

inside her. He was irritated: this was spoiling everything. He raised himself on one elbow and hit her across the face with his fist. She cried out and her cheek turned an angry red, but as soon as he tried to enter her she began to resist him again.

Walter could have held her still, but he had the boy.

Suddenly William was inspired. 'Cut the boy's ear off, Walter,' he said.

Aliena went still. 'No!' she said hoarsely. 'Leave him alone - don't hurt him any more.'

'Open your legs, then,' William said.

She stared at him, wide-eyed with horror at the dreadful choice forced upon her. William enjoyed her anguish. Walter, playing the game perfectly, drew his knife and put it to Richard's right ear. He hesitated, then with a movement that was almost tender, he sliced off the boy's earlobe.

Richard screamed. Blood spurted from the small wound. The piece of flesh fell on Aliena's heaving chest.

'Stop!' she screamed. 'All right. I'll do it.' She opened her legs.

William spat on his hand then rubbed the moisture between her legs. He pushed his fingers inside her. She cried out with pain. That excited him more. He lowered himself on top of her. She lay still, tense. Her eyes were closed. Her body was slick with sweat from the struggle, but she shivered. William adjusted his position, then hesitated, enjoying the anticipation and her dread. He looked at the others. Richard was looking on with horror. Walter was watching greedily.

William said: 'Your turn next, Walter.'

People were allowed to beat them and rob them as if they were horses or dogs. There was nobody to protect them. We've been too trusting, she thought. They had lived for three months in the castle without ever barring the doors. She resolved to trust nobody in the future. Never again would she should let someone else take the reins of her horse, even if she had to be rude to prevent it. Never again would she let someone get behind her the way the verderer had last night, when he pushed her into the shed. She would never accept the hospitality of a stranger, never leave her door unlocked at night, never take kindness at face value.

'Let's walk faster,' she said to Richard. 'Perhaps we can reach Winchester by nightfall.'

They followed the path to the clearing where they had met the verderer. The remains of their fire were still there. From there they easily found the road to Winchester. They had been to Winchester before, many times, and they knew the way. Once they were on the road they could move faster. Frost had hardened the mud since the storm two nights ago.

Richard's face was returning to normal. He had washed it yesterday, in a cold brook in the woods, and most of the dried blood had gone. There was an ugly scab where his right earlobe had been. His lips were still swollen but the puffiness had gone from the rest of his face. However, he was still badly bruised, and the angry colour of the bruises gave him a rather frightening appearance. Still, that would do no harm.

Aliena missed the heat of the horse beneath her. Her hands and feet were painfully cold, even though her body was warm from the exertion of walking. The weather remained cold all morning,

could grant Philip permission to hold a market. Only the king could now save the cathedral.

He finished his prayers and left the crypt. The sun was coming up, and there was a pink flush on the grey stone walls of the rising cathedral. The builders, who worked from sunrise to sunset, were just beginning, opening their lodges and sharpening their tools and mixing up the first batch of mortar. The loss of the quarry had not yet affected the building: they had always quarried stone faster than they could use it, from the beginning, and now they had a stockpile that would last many months.

It was time for Philip to leave. All the arrangements were made. The king was at Lincoln. The journey would take four weeks. However, Philip would have a travelling companion: Richard, the brother of Aliena. After fighting for a year as a squire, Richard had been knighted by the king. He had come home to re-equip himself and was now going to rejoin the royal army.

Aliena had done astonishingly well as a wool merchant. She no longer sold her wool to Philip, but dealt directly with the Flemish buyers herself. Indeed, this year she had wanted to buy the entire fleece production of the priory. She would have paid less than the Flemish, but Philip would have got the money earlier. He had turned her down. However, it was a measure of her success that she could even make the offer.

She was at the stable with her brother now, Philip saw as he walked across. A crowd had gathered to say goodbye to the travellers. Richard was sitting on a chestnut warhorse that must have cost Aliena twenty pounds. He had grown into a handsome, broad-shouldered young man, his regular features marred only by an

angry scar on his right ear: the earlobe had been cut off, no doubt in some fencing accident. He was splendidly dressed in red and green and outfitted with a new sword, lance, battleaxe and dagger. His baggage was carried by a second horse which he had on a leading-rein. With him were two men-at-arms on coursers and a squire on a cob.

Aliena was in tears, although Philip could not tell whether she was sorry to see her brother go, proud that he looked so fine, or frightened that he might never come back. All three, perhaps. Some of the villagers had come to say goodbye, including most of the young men and boys. No doubt Richard was their hero. All the monks were here, too, to wish their prior a safe journey.

The stablehands brought out two horses, a palfrey saddled ready for Philip and a cob loaded with his modest baggage - mainly food for the journey. The builders put down their tools and came over, led by bearded Tom and his red-headed stepson Jack.

Philip formally embraced Remigius, his sub-prior, and took a warmer farewell of Milius and Cuthbert, then mounted the palfrey. He would be sitting in this hard saddle every day for four weeks, he realised grimly. From his raised position he blessed them all. The monks, builders and villagers waved and called out their goodbyes as he and Richard rode side by side through the priory gates.

They went down the narrow street through the village, waving to people who looked out of their doorways, then clattered across the wooden bridge and on to the road through the fields. A little later. Philip glanced back over his shoulder, and saw the rising sun shining through the window space in the half-built east end of

the new cathedral. If he failed in his mission, it might never be finished. After all he had been through to get this far, he could not bear to contemplate the idea of defeat now. He turned his back and concentrated on the road ahead.

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lit upon a young priest who was one of the more knowledgeable of the king's clerics. He drew the priest to him and said quietly: 'What the devil did he mean about the "question" of the succession, Joseph?'

'There's another claimant to the earldom,' Joseph replied.

'Another claimant?' William repeated in astonishment. He had no half-brothers, illegitimate brothers, cousins.... 'Who is it?'

Joseph pointed to a figure standing with his back to them. He was with the retinue of the newly-arrived earl. He was wearing the clothing of a squire.

'But he's not even a knight!' William said loudly. 'My father was the earl of Wiltshire!'

The squire heard him, and turned around. 'My father was also the earl of Wiltshire.'

At first William did not recognise him. He saw a handsome, broad-shouldered young man of about eighteen years, well-dressed for a squire, and carrying a fine sword. There was confidence and even arrogance in the way he stood. Most striking of all, he gazed at William with a look of such pure hatred that William shrank back.

The face was very familiar, but changed. Still William could not place it. Then he saw that there was an angry scar on the squire's right ear, where the earlobe had been cut off. In a vivid flash of memory he saw a small piece of white flesh fall on to the heaving chest of a terrified virgin, and heard a boy scream in pain. This was Richard, the son of the traitor Bartholomew, the brother of Aliena. The little boy who had been forced to watch while two men raped his sister had grown into a formidable man with

the light of vengeance in his light blue eyes. William was suddenly terribly afraid.

'You remember, don't you?' Richard said, in a light drawl that did not quite mask the cold fury underneath.

William nodded. 'I remember.'

'So do I, William Hamleigh,' said Richard. 'So do I.'

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he found. 'What the devil happened here?' he said to her. 'I can't find our house - the whole town has changed!'

'William Hamleigh came on the day of the fleece fair, with a troop of men-at-arms, and burned the town,' Aliena said.

Richard paled with shock, and the scar on his right ear showed livid. 'William!' he breathed. 'That devil.'

'We've got a new house, though,' Aliena said expressionlessly. 'Alfred's men built it for me. But it's much smaller, and it's down by the new quay.'

'What happened to you?' he said, staring at her. 'You're practically bald, and you've got no eyebrows.'

'My hair caught fire.'

'He didn't....'

Aliena shook her head. 'Not this time.'

One of the girls brought Richard some salt bread to taste. He took some but did not eat it. He looked stunned.

'I'm glad you're safe, anyway,' Aliena said.

He nodded. 'Stephen is marching on Oxford, where Maud is holed up. The war could be over soon. But I need a new sword - I came to get some money.' He ate some bread. The colour came back to his face. 'By God, this tastes good. You can cook me some meat later.'

Suddenly she was afraid of him. She knew he was going to be furious with her and she had no strength to stand up to him. 'I haven't any meat,' she said.

'Well, get some from the butcher, then!'

'Don't be angry, Richard,' she said. She began to tremble.

'I'm not angry,' he said irritably. 'What's the matter with

you?'

'All my wool was burned in the fire,' she said, and stared at him in fear, waiting for him to explode.

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her hand went to her stomach, where the new baby was growing. She looked up, and Jack met her eye. They were both thinking the same.

Richard went on: 'Later I got talking to some of the younger ones, who don't know me. I told them about the battle of Lincoln, and so on, and said I was looking for a fight. They told me to go to Earls castle, but it would have to be today, for they were to leave tomorrow, and the fight would be on Sunday.'

'Sunday,' Jack whispered fearfully.

'I rode out to Earls castle, to double check.'

Aliena said: 'Richard, that was dangerous.'

'All the signs are there: messengers coming and going, weapons being sharpened, horses exercised, tack cleaned.... There's no doubt of it.' In a voice full of hatred, Richard finished: 'No amount of evil-doing will satisfy that devil William - he always wants to do more.' His hand went to his right ear, and he touched the angry scar there with an unconscious nervous gesture.

Jack studied Richard for a moment. He was an idler and a wastrel, but in one area his judgement was trustworthy: the military. If he said William was planning a raid he was probably right. 'This is a catastrophe,' Jack said, half to himself. Kingsbridge was just beginning to recover from the slump. Three years ago the fleece fair had burned, two years ago the cathedral had fallen on the congregation, and now this. People would say the bad luck of Kingsbridge had come back. Even if they managed to avoid bloodshed by fleeing, Kingsbridge would be ruined. No one would want to live here, come to the market or work here. It could even stop the building of the cathedral.

Aliena said: 'We must tell Prior Philip - right away.'

Jack nodded. 'The monks will be at supper. Let's go.'