the elder leading a band of what could variously be described as bandits, rebels, or the last remnants of the army of the true King of England.

"I am uneasy," said Merewyn. She looked up at the sky. The sun was still a full disc, but low and near the western hills. Two ravens circled over-head, black shapes against the darkening sky. "We will lose the light very soon, and we do not know who is in the litter."

"Only six guards," said Robin. "It can't be any one important... or dangerous."

"It could be someone confident enough to need no larger escort," said Merewyn. "An ironmaster hiding his charms and devices until the last."

"Let's attack before it *is* dark," urged Robin. "We haven't had a chance like this for weeks."

Merewyn didn't answer. Robin frowned, then tugged at her sister's sleeve.

"This'll be the third Norman we've let go if you don't give the order! What's wrong with you?"

"There is nothing wrong, Robin," said Merewyn softly. "Knowing when not to attack is as important to a leader as being up front swinging a sword."

"That's not leading!" snapped Robin. "*This* is leading!"

She snatched the horn from Merewyn's shoulder and, before her sister could stop her, blew a ringing peal that echoed across the valley. That done, she darted forward, drawing her sword as she ran.

The horn blast set the well-prepared ambush in motion. The heavy reverberation of axes on wood sounded ahead of the Norman's party. A few seconds later, a great tree came twisting down across the path,

testament to the wood-cutters' skill in keeping it balanced all afternoon on the thinnest spire of uncut trunk.

As the tree crashed, archers stepped out from their hiding places on the edge of the cleared area on the side of the path and began to shoot at the guards' horses. The guards responded by charging the archers, bellowing oaths and cursing. Unusually, the litter-bearers didn't simply run away, top-pling the litter, but set it down carefully before sprinting off between the trees.

Robin ran on the heels of a shaggy, slavering dog that stood higher than her shoulder. Merewyn and Jack came behind her, with a dozen of their band, all armed with swords, spears, or bill-hooks. They were the blocking force, to prevent an escape back along the path, as the fallen tree prevented any escape the other way.

But there was no attempt to flee. One of the guards was dead on the ground, killed instantly by an arrow that found a chink in his mail coif. Two more were trapped under dead or dying horses. The remaining three had realised the impossibility of riding down archers hiding in the forest fringe and had turned back.

"Surrender!" called Robin. She was out of breath from the mad charge down the slope and had to repeat the call. "Surrender!"

The three men-at-arms looked at the archers, who were once again stepping out of the green shadows, at the huge *cralle* dog that chose that moment to howl, and at the fifteen armed bandits approaching.

"You will die if you try to charge through," said Merewyn loudly, correctly observing the intention announced by the tensing of the men's arms and the flick of their horses' heads. "We will give quarter."

Two of the men-at-arms looked at the third, who nodded and threw down his sword. His companions did likewise. Then they dismounted and stood by their horses' heads, casting dark looks at Robin and Merewyn and nervous glances at Doublejack, who was sniffing around the litter.

Merewyn made a signal, and the archers moved closer, arrows still nocked and ready to loose. Six of her men raced forward and threw the men-at-arms to the ground, binding their hands as they also removed their daggers, boot-knives, and, in the case of the leader, a tiny knife scabbarded in the back of his gauntlet.

“Who is in the litter?” asked Robin. There had been no movement from it, not even the twitch of a curtain pulled aside. Doublejack was still sidling around it, his huge nose wrinkled much as a human forehead might frown in thought.

“An old Norman merchant,” said one of the men-at-arms, the one the others had looked to. He had the faded, crescent scar of a slave tattoo on his cheek. “Going to the baths at Aquae Sulis.”

“Not until he’s paid his toll, he’s not,” said Robin. She strode over to the litter, hacked off the knots that held the curtain to the frame, pulled the rich but travel-stained velvet drapes aside, and trampled them under her heels.

There was a man inside the litter, sitting upright, wrapped in a thick cloak of blue felt, the hood pulled up and forward, so his face was shad-owed. He had a chess-table set before him, of dark mahogany and ivory. There was a game in progress, though no one sat opposite him, slate-grey pieces in movement against softer, smaller ones of cherry-wood.

“You are our prisoner,” said Robin. She extended her sword-arm, the point hovering a few inches from the man’s hooded face. “And we will want a suitable ransom. What is your name?”

Instead of answering, the man lifted one of the slate-grey knights from the chess-board. Robin had only a moment to register that *all* the grey pieces were knights before she suddenly felt her sword twist violently out of her hand and hurtle up and behind her, almost impaling Doublejack.

Robin immediately snatched her necklace-garrote of holly-beads from her belt, but before she could do anything with it, the Norman flung down the grey knight. As it hit the ground, there was a clap of thunder, strange and terrible in the still air. Heat washed over Robin, as if she’d stepped into a forge, and there was no longer a chess piece between her and the palan-quin, but an eight-foot-tall warrior, made entirely of iron, bearing a sword of blue-edged star-steel and a kite shield green with verdigris.

The iron warrior pushed his green shield at Robin, a blow that would have knocked her to the ground if she had not flung herself backward. Los-ing her garrote in the fall, she rolled and wriggled away as the iron warrior stomped towards her, its feet leaving deep impressions in the soft forest soil.

Robin heard Merewyn shouting “Flee!” but her sister did not follow her own orders. Instead, she rushed forward to help Robin up. The ground was damp and the leaf mulch slippery, and they slid apart as Robin got to her feet, with Merewyn behind her.

In that instant, the iron warrior was upon them. Merewyn tried to pivot on guard as it slammed its iron shield towards her, but it was too quick. The iron rim of its shield caught her full in the neck. There was a sickening crack, all too like a snapping branch, and Merewyn was hurled to the ground. She lay there, her head at an impossible angle.

Robin could do nothing but run. There were thunder-claps all around as the ironmaster threw out his chess pieces, iron warriors rising up where the knights fell. Robin ducked, weaved, and zigzagged to the tree-line, with iron warriors smashing their way through saplings, shrubs, and bushes towards her.

She paused when she reached the trees, twisting back to take a look. The nearest iron warrior was a dozen paces away, allowing Robin a few seconds’ grace to take in the scene before she had to run again.

A full dozen iron warriors stalked the clearing, and there were two more standing in front of the palanquin, their shields raised to protect the ironmaster from archery. Not that there was any one shooting at him. Merewyn’s band had vanished like a summer shower. The only signs that they had ever been there were the men-at-arms working away at their bonds—and Merewyn’s body, a dozen paces from the palanquin.

Robin waited another second she couldn’t afford, hoping that she would see Merewyn move, that her sister would suddenly get up and sprint away. But she didn’t move. Deep inside, beneath the barrier of hope, Robin knew that Merewyn wouldn’t get up, now or ever. She’d been hit too hard.

The iron warrior struck at the tree in front of Robin, its sword shear-ing through the wrist-thick branches she was sheltering behind, a spray of woodchips chasing Robin as she fled deeper into the forest.

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NOT long after dawn the next morning, with the inexplicably insistent and enduring iron warriors left behind only a few hours before (and at least one of them struggling in one of the forest’s more extensive bogs) Robin wearily climbed up on to the broad, ground-sweeping branch of an ancient oak and used it as a bridge over the narrow ravine known to locals as

Hammer bite.

She looked for the two sentinels on the upper branches, but no one was there. There didn't seem to be any one in the camp either, when she rounded the trunk and looked out through the lesser trees at the row of leather tents, carefully pitched under the overhang of a huge ledge of shale, an outcrop from the grey hill whose bare crown poked out of the forest a hundred yards above the camp.

Robin whistled dispiritedly, not really expecting an answer, and so was not surprised when there wasn't one. She trudged over to the fire pit and looked down into it. The fire was emplaced about three feet down to disguise the smoke, and it was fed only good, dry wood, so it would burn clean. It was always kept alight, for there was never any knowing when fire might be needed.

But it was not burning now. Robin picked up the bent iron rod that doubled as poker and pot-hanger and stirred the ashes, but not one bright coal emerged.

She kept poking it long after this was clear, for want of anything better to do. It seemed symbolic to be stirring dead ashes, the ruins of a once-bright fire. Merewyn was dead, and it was all Robin's fault. She had got her own sister killed. The fact that none of the band had returned to the camp indicated that they thought so too, perhaps coupled with the distrust of her Norman heritage that had always simmered beneath the surface, kept in check only by Merewyn's authority.

She stabbed the poker hard into the ashes, wishing that it were the heart of the Norman ironmaster. Flames suddenly erupted from the dead ashes, and Robin jumped back. Not in fear of the flames, but of what she had just done, without thinking.

"That's a right Norman trick. Iron magic," said Jack, making Robin jump again, this time almost into the fire.

"I ... I didn't..."

Jack shook his head and crouched down to pick up a gnarled knot of ancient beech, which he threw down on to the fire.

"You needn't fear, lass," he said. "I always knew you had the iron magic from your mother. There's no one here to see but me and Doublejack, and he's across the Hammerbite, eating up a gobbet of

something I didn't care to look at."

"Did you see ..." asked Robin quietly. "Is Merewyn ..."

Jack took the poker and made sparks fly. He didn't look at Robin.

"The Princess is dead," he said finally. "I took the squirrel-shape and went back to be sure, though the *Ferratnenta* chased me anyway. Her neck was broken. They took the body."

"I killed her," whispered Robin. She picked up handfuls of dry dirt and smeared them across her face, then she stood up and screamed, her words flying back at her, reflected by the overhanging shale. "I killed my sister!"

She reached for the hot coals of the fire and would have taken two handfuls, but Jack caught her in a bear hug and lifted her away, with her still kicking and screaming and quite out of her head with shock and grief and exhaustion. He carried her to the tent that was their makeshift surgery and hospice, patting her on the head and crooning the nonsense words he'd used long ago to calm young dogs when he was the King of England's mas-ter of hounds.

When her threshing stopped and the screaming subsided into a dull, inward keening, he laid her down, and, taking up a small leather bottle, poured a cordial of *dwale* down her throat. Within a few minutes, the potent combination of hemlock, Italian mandragora, poppy-juice, henbane, and wine quieted her and only a little later sent her into a dreamless sleep.

When she awoke, Robin felt strangely calm and distant, as if a veil of many months lay between her and Merewyn's death. But she knew that the dusk she could see outside was the partner of the *Ferramenta-haunted* dawn. Even *dwale-sleep* could not hold someone for more than nine or ten hours.

The taste of the herbal brew was still in her mouth, and her breath stank as if she had vomited, though she was clean enough. Her hands had been washed, and the scratches smeared with yarrow paste. Robin stared at the scratches and for a few seconds couldn't remember how she had got them. She sat for a minute or two, thinking, then she slowly unfastened her dark Norman hair and hacked it short with her dagger, so short that her scalp bled and had to be staunched with cloth.

Jack and Doublejack were sitting by the fire, occasionally passing a wine-skin between them, with an even more occasional word or two. They looked around as Robin emerged from her tent, started at her changed appearance, then got up and bowed as she approached. Deep, courtly bows, out of place for outlaws in a wild woodland den.

“Don’t,” said Robin. “Not to me.”

“You are the Princess Royal now,” said Jack. “Heir of Inland.”

“Ruler of all I survey,” muttered Robin, gesturing at the empty camp. She held out her hand for the wine-skin, and poured a long draught down her throat before handing it back.

“You are King Harold’s daughter,” said Jack. Doublejack nodded in emphasis, almost spilling the wine. “You are the rightful Queen of Inland.”

Robin laughed bitterly.

“Queen of nothing,” she said. “We should have found another way, not this bandit life, skulking in the trees, while Duke William’s rule grows ever stronger.”

“We have been biding our time,” said Jack. The words came easily to his lips, the familiar speech he had made to doubters before. “The Duke is old and has no sons. The Normans will fight each other when he dies, and we shall have our chance. The true English will flock to your banner—”

“No,” said Robin. “They won’t. They might have come to serve Merewyn. They won’t serve me. Besides, Duke William looked well enough yesterday eve. He might live for years, even beget himself new sons.”

“It was the Duke?” asked Jack. “I wondered—”

“It must have been,” said Robin. “Fourteen *Ferramenta*, walking for hours, never wavering in their purpose. Duke William is the only living ironmaster who wields such power. It was him. My grandfather was my sister’s bane. Though I also must bear the fault—”

“Nay,” interrupted Jack quickly, as he saw the grief begin to twist Robin’s face. “None can escape their doom. The Princess was fated to fall as she did.”

Robin did not answer for a full minute, her gaze locked on the fire.

When she at last lifted her chin, her eyes were red, but there were no tears. A plan ... or at this stage just a notion . . . was already swimming up from the dark depths of her mind.

“Who stands to inherit from the Duke should he die now?” she asked. Merewyn had always kept up with the many machinations, plots, counter-plots, and deaths among the Norman nobility, but Robin chose not to know, as part of her repudiation of that side of her heritage.

“I think three of the eight grand-nephews still live, his sister’s son’s sons,” replied Jack. “And the son of his brother’s leman, the Bastard of Aurillac, has something of a claim to Normandy alone.”

He hesitated, then added, “None of your cousins has as good a claim to the Duke’s lands as you do, Highness.”

“I am not a Norman heir!” protested Robin. “My claim flows from my father, the true and English King! Besides, the Duke has already tried to slay me, as his iron servants slew Merewyn!”

Jack tilted his head just a fraction, indicating his doubt that the *Ferramenta* had actually tried to kill Robin. But she did not see it, her eyes on the fire and her mind on other things.

“If I die, Jack, who stands next in the true line?”

Jack looked at her, trying to fathom what she was thinking. He had known her since she was born, but even as a little girl it had been hard to gauge her thoughts or predict her actions. She was always headstrong, a fault usually tempered by intelligence. She never did the same stupid, im-petuous thing twice. Though sometimes once was all it took for lifelong regrets.

“None stand clear,” replied Jack slowly. “The kin of your father’s brother’s wife in Jutland. King Sven would claim by that right, I think. But he would gather no following amongst our people here—”

“Is there no other English heir?”

“There are distant cousins of your family, but none with the name or blood to stir the hearts of the people. Even fewer could wield the holly-magic or the rowan, as you do.”

The fact that Robin could also wield the iron magic was left unsaid

between them. The magics of holly and rowan were English, born of the land, bred true in the royal line. Iron magic was not native to the island kingdom; it was an alien power, like the Norman invaders themselves. It was also magic much more suited to war and conquest.

“What do you intend, Highness?” asked Jack.

Robin did not answer.

“I know ... I suppose . . . you will wish to see the rites conducted for Princess Merewyn. But we cannot bring a priest here, or linger ourselves. The *Ferramenta* may not cross the Hammerbite, but men-at-arms could, and this place is known . . . and the local folk may not hold out against questioning.”

“Not now they know Merewyn is dead,” said Robin bitterly. “Tell me, does that fat priest still haunt the cave near the whitestone glade?”

Jack looked at Doublejack.

“Aye, he does,” said the huge man.

“Which god does he serve?”

Doublejack shrugged. “He keeps to himself. I would guess the All-father.”

“Not the best—” said Jack.

“Can he sing a death?” interrupted Robin.

“He sang for Wat the miller’s son,” said Doublejack. “Not at the cave, though.”

“Her death should be sung at the High Chapel in Winchester,” said Robin bitterly. “But we cannot go there, or to any temple or church that I can think of. So we will go to the fat priest, no matter which god he worships.”

Jack and Doublejack bowed, though it was clear Jack would have argued more if Robin had allowed it.

“We should take what we can from here, Highness,” said Jack. “We will not be able to come back.”

"I will gather what is needed from our . . . my tent," said Robin. She walked the little way over to the small leather tent she had shared for so many years with Merewyn. There was little enough inside to pack. She took Merewyn's second-best bow, which was better than her own, but left everything else. Of her own stuff, she took a quiver, amongst its dozen arrows one ivory-tipped, black-fletched shaft, made for killing Norman iron-masters; a small purse of silver pennies; and more hunting-clothes.

Then she reached under her straw-stuffed bed and retrieved a leather case. It contained two books. One, bound in bright blue calf-skin, was a primer for the English magics of holly, rowan, and oak. The other, bound in dull bronze and black leather, was her mother's *grimoire*, an ironmaster's compendium of spells and lore.

Robin took everything outside to pack and sort. She could feel grief and raw emotion rising up in her again, overcoming the numbing dregs of *dwale* that still coursed through her blood. But she forced the complex mix of guilt, rage, and sorrow back down and concentrated on balancing her case, bow, quiver, and sack of clothes. It took her only a very few minutes, for quick departures had been part of her life for four years. Even so, Jack and Doublejack were already ahead of her, the hawker's baskets on their backs full of everything of worth that needed to be carried away.

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IT was a long walk, via the most hidden paths in the deep forest. The night was light enough for travel, with the moon waxing and near full, and the stars bright save for a single long wisp of cloud on the horizon. Robin gave little thought to where she put her feet or to the green world around her. She simply followed Jack, with Doublejack behind, her mind mostly stuck on a narrow path of its own, a constant repetition of those fateful seconds when the *Ferramenta* stepped forward and swung its shield at Merewyn.

To try to break out of this pattern, Robin began to focus on a plan that was slowly gathering momentum in her mind. An act that, if successful, might make some small amends to Merewyn's shade, to her father, and to the people of England.

It was near midnight when they reached the cave. Though they were quiet and came so late, the priest was waiting for them on the high ledge outside the cave-mouth.

Merewyn's band knew him as the fat priest, for he had carried much excess flesh when he'd first arrived in the forest. But that was two years

past, and he was now gaunt, great folds of skin around his cheeks and neck the only signs of his previous corpulence. It was unlikely any one from his past, before he came to the cave, would recognise him. Particularly since, in addition to being a much reduced man, he had also chosen to cut out his left eye in honour of his god.

The priest went down on one knee as Robin climbed up the stone steps to the cave entrance, Jack pushing past him to make sure no one lurked in-side.

“I welcome you, Highness, in the Allfather’s name,” the priest intoned quietly.

“I am honoured,” replied Robin. It was best to be civil to priests and particularly to those who served the Allfather. “I suppose since you know who I am you also know what I wish of you.”

“To sing Princess Merewyn beyond this world,” replied the priest. “A raven came to me with the dawn, with the news of her death and what would be required of me. But come, set down your burdens. I have pre-pared ale and oat-cakes within.”

“We do not worship the Allfather,” said Robin. “And do not wish to be beholden to him. We will set our packs down here, sit on these steps, and sup on our bread and water, while you sing.”

“As you wish,” said the priest. He got to his feet creakily and went into the cave, emerging a few minutes later with a harp that only had four strings, a cup of ale, an oat-cake, and a silver-bound ox-horn. He set all but the harp upon the ground. Taking the instrument under his arm, the priest looked to the starry sky and slowly began to pick out a tune. It began sim-ply, but grew more complex, and Robin felt sure she could hear the strings that weren’t there.

Then the priest began to sing as well. His voice was hoarse, but strong, and after the first few words, it echoed strangely, almost as if someone far distant had joined in the singing.

Robin shivered as the song grew louder and stranger, with the unseen voice beginning to drown out the priest. Then suddenly Robin heard Merewyn, clear through the layers of song, in between the harp notes.

“Robin! Seek new beginnings!”

Robin sprang to her feet and rushed towards the priest, but even as she gripped him, screaming “Merewyn! Merewyn!” her sister’s voice was gone, as were the others. There was only the priest, silent now himself, plucking one last note.

“She is gone,” said the priest. He stepped back out of Robin’s grasp. She did not try to restrain him. “You had best begone yourself, Highness, before your men wake.”

Robin looked behind her. Jack and Doublejack were sprawled against the steps, chests slowly rising and falling in the rhythm of deep sleep.

“Duke William is at Winchester,” said the priest. His single eye reflected the moonlight with a red glint, as if there was also fire in the sky. “You wish to kill him, do you not? Have your revenge?”

“Yes,” said Robin warily. She was not entirely sure who she was talking to now, whether it be the priest or the one he served. She could feel the sudden attention of the oaks in the forest. They would not bend themselves to listen to a mortal. But it was not safe to seek the Allfather’s favour. He was a god who loved battle and dissent, and delighted in sudden treachery.

“Your servants would try to prevent you going to Winchester,” said the priest. “But they will sleep here till the dawn, and by then you will be at the gates of Winchester, with your black arrow.”

“I do not want your aid, whoever or whatever you are,” snapped Robin. “Wake my men!”

“I only wish to be of service,” wheedled the priest. “Duke William is a powerful adversary. How will you strike at him, without more powerful allies?”

“I asked only for what any kin may ask of any priest, to sing my sister’s death,” said Robin. “I will take nothing else, and owe no debt. Wake my men!”

“Very well,” said the priest. “I will wake them.”

He snatched up the ox-horn and blew it mightily, its peal echoing out across the forest. It was answered not just by Jack and Doublejack’s sudden, surprised oaths, but by many voices on the forest path below,

accompanied by the jangle of arms, armour, and harness.

Robin looked down and saw a column of men-at-arms stretching back along the path, their helmets glinting in the moonlight. They were leading their horses and there were at least two score of them, perhaps more.

When Robin turned back, the priest was gone, as were horn, cup, and oat-cake. Shouts from below showed that she had been seen. Within a few seconds there would be Norman men-at-arms charging up the steps.

“Into the cave, Highness!” exclaimed Jack. He pushed Robin out of the moonlight, into the dark entrance. “You must escape!”

Robin knew there was a wide, natural chimney at the rear of the cave, but she couldn’t see it, and she didn’t even try to find it. Instead, she turned back towards Jack and Doublejack. Two silhouettes, etched in moonlight, standing in the cave entrance with drawn swords. From beyond them came the crash of soldiers charging up the steps, and sudden war-cries that echoed and danced around the cave.

“Go!” shouted Jack. He didn’t turn around. A moment later, he and Doublejack were beset by three men-at-arms, all that could attack the cave-mouth at one time. But many more waited their turn on the steps or the forest-floor below.

Robin tried to think of some magic she could do, something that might hold the soldiers off long enough for Jack and Doublejack to disengage. But no English spell came to mind, not one that would work in a cold stone cave. And she had none of the apparatus or the prepared objects that would let her work any serious Norman magic.

But she had her sword. She ran forward and, crouching between her two housecarls, stabbed out at the knee of one of the attacking men-at-arms. Her thrust struck home, sliding under the skirts of the man’s mail byrnie. He stumbled back, teetered on the edge of the cave’s natural porch, was helped along by a sword-thrust from Jack, and fell over the edge.

One of the other men-at-arms was already dead on the ground. The third backed towards the steps. A commanding voice from the forest-floor below bellowed out, “Bring up the archers!”

“Take the Princess and flee!” ordered Jack to his brother. Doublejack shook his head. It started as a human head-shake but ended up as a dog’s.

His shredded clothes and basket fell to the ground and a huge *cralle* dog crouched, ready to spring. With a deep bass howl that Robin felt from her feet up through her breastbone, the huge beast leapt forward, straight at the terrified men-at-arms, who tried to jump back, beginning a mass fall down the steps.

Jack watched for two long seconds, then whirled around, gripping Robin's arm with considerable force.

"To the chimney!"

Robin tried to wriggle out of his grasp as they ran into the cave. She couldn't see a thing, but Jack obviously could, for they didn't run into any-thing.

"We have to go back! Doublejack—"

"They'll shoot us down. Don't waste his gift!"

Robin stopped struggling. Jack dragged her along another half-dozen steps, then abruptly picked her up. Tilting her head back, Robin could see a faint circle of lighter darkness above her.

"There are iron staples," said Jack. "I hope."

"There are," said Robin. She knew where they were without having to see them. Iron called to her; she could feel its resonance deep in her bones. She reached out blindly, her fingers closed around the first staple, and she started to climb.

The chimney was about fifty feet high. Robin emerged on the side of a steep slope, between stunted trees that clung to the rock with gnarled, exposed roots. Jack climbed out behind her.

Both of them looked down the slope. The cave-mouth was hidden from them, but they could see at least forty Norman men-at-arms standing ready on the path below it, including half-a-dozen archers who stood in a semi-circle, laughing and joking. From their triumphant demeanour, and the snatches of talk that drifted up the hill, it was clear Doublejack's furious attack had ended under a hail of arrows.

"Doublejack—"

"He's dead," said Jack. "Come on. Some brave fool will try the

chim-ney, sooner or later, and the wiser will come up the easy side of the hill.”

Using the exposed roots as handholds, Jack started to make his way diagonally across and up the slope. Robin followed more slowly. Jack no longer had his basket to weigh him down, but Robin had managed to keep her leather bag and quiver, though Merewyn’s bow lay on the cave steps below.

It was a hard scramble to the top of the hill, followed by a frantic, dipping, ducking run between, under, and around the trees and bushes that followed the ridge-line, as the Normans had already raced up the easier side of the hill. Fortunately, they were much slower and clumsier in the forest than Jack and Robin and could not simply bull their way through the undergrowth like the *Ferramenta*.

At last, when the noise of their pursuers faded and there was only the expected sounds of the night forest, Jack stopped before a vast, lightning-struck remnant of a royal oak. It was split in several places, revealing a hollow chamber within, but none of the holes were large enough to allow even a child passage.

“Highness, can you make us a way?”

Robin touched the oak, her palm flat on the ancient trunk. If the tree had been alive, she would have felt its green spark at once. But this oak was long dead. Only its shade remained, contained within the collective memory of the forest.

Robin stopped breathing and stood as still as she could. She felt the forest mind slowly drift into her head, like a fog gliding across the moor. She felt what it was to be a sapling reaching for the sun, to have leaves trembling under heavy raindrops, branches reaching out and dividing many times, a trunk thickening its girth for year after year, century after century.

She became the oak, took its place in the memory of the forest. Green shoots sprang out around her palm. Old, dry bark quickened under her skin. One of the holes in the trunk groaned and split farther, a tiny twig growing out from one side. The split expanded, and the twig became a branch, tiny shoots forming on its edges, leaves unrolling from the green buds a few moments later.

“Enough,” said Jack.

Robin heard him from far away. But she did not want to let go, did not want to leave the forest. She was the oak, and all her human pain and guilt and fear were somewhere else, far away and alien.

More branches grew around the split, questing outward.

“Enough!” said Jack again, more strongly.

Robin shuddered and withdrew her hand, tearing the skin where the bark had grown around the fleshy mound between thumb and wrist.

She sucked at the graze as she ducked through the split and into the warm, dry, and remarkably roomy chamber that occupied perhaps a quarter of the royal oak’s broken stump. The interior was lined with thick moss, on which Robin gratefully lay down, letting the exhaustion she’d held back flow through her limbs.

After a few minutes, Jack, who was propped up near the split, said, “We’ll be safe enough here till the dawn. After that, it might be best to make for the convent at Avington. You could claim sanctuary there.”

“No,” said Robin. “I’ll not run from the Allfather to Christ Godsson.”

“What shall you do then, Highness?” asked Jack. His voice was weary, so weary that he stumbled on his words. Robin looked at him, and for the first time in her young life, saw that Jack was old. Forty at least, perhaps even older. She hadn’t noticed that he was grey with fatigue, for Robin had been thinking only of herself.

“I’m sorry, Jack,” she said quietly. “For everything. If I hadn’t been so impatient to attack, none of this . . . Merewyn . . . Doublejack . . .”

“If not then, it would have been soon anyway,” said Jack. All his usual confidence was gone, his tone strange to Robin. “Princess Merewyn knew it. We had more than two thousand men in the months after Senlac Hill. How many stood with us two days ago? Four-and-thirty! I fear to say it, Highness, but I think the time has come for you to treat with your grand-father.”

“What?” snapped Robin.

Jack closed his eyes for several seconds before forcing them open again with obvious effort.

“Let us speak of this in daylight, Highness,” he whispered. “I am weary, so weary . . . perhaps it is weariness and despair that speaks. Let us talk on the morrow ...”

His voice trailed off, his head slumped to one side, and his breathing slowly changed, clear indication that he had fallen into an exhausted sleep.

Robin stayed awake, anger frothing about inside her, but she could not maintain her rage. Jack had served her father and her sister faithfully for far longer than Robin had lived. He was mistaken, of course. It might seem as if the English were defeated, but Robin had no intention of falling on her knees before her grandfather and begging forgiveness. She had other plans.

Other plans which meant forcing herself to wake before the dawn and creep from the hollow oak, leaving Jack still asleep. She looked down at him for a few moments, wondering if she was doing the right thing, and found herself reaching out to wake him. But she stopped, her hand waver-ing a few inches from his shoulder. Jack would not allow her to do what she intended.

Even so, she felt she could not leave him without a word or sign to show that she had gone of her own free will and not been taken by enemies. So she took the silver-set amber hairpin that no longer had a place to go on her shorn head, and stuck it in the ground by Jack.

* * * *

BY the time the sun was well up and warming the air, Robin was hidden amidst long grass, watching the Roman road that ran down from Newbury to Winchester. A lone rider had passed by just after the dawn, but Robin was looking for a large group of travellers, or better yet, a train of mer-chants that she could join and mingle with. To better do so, she had thrown away her quiver, keeping only the ivory-tipped arrow, which was uncom-fortably tied to her waist under her tunic. She had cut it short, throwing away the flight end, for Robin did not intend to shoot this arrow.

A small group of broad-hatted, staff-wielding pilgrims followed the lone rider an hour after the dawn had yielded to the bright sunshine of a summer day. Robin ignored them too. She would stand out like a dark toadstool in a basket of mushrooms amidst the pilgrims.

The next group was much more promising. It looked like the whole

population of a village, going to the fair at Winchester to sell their produce. More than thirty men and women, with half a dozen hand-carts and three ox-hauled wagons.

Robin stepped out of the trees, pulling her tunic down and hose up, as if she were returning to the road after modestly finding a more private toi-let than the roadside ditch.

Thirty pairs of suspicious eyes watched her approach. But when they saw that she had neither sword nor bow, and was not the precursor of a throng of armed bandits, some called out a greeting, the words unclear but the intention friendly.

They were from two villages, Robin found as she walked and talked amongst them. She had thought they might be wary of her, with her Nor-man looks, but if they were, they didn't show it. Towards mid-morning, a grandmother even invited Robin to ride with her on an ox-wagon, making one of her grand-daughters step down. Robin accepted gratefully, for she was very weary.

They did not talk at first. But after a mile of silence, save for the rum-ble of the wheels, the creak of the cart, and the occasional snuffling bellow from the oxen, the woman asked a question. Her dialect was thick, but Robin understood her well enough.

"Where are you from, boy? Who is your master?"

"Winchester," said Robin, glad that as she hoped, she had been taken for a boy. "I am a freeman. My name is ... Wulf."

The woman nodded three times, as if impressing the information into her head.

"I am Aelva," she said. "Widow. My sons are also freemen, holding a hide of land from Henry Molyneux."

"Is he a good lord?" asked Robin.

"Aye, better than the last."

"The Normans have many bad lords," said Robin. She saw the woman's gaze slide across her shorn hair, and added, "My father was English. My mother Norman."

“The last lord before Sir Henry was English. We danced when the tid-ings came of his end at Senlac Hill.”

Robin glared at her and stood, ready to jump off the cart. But the woman caught her elbow.

“I meant no harm, lad. English or Norman lords, it matters not to me, but I’ll say no more.”

Robin slowly sat back down. They did not talk again, but after a while settled into a companionable silence, the moment of tension between them left on the road behind.

Instead of talking, Robin watched the countryside, enjoying the fresh air and the sunshine. It was years since she’d been out of the forest in day-light. The land looked more prosperous than she remembered. There were more sheep on the hill-sides, and more, farm buildings, and the road was well mended.

The villagers stopped to rest the oxen and themselves when the sun was high. Robin thanked Aelva and wished them all well, and continued on her way. She felt much more rested in body, but her mind was besieged by new thoughts, brought on by the peaceful road, the contentment of the vil-lagers, and the wealth of the country around her. She tried to tell herself that it was fattened as a lamb was fattened for the slaughter, but this did not agree with what she could see, or with the demeanour of the people.

A mile farther on, she caught her first look at the city of Winchester, the ancient royal capital of England. Once it had been her home, but she had not seen it for more than three years. She had expected it to look ex-actly the same, for it had not changed in the first twelve years of her life. But it was different, very different, and Robin stopped on the road and stared.

The old wooden palisade was gone, replaced by a much higher one of white-faced stone that incorporated the three old stone watch-towers and had four new towers as well. At first she thought nothing remained of the old royal palace, a large hall, which used to perch atop a low hill, then she realised it had been incorporated into the fabric of a new castle, a fortifica-tion that would completely dominate the city were it not balanced by the abbey, whose bell-tower was as tall, if not so martial. The abbey had also been extended and rebuilt since Robin had seen it last. Harold had not favoured the followers of Christ Godsson, but William was said to hold their priests in high esteem.

Entering the city through a new gate of freshly worked stone with masons still finishing the facade, Robin found herself in a crowd and for a few moments was struck with a sudden, nameless fear. She wasn't used to the noise, to the bustle, to the accidental touches as people moved all around her. But she kept pushing forward, making for the market square, where there would be more room. Surely, she told herself, that would not have changed overmuch.

Yet, when she came to it, she found the square also completely different to her expectations, as it was neither an empty field, as it used to be seven days out of fourteen, nor awash with buyers and sellers, goods, and smaller livestock as it would be on the seven fair days.

Instead, the whole field was roped off with muddy red cord fixed to iron pickets driven into the ground. Small groups of men-at-arms lingered at each corner of the field, and right in the middle there was a huge roughly hewn lump of sandstone lying on its side like a toppled sarsenstone. It had a sword stuck right in the middle of it. Even sixty feet away, Robin could feel the iron magic involved. The sword had been plunged into the stone by some great magic.

But there was also a hint of English magic there. Robin couldn't make it out, but there was something on the stone next to the sword. A pile of sticks, perhaps a bird's-nest, or something like that, only it emanated a strong sense of holly magic, and rowan too. It gave her a strange, slightly nauseating sensation to feel the two magics so close together.

"Strange, ain't it?" whispered a voice near her elbow. "Kiss my hand with silver, and I'll tell you the tale."

Robin looked down and stepped back. A crippled man, both of his legs lost at the knee, was grinning up at her and holding out his hand. He would have been tall and strong once, Robin could see, a handsome Englishman. Now he was a beggar, though she guessed he must be a successful one, for he had decent-enough clothes and good padding on his stumps.

"Did you lose your legs at Senlac?" she asked. If he were one of her father's men, she thought to give him a coin.

"Nay," smiled the man. "It was an accident, building the castle. The King's reeve paid me leg money, but that's long gone. Go on, give me a scratch of silver, and I'll tell you about the sword."

“No,” said Robin. She turned away and headed back towards the busy, closed-in streets. The cripple shouted after her, but in good-nature. Some-thing about it being a story worth hearing but only if told well.

The crowd swallowed Robin up and buffeted her. It took a while for her to get her bearings again and try to find the human currents that would carry her in the direction she chose, rather than force her back or push her into the more dubious side streets.

Her destination was always visible to Robin, no matter how the streets turned or the people thronged about her. The castle was a constant land-mark, its towers looming above the roof-tops.

Finally, she reached the gate and stood alone between the commercial hurly-burly of the city and the guards who glanced at her with casual dis-interest. The gatehouse was new, of the same white-faced stone as the city wall. But the twin leaves of the gate were the old ones, the palace gates of ancient oak, etched with the names of all the Kings and ruling Queens of England back to Alfred.

Robin found her father’s name there. Duke William had not removed it, as she thought he might. But his own name was there too, clear-cut and bright on the old wood, above Harold’s and the Edwards, Edgars, Ed-munds and others fading into illegibility below.

Robin coughed to clear her throat, and the guards looked at her again. She stared back, suddenly aware that this was a moment just like when she had snatched Merewyn’s horn. If she stepped forward and spoke, her plan would be put irrevocably in motion. Her fate would be decided by its suc-cess or failure, and the fate of Duke William, and the fate of the whole kingdom of England and perhaps the world.

If she stepped forward and spoke.

One of the guards let his hand drop to the hilt of his sword. Three of them were watching her now, wondering why she did not finish her gawp-ing and turn away, as so many did.

Robin stepped forward. At the same time, she reached out to the iron in the guards’ swords, helmets, and mail, feeling the weight of it, the cur-rents of attraction and repulsion that moved in the metal. She made a ritual gesture with her hand, closing her fist and shaking it, and, as her hand moved, everything of iron on or about the guards let out a keening wail, a

crescendoing shriek that was loud enough to make the youngest guard screw his face up and move a little out of position.

It was the iron cry, the announcement of the arrival of a Norman noble ironmaster. Everyone in the castle would have heard it. But even the ironmasters would not recognize this particular cry, because Robin had never used it. From the Duke down, they would be wondering who could have summoned such a loud, pure call.

The guards reacted instinctively, bracing to attention. Robin might look like a vagrant boy, but there was no denying the iron cry. She walked towards them, stopped under the gate, and spoke.

“I am Princess Robin. I wish to be escorted to my grandfather, Duke... King William.”

More guards ran out to stand at attention, lining both sides of the gate passage. A knight, busy buckling on his sword, followed them, marching up to Robin. He bent his knee briefly and smiled, a cheery, honest smile that had no hint of the Norman duplicity Robin always suspected.

“Greetings, Your Highness. I am Geoffrey of Manduc. The King has been expecting you, and awaits you in the Great Hall. This way.”

“Expecting . . . me?” asked Robin, confusion and fear suddenly grip-ping her throat, so the words came out hoarse and broken.

“Indeed, all the King’s heirs are here,” said Geoffrey happily as he bounced along one step behind, still fumbling with his sword-belt. He reminded Robin of a hunting-dog she’d had, long ago when her father had been alive. Or rather it was a dog supposed to be a hunter, but despite its enthusiasm it kept tripping over its own paws and running around in cheer-ful, ever-decreasing spirals. “When the King returned from the forest yestereve he told the court that you had chosen to end your self-imposed exile. You are very welcome, Highness.”

“That’s not...” said Robin. She was already trying to work out what the Duke was up to, and how it might affect what she planned. “Never mind. You said all the King’s heirs are here?”

“Yes, they have all been summoned here, though none know why,” burred Geoffrey. “The King has not spoken, though many believe it has something to do with his sword, which he set in a stone down in the mar-ket field last settling-day.”

“A beggar said he could tell me the story of the sword,” said Robin, though she felt like someone else was speaking. Most of her attention was on the passage through the gatehouse, and then on the clear space of the outer bailey beyond. She noted the guards’ positions and looked for a postern gate or any other way out of the castle.

“I’m sure he did!” laughed Geoffrey. “Stories being the stock of beggars. But surely, Highness, you have better stories of your own. To live as a priest-ess of the Easterner’s Moon Goddess must have given you many stories—”

“What?” asked Robin. “I haven’t been a priestess for any god, let alone the Easterner’s Moon mistress. I’ve been ...”

Geoffrey leaned in, intent on her words, and Robin realized that he was probably not the fool he appeared. He was some sort of functionary, but at a royal court, and already he was trying to gain some advantage, some secret knowledge of the King’s granddaughter.

“Is it not known where I have been these last four years?” she asked quietly, as they rounded the base of the motte hill, heading towards the Great Hall rather than climbing the steps to the Keep.

“No, Highness,” said Geoffrey. “But there have been many tales.”

“What of ... what of my sister, the Princess Merewyn? What do these tales tell of her?”

Geoffrey looked surprised. “The Princess Merewyn? She died of a fever only three days after Senlac Hill, did she not?”

Robin shook her head, unable to speak. It was becoming clear to her that her life of the last four years had been largely irrelevant to the Nor-mans, to the people, to ... everyone in the world outside the forest. They had just been another band of robbers, hiding in the greenwood as robbers so often did. Not even a big enough nuisance for proper tales to be told about them.

The huge doors of the Great Hall were open. As they approached, Robin could hear voices raised in uproar, immediately followed by the harsh clang of *Ferramenta* beating their swords on their shields.

“I suspect the King has explained the matter of his sword,” said

Geof-frey. He lengthened his stride and began to hurry. Despite the booming bell-noise of the *Ferramenta*, the shouts and impassioned voices inside had not subsided.

It was much louder inside the Hall. A vast, high-roofed building, it was a sea of shouting men and a smaller number of equally loud women. Down the far end, a line of twenty *Ferramenta* held the crowd back from a dais with a simple wooden throne on it. Only four of them were striking their shields, the insistent clangour slowly quietening the crowd. Behind the *Fer-ramenta* were a score of archers who wore the black surcoat of Duke William's guard.

The Duke himself stood in front of the throne, calmly waiting for quiet. If he saw Robin, he did not show it. As Geoffrey led her through the crowd towards the throne, Robin realised that nearly everyone around her was a follower of one or the other of William's heirs. The Hall was packed with Norman nobility and the most important knights and ladies of William's realm. Most of them either angry, shocked, or excited, the end result being a lot of noise.

Robin didn't speak to any one of them, but every few yards, Geoffrey would grab an elbow and exchange a few words and there would be a bit of space for Robin to squeeze through.

They were only halfway through the crowd when Robin suddenly felt a cold, biting pain behind her right eye. It only lasted a moment, but it also made a strange and sudden anger well up inside her. Anger that was di-rected at Duke William. He had slain her father, and her sister, and usurped the crown that was rightfully hers. He had to die!

Robin stopped. She had certainly felt anger towards the Duke. She planned to kill him, it was true, but that had been a cold decision, not born of anger. This sudden fury felt strangely out of place, as if it had come from somewhere else. She looked around and saw only Normans looking to the throne.

Then she looked up and saw a raven staring down at her from the rafters. Its beady black eye was fixed upon her, but its gaze was not that of a bird. She felt it almost like a wind, something invisible but powerful and cold.

Robin shook her head and looked at the floor, mud and rushes overlaying the white flagstones. The fury was still there, but she knew it was

not hers. It was the Allfather, trying to force her to play her hand too early.

“Are you well, Highness?” whispered Geoffrey. Robin jerked her head up, suddenly aware that the *Ferramenta* had stopped their clanging, the people their shouting, and that the Hall was growing quiet. She took a slow breath, forcing out the anger that would not help her.

“Yes,” she answered. “But before we go on, tell me, what has caused this commotion?”

“The King has announced that his heir will be—”

Geoffrey stopped as the King suddenly spoke, his voice strong and penetrating, echoing above Robin’s head.

“I have spoken. It is as it is. Who will be the first of my blood to try the test?”

Silence greeted the King’s words for several seconds. Then a short but very broad-shouldered man with the back of his head shaved to the crown pushed to the front and walked between the *Ferramenta*. The iron knights let him pass, and the black-clad archers merely watched as he strode to the foot of the dais. He did not bow, but did incline his head a fraction.

“Aurillac,” whispered Geoffrey to Robin.

“I protest, Uncle!” snorted the Bastard of Aurillac. “There should be no test! I claim to be your heir by right of blood. There is no need for this foolery with swords—”

“There are others with an equal or better right of blood,” said William. “More is needed from one who would be heir to the King of England and Normandy both. I have proclaimed the manner of my choosing. If you do not dare attempt it—”

Aurillac snorted like a bull.

“I am a greater ironmaster than any here save you, Uncle. I will go now and take your sword from the stone!”

He did not wait for permission, but bent his head a little once more, then turned and strode towards the doors. His lesser barons and knights, perhaps a quarter of all those present in the Hall, turned to follow him.

Shouting and scuffling broke out again, intensified as the *Ferramenta* suddenly tromped into a wedge formation and began to march for the doors, with the King and his archers within the wedge.

Geoffrey gingerly pinched Robin's sleeve, being careful not to touch her, and tried to draw her back.

"Best we hold back and follow the King," he said. "This crowd is too great to draw near to him."

Robin nodded and followed his twisting, winding progress between people to the side of the Hall. She could feel the ivory-tipped arrow at her side and her hand ached to draw it out and plunge it into William's chest. But she could not get close enough now. Later, she would have her chance.

She would be slain soon after, Robin knew, but at least she would die knowing that she had avenged her sister's and father's deaths, and that William's heirs would plunge England and Normandy into war. Though from the look of things, the Bastard of Aurillac might well win that struggle quickly, for his entourage was by far the largest and most warlike. He would also be here, in the capital . . .

A shadow of doubt slowly slid into Robin's mind. If she slew William, then she might be giving England to Aurillac, who by all accounts would be a far worse master than the Duke. And did she really want England to be stricken by yet another war? These thoughts felt disloyal, and were slip-perier and harder to grapple with than the pure anger she felt towards William. But they were also persistent, and they stuck with Robin as she followed the crowd out of the castle and down through the town to the market field.

The commotion from the castle, with the sudden parade of the King, the *Ferramenta*, and over four hundred Norman notables, caused an even greater sensation in the town. It seemed to Robin that absolutely everyone within the city walls was streaming towards the market field, townsfolk and country visitors mingling with the outer edges of the procession from the castle.

With Geoffrey's deft help, whispered words to barons and knights ahead of her, and directions via her sleeve, Robin found herself only just behind the wedge of *Ferramenta* when they reached the field. There, the iron knights and the bowmen, reinforced by the men-at-arms already at the field, formed a cordon thirty yards out from the sword in the stone, holding

back the crowd, which to Robin now seemed to number in the thousands.

Within the cordon, William stood alone with Aurillac. Geoffrey tugged at Robin's sleeve and gently manoeuvred her to a position at the very front, so she could see clearly between two *Ferramenta*. She shivered as she stood up close to them, blinking as she felt the hot spirits contained within the metal bodies reach out to touch her mind. She was both repulsed by and attracted to that mental touch. She had not felt it for many years, not since her lessons with her mother. She had been too busy fleeing from the iron warriors two days before.

Aurillac was shouting something at William. Robin forced her attention away from the iron knights in order to listen to the Bastard.

“—the commoners away! I shall not be tricked, Uncle, in front of the mob!”

William said something Robin couldn't hear, and gestured at the sword. Aurillac snarled and strode over to it. He climbed up on the stone and planted his feet on either side of the sword, grasping it with both hands. His muscles tensed, and at the same time, Robin felt a surge of iron magic emanating from him. He was trying to manipulate both the metal of the sword and the more unyielding stone, which William had melded together.

“You must also wear the crown!” called out William. He indicated what Robin had thought was a bird's-nest, an irregular ring of sticks and berries, before she'd sensed its magic.

“What?” shouted Aurillac, his nose and cheekbones bright with fury and exertion. “You push me too far! I'll not wear some fool's cast-off casque—”

“It is King Alfred's crown,” William said, and though he did not shout, his voice penetrated through the crowd and Aurillac's anger, quietening both. “Lost these two centuries, now found again. Wear the crown of holly, Aurillac, and draw the sword of iron, and you shall succeed me as King of England and Normandy.”

“Is this yet another insult?” asked Aurillac. “I am pure Norman, no matter that my parents were not wed. I cannot wear a crown of holly!”

“That is nonsense, born of tales and fancy,” said William. He walked over to the stone and reverently picked up the ancient crown. He held it aloft for a few moments, then gently placed it on his head. There was a

col-lective gasp from the crowd, but William neither sweated blood, nor fainted, nor showed any of the other signs Norman ironmasters were sup-posed to when touched by good English holly.

Aurillac stared at William, then a slow smile crept across his face. It was obvious to Robin that he thought the crown some kind of trick, a thing of paper berries and painted sticks. But she could feel its power too, like a cool and separate pool, riven by currents of hot iron magic that flowed be-tween the *Ferramenta*, William, Aurillac, and . . . herself.

“Give me the crown!” Aurillac demanded. He stretched out his hand, but William stepped back and held the crown aloft.

“Let the crown of King Alfred choose my successor!” he intoned. Au-rillac grunted and climbed down from the stone. He bent his head slightly to allow William to place the crown on his head, then he stood up.

The smile faded from his flushed face as thorns suddenly grew from the holly, long thorns that scraped and scratched like claws towards his eyes. Blood suddenly gushed from his nose, and his breath came in harsh, wheez-ing gasps. He fell to his knees, with his hands pressed over his eyes to pro-tect them from the thorns. William stepped forward and lifted the crown from his head, the thorns retreating.

Robin stared. She had felt the holly magic surge, its calm replaced by a sudden chill blast, like a freezing wind off the sea. But she had also sensed that the crown had not reacted to Aurillac’s Norman blood, but to some other sense of wrongness. She vaguely remembered her mother saying too much was made of the Norman antipathy to holly and oak, but it was widely believed—and that belief had its own power. There were rare people—even rarer than shape-changers—who did not believe in magic at all, and they were extremely resistant to spells, and sometimes could even prevent magic being done at all. Savants speculated that this was a type of magic in itself.

Two of Aurillac’s knights helped him up. The Bastard wiped his bloody face, stared at William, then turned on his heel and strode to join his follow-ers. There he held a quick conversation, and his men began to turn around and start pushing the common folk, to create a path away from the field.

“Aurillac!” William called out. “I have not given you leave to go. There are others of my blood here. If one succeeds, all must swear allegiance to my chosen heir.”

Four *Ferramenta* moved as William spoke, the iron knights lumbering closer to where Aurillac paused, fury expressed in his clenched fists and caution in his twisting torso, as he turned back to face the sword in the stone.

William looked at another knot of knights and men-at-arms behind three young men who all stood scowling at the stone. Unlike Aurillac, they were not in mail, and their bright garb was in stark contrast to most of the other men.

“Well, nephews?”

“We will wait till you’re dead, Great-uncle,” said the one with the bright blue tunic and the silver-tipped cap. He looked over at Aurillac and added, “Then split everything between us equally.”

William laughed.

“Honest as ever, Jean. But I do not intend to die for some time. I think I will find my heir today—and you will swear allegiance.”

“Who?” asked Jean. “Aurillac could not draw your sword, and my brothers and I know better than to attempt it. There is no one else.”

William smiled again and turned to face the crowd. He didn’t speak, but stood waiting. A hush fell upon the crowd, the silence spreading till the only sound Robin could hear was the thumping of her heart, the blood vessels in her neck hammering like a drum.

“The iron call outside the castle,” Jean said suddenly, his voice strange and reedy in the silence of the crowd. “Who was that?”

A raven cawed its lonely cry and flew over the field. A one-eyed man pushed to the front of the crowd, right behind Robin and Geoffrey.

She reached inside her tunic to grasp the broken end of her ivory-tipped arrow, but still hesitated. She would never have such an opportunity again to kill William, but still—

The one-eyed man touched Geoffrey on the small of the back with his little finger, a touch that would not have crushed a fly. But the Norman courtier fell and would have hit Robin, but she had already started forward, bursting into the clearing, where she appeared like a sprung child’s toy from

between the two *Ferramenta*.

There was a collective gasp from the crowd as Robin slowly walked towards William. To them it looked like a poor Norman boy, a peasant, was approaching the King of England and Normandy—with head held high.

“Princess Robin,” said William.

“Grandfather.”

A shriek came from the crowd as she spoke, and nervous laughter, followed by many voices calling for quiet. Aurillac started forward, and the *Ferramenta* moved fast, blocking his way. William made a sign and his black-clad archers moved closer, their eyes on the Bastard and his entourage.

“What is to be, then?” asked William softly, so no one else could hear. “What do you hold there? A wooden stake? Will you hear me first?”

Robin nodded, though instantly she felt that this was a mistake. Her courage and fury, pulled taut as a bow-string, could not be held so long. She gripped the arrow more tightly and told herself that a minute more would not matter. William would merely die a little later.

“Kill me, and you will die,” said the King. “England will be riven by war. Everything your father held dear will be lost—”

“You slew my father!” Robin whispered hoarsely, while all the crowd leaned forward, desperate to hear what was being said.

“He died in battle, with a sword in his hand, as did your sister. I regret their deaths, particularly Merewyn’s. My death will not return them to the living, Robin. *Your* death will serve no purpose. Wear the crown and take my sword, and within a year or two at most, you will be Queen of England and Normandy!”

William spoke fiercely and reached out to grip Robin’s shoulders. She shuddered under his touch and half-drew the arrow. He was so close, it would be so easy to punch the arrow up through his old ribs and into his heart. All the charms and protections every ironmaster wrapped himself in would be as nothing to the sharp ivory point.

Robin raised her elbow and began to draw the arrow out through the fold in the front of her tunic.

“You are my granddaughter,” whispered William. He closed his eyes and leaned forward, as if seeking an embrace. “Do what you will.”

“Seek new beginnings,” whispered Merewyn. Though her voice was nearly drowned by the sudden cawing of ravens overhead, it sounded to Robin like her sister was just behind her.

But she wasn't. There was only her old grandfather, his eyes still closed, his hands on her shoulders. There was the crowd beyond, a great mass of excited expectation, aware that they were witnesses to a great and strange event. The three grandnephews, staring at her as if she were some strange creature. Aurillac, his stare that of an enemy, held in check only by temporary weakness.

Robin remembered grabbing the horn from Merewyn. Remembered charging down the slope. Remembered the sound of Merewyn being struck by the iron knight.

Knowing when not to attack . . . seeking new beginnings . . .
Merewyn's voice echoed in her head, as it would probably echo for as long as Robin lived.

Slowly, she pushed the arrow back under her tunic, through her belt, and pulled her hand free.

“I will never forgive you,” she whispered. “But I will take your sword.”

Then she spoke loud enough for the crowd to hear.

“Give me the crown.”

A cheer rippled through the mass of onlookers, though Robin wasn't sure whether they were cheering her on or hoping to see a repeat of what had happened to Aurillac.

William held the crown high, and Robin felt the magic within it. It was like a seed, a container of potent force waiting for the right conditions to burgeon forth.

Robin bent her head and felt the rough touch of the holly leaves scrape through her hair. She tensed, waiting for the sharper stab of thorns, or for a sudden, shocking attack of nausea. But the crown sat comfortably on her near-shaven head, and her stomach was no more stricken with

anxiety than it had been before.

“The sword!” someone shouted from the crowd, a cry that was taken up in seconds, to become a chant, several thousand voices all calling at once.

“The sword! The sword!”

Robin reached up to steady the crown and was startled to find her fingers touching flowers and green shoots rather than dried sticks and wizened berries. She was even more startled to find that the stubble on her scalp was no longer harsh and fuzzy. Her hair was growing back impossibly fast, and was already as long as the first two knuckles on her little finger.

“The sword,” said William. Robin couldn’t hear him, the chanting was so loud, but she knew what he was saying. She dropped her hands from her new-found hair and the flowering crown, flexed her fingers, and stepped up on to the stone.

The sword radiated iron magic like a miniature sun. Robin felt the heat wash across her face and breathed hot air through her mouth. But she knew this was not real heat, and it would not burn her unless she feared it would.

Without hesitation, she gripped the hilt of the sword with both hands, accepting the heat and the magic, letting them flow through her body, taking in the strength of the iron to add to her own.

She felt no conflict from the crown, but rather an acceptance that this too was part of her. Her heritage was of both the green forest and the hot stone that lay deep beneath the earth, and they did not clash within her.

The chant grew louder and more frenzied as Robin bent her knees and focused both her strength and her will upon the sword in the stone. She could feel how William had meshed blade and rock, but it was no easy matter to undo what he had done. But slowly she compelled sword and stone to separate, and with a screech like some tormented beast of legend, the weapon came free, an inch at a time.

Sweat poured from Robin’s face, and pain coursed through her lower back and forearms, but with one last outpouring of strength and determination, the stone gave up its prize. Robin whipped the sword around and held it aloft, too breathless to shout or even speak. Not that even her shouts would be heard above the noise of the crowd.

William held up his hands for silence, the *Ferramenta* booming and clanging to punctuate his demand. As the crowd stilled, William turned to the stone and started to walk the few paces over to Robin.

At that moment, Aurillac and his men suddenly charged, the Bastard himself leaping up on the stone, sweeping his great sword out of its scab-bard as he jumped.

Robin ducked under his first blow, Aurillac's sword-point skittering off the stone in a spray of sparks. She parried the next, but the blow was so strong that William's sword was smashed out of her hand, and her fingers were suddenly numbed and useless.

Three arrows bounced off the Bastard, repelled by his charms, as he struck again. Robin jumped backward off the stone, landed well, and backed away, the crowd receding like the tide.

A sweeping glance showed Robin that William, his bowmen, and *Ferramenta* were wreaking bloody havoc amongst Aurillac's men, and that this stupid battle would not last more than a few minutes.

But that was all the Bastard would need to kill her.

He jumped from the stone and charged towards her as Robin tried to pull out the black arrow with her left hand. She tensed, ready to try and dodge, the arrow still stuck in her clothes. But as Aurillac raised his sword, he was suddenly struck from behind by a huge lump of snarling brown fur that was either a dog or a small bear that had jumped from the fringes of the crowd straight on his back.

At the same time, more than a dozen unarmed men—townsfolk or simple peasants—charged in front of Robin. One fell beneath Aurillac's sword, but the others leaped on him as the bear brought the Bastard bellowing down. More men and women surged from the crowd to form a human shield-ring around Robin.

All were shouting the same thing.

“Inglad! Inglad! Inglad!”

Then Robin was being lifted up, onto the shoulders of the taller men of those about her. Aurillac lay dead nearby, or good as dead, as eight or nine people hacked at him with small knives, hatchets, and even their hands. The bear that had felled him sat up on its haunches, the crowd

giving it space as it licked its paw and muzzle clean of blood.

Robin looked at the bear and it met her gaze with a human understanding.

“I thank you, Jack,” said Robin softly.

The bear got up and stood on his hind legs. Then he slowly sank onto one knee and bowed his head. All around him, the people followed suit. It was like the wind pressing down a field of corn, as heads suddenly lowered and men, women, and children all sank to one knee. The peasants and townsfolk were first, but then the Norman men-at-arms followed suit, then the knights and lords and ladies, into the bloodied mud where Aurillac’s followers lay dead or wounded.

Only William still stood. Even the men who carried Robin had sunk to their knees, so she was seated on their shoulders. Her hair had grown long and now framed her face, and the holly flowers of her crown had grown and spread too, to make a mantle that fell down her back like a rich, royal cloak.

William walked to her. Halfway, he held out his hand, and his sword flew into it. He reversed it to hold the blade. Then he proffered the hilt to Robin, and she took it in her left hand and held it high.

So the Princess Robin came into the inheritance she had never sought; amidst blood, but not of her choosing; welcomed by a grandfather she had always feared and hated; hailed by the Normans she looked like and the English that she felt were her true people.

Overhead, two ravens cawed once in disgust and flew north-east, biting and snapping at each other as they flew. As they fled, a one-eyed man coughed and died where he lay on the ground between two of Aurillac’s dead men, the arrow that had chance-hit him buried deep in his chest.

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