# 70

The priest at Outhenby had died of the plague, and there had been no services at the church since; so Gwenda was surprised when bell began to toll on Sunday morning.

Wulfric went to investigate and came back to report that a visiting priest, Father Derek, had arrived to take care of the souls of the Outhenby folk; so Gwenda washed the boys' faces quickly and they all went out.

It was a fine spring morning, and the sun bathed the old grey stones of the little church in a clear light. All the villagers turned out without exception, and stood waiting curiously to view the newcomer.

Father Derek turned out to be a well-spoken city clergyman, too richly dressed for a village church. Gwenda wondered whether any special significance attached to his visit. Was there a reason why the church hierarchy had suddenly remembered the existence of this parish? She told herself that it was a bad habit always to imagine the worst, but all the same she felt something was wrong.

She stood in the nave with Wulfric and the boys, watching the priest go through the ritual of the Sunday morning service, and her sense of doom grew stronger. A priest usually looked at the congregation while he was praying or singing, to emphasize that all this was for their benefit, not a private communication between himself and God; but Father Derek's gaze

went over their heads.

She soon found out why. At the end of the service, he told them of a new law passed by the king and Parliament. "Landless labourers must work for the lord in their village of origin, if required," he said.

Gwenda was outraged. "How can that be?" she shouted out. "The lord is not obliged to help the labourer in hard times—I know, my father was a landless labourer, and when there was no work we went hungry. So how can the labourer owe loyalty to a lord who gives him nothing?"

A rumble of agreement broke out, and the priest had to raise his voice. "This is what the king has decided, and the king is chosen by God to rule over us, so we must all do as he wishes."

"Can the king change the custom of hundreds of years?"

"These are difficult times. I know that many of your have come to Outhenby in the last few weeks—"

Let's see him again.

"Invited by the ploughman," a voice interrupted angrily. It was Claus Shaftesbury.

"Invited by all of the villagers," the priest acknowledged. "And they were grateful to you for coming. But the king in his wisdom has ruled that this kind of thing must not go on."

"And poor people must remain poor," Claus said.

"God has ordained it so. Each man in his place."

Harry Ploughman said: "And has God ordained how we are to till our fields with no help? If all the newcomers leave, we will never finish the work."

"Perhaps not all the newcomers will leave," said Derek. "The new law says only that they must go home if required."

That quietened them. The immigrants were trying to figure out whether their lords would be able to track them down; the locals were wondering how many labourers would be left here. But Gwenda knew what her own future held. Ralph had already found her. Sooner or later, he would come back for her and her family.

By then, she decided, they would be gone.

The priest retired, and the congregation began to drift towards the door. "We've got to leave here," Gwenda said to Wulfric in a low voice. "Before Ralph comes back for us."

"Where will we go?"

"I don't know. Perhaps it's best this way. If we don't know where we're going, no one else will."

"But how will we live?"

"We'll find another village where they need labourers."

"Are there many others, I wonder?"

He was always slower-thinking than she. "There must be lots," she said patiently. "The king didn't pass this ordnance just for Outhenby."

"Of course."

"We should leave today," Gwenda said decisively. "Today is Sunday, so we're not losing any work. It's not yet noon—we could cover a good distance before nightfall. Who knows, we could be working in a new place tomorrow morning."

"I agree," Wulfric said. "There's no telling how fast Ralph might move."

"Say nothing to anyone. We'll go home, pick up whatever we want to take with us, and just slip away."

"All right."

They reached the door and stepped outside into the sunshine, and Gwenda saw that it was already too late to slip away.

Six men on horseback were waiting outside the church: Ralph; his sidekick Alan Fernhill; a tall man in London clothes; and three dirty, scarred, evil-looking ruffians of the kind that could be hired for a few pennies just by going into the lowest tavern in any town in the land.

Ralph caught Gwenda's eye and smiled triumphantly.

Gwenda looked around desperately. A few days ago the men of the village had stood shoulder to shoulder against Ralph and Alan—but this was different. They were up against six men, not two. The villagers were unarmed, whereas they had previously had tools in their hands. And, most important of all, on that first occasion they had believed they had right on their side, whereas today they were not so sure.

Several men met her eye and quickly looked away again. That confirmed her suspicion. The villagers would not fight today.

Gwenda was so disappointed that she feared she might fall down, and she leaned on the stonework of the church porch for support. Her heart had turned into something heavy and cold and damp, like a clod from a winter grave. A grim hopelessness possessed her completely.

For a few days they had been free. But it had just been a dream. And now the dream was over.

*

Ralph rode slowly through the village of Wigleigh, leading Wulfric by a rope around his neck.

They arrived late in the afternoon. For speed, Ralph had let the two small boys ride, sharing the horses of the hired men. Gwenda was walking behind. Ralph had not bothered to tie her in any way. She could be relied upon to follow her children.

Because it was Sunday, the Wigleigh folk were at home rather than in the fields, and most of them were outside their houses, enjoying the sun, as Ralph had anticipated. They all stared in horrified silence at the dismal procession. Ralph hoped the sight of Wulfric's humiliation might deter others from going in search of higher wages.

They reached the small timber manor house that had been Ralph's home before he moved to Tench Hall. He released Wulfric and sent him off to his old home. He paid off the hired men, then took Alan and Gregory into the manor house.

It was kept clean and ready for his visits. He ordered Vira to bring wine then prepare a supper. It was too late now to go on to Tench Hall: they could not get there before nightfall.

Gregory sat down and stretched out his long legs. He seemed like a man who could make himself comfortable anywhere. "How do you feel that went?" he said.

Ralph had been thinking about the new ordinance all the way home, and he had his answer ready. "It's not going to work," he said.

Gregory raised his eyebrows. "Oh?"

Alan said: "I agree."

"Reasons?"

Ralph said: "First of all, it's difficult to find out where the runaways have gone."

Alan put in: "It was only by luck that we traced Wulfric. Someone had overheard him and Gwenda planning where to go."

"Second, recovering them is too troublesome," Ralph went on.

Gregory nodded: "I suppose we have been all day at it."

"And I had to hire those ruffians and get them horses. I can't spend my time and money chasing all over the countryside after runaway labourers."

"I see that."

"Third, what's to stop them running away again next week?"

Alan said: "If they keep their mouths shut about where they're going, we might never find them."

"The only way it will work," Ralph said, "is if someone can go to a village, find out who the immigrants are, and punish them."

Gregory said: "You're talking about a sort of Commission of Labourers."

"Exactly. Appoint a panel in each county, a dozen or so men who go from place to place ferreting out the runaways."

"You want someone else to do the work for you."

It was a taunt, but Ralph was careful not to appear stung. "Not necessarily—I'll be a commissioner, if you wish. It's just the way the job is to be done. You can't reap a field of grass one blade at a time."

"Interesting," said Gregory.

Vira brought a jug and some goblets, and poured wine for the three of them.

Gregory said: "You're a shrewd man, Sir Ralph. You're not a member of Parliament, are you?"

"No."

"Pity. I think the king would find your counsel helpful."

Ralph tried not to beam with pleasure. "You're very kind." He leaned forward. "Now

that Earl William is dead, there is of course a vacancy—" He saw the door open, and broke off.

Nate Reeve came in. "Well done, Sir Ralph, if I may say so!" he said. "Wulfric and Gwenda back in the fold, the two hardest-working people we've got."

Ralph was annoyed with Nate for interrupting at such a crucial moment. He said irritably: "I trust the village will now be able to pay more of its dues."

"Yes, sir…if they stay."

Ralph frowned. Nate had immediately fastened on the weakness in his position. How was he going to keep Wulfric in Wigleigh? He could not chain the man to a plough all day and all night.

Gregory spoke to Nate. "Tell me, bailiff, do you have a suggestion for your lord?"

"Yes, sir, I do."

"I thought you might."

Nate addressed Ralph. "There is one thing you could do that would guarantee that Wulfric would stay here in Wigleigh until the day he dies."

Ralph sensed a trick, but had to say: "Go on."

"Give him back the lands his father held."

Ralph would have yelled at him, except that he did not want to give Gregory a bad impression. Controlling his anger, he said firmly: "I don't think so."

"I can't get a tenant for the land," Nate persisted. "Annet can't manage it, and she has no relations living except for her daughter, who is only six."

"No," said Ralph.

Gregory said: "Why not?"

p1105
IT: First few lines. I think the repetition of the nose reason sounds odd here, and it's now some twelve years later, so how about 'Ralph did not want to admit the real reason, that he still held a grudge against Wulfric for a skirmish some years ago'

Ralph did not want to admit the real reason, that Wulfric had broken his nose twelve years ago and the two of them had had a murderous feud ever since. Gregory had formed a good impression of Ralph, but Ralph could spoil it yet. What would the king's councillor think of a knight who acted against his own interest in pursuit of a boyhood squabble? He cast about for a plausible excuse. "It would seem to be rewarding Wulfric for running away," he said finally.

"Hardly," said Gregory. "From what Nate says, you're giving him something no one else wants."

"All the same, it gives the wrong signal to the other villagers."

"I think you're being too scrupulous," Gregory said. "Everyone must know that you're desperate for tenants. Most landlords are. The villagers will see that you're simply acting in your own interest, and consider that Wulfric is the lucky beneficiary."

Nate added: "Wulfric and Gwenda will work twice as hard if they've got their own land."

Ralph felt cornered. He was desperate to look good in Gregory's eyes. He had started but not finished a discussion about the earldom. He could not put that at risk over Wulfric.

He had to give in.

"Perhaps you're right," he said. He realised he was speaking through gritted teeth, and made an effort to be more nonchalant. "After all, he has been brought home and humiliated. That may be enough."

"I'm sure it is."

"All right, Nate," Ralph said. For a moment, words stuck in his throat, he hated so much to give Wulfric his heart's desire. But this was more important. "Tell Wulfric he can

have his father's lands back."

"I'll do that before nightfall," Nate said, and he left.

Gregory said: "What were you saying about the earldom?"

Ralph picked his words carefully. "After Earl Roland died, at the battle of Crécy, I think the king might have considered making me the earl of Shiring, especially as I had saved the life of the young Prince of Wales."

"But Roland had a perfectly good heir—who himself had two sons."

"Exactly. And now all three are dead."

"Hmm." Gregory took a draught from his goblet. "This is good wine."

"Gascon," said Ralph.

"I suppose it comes into Melcombe."

"Yes."

"Delicious." Gregory drank some more. He seemed to be about to say something, so Ralph remained silent; but Gregory took a long time choosing his words. At last he said: "There is, somewhere in the neighbourhood of Kingsbridge, a...letter...that ought not to exist."

Ralph was mystified. What was coming now?

Gregory went on: "For many years, this was in the hands of someone who could be relied upon, for various complicated reasons, to keep it safe. Lately, however, certain questions have been asked, suggesting to me that the secret may be in danger of getting out."

This was all too enigmatic. Ralph said impatiently: "I don't understand. Who has been asking embarrassing questions?"

"The prioress of Kingsbridge." She asked Thomas, but who else? Oh yes, the bailiff from Lynn! Maybe a reference to him should be made. OR would that be repetitive.

"Oh."

"It's possible that she may have simply picked up some hint, and that her questions may be harmless. But what the king's friends fear is that the letter may have got into her possession."

"What is in this letter?"

Once again, Gregory chose his words carefully. "Something touching the king's beloved mother." Are we now to assume that the King now knows what his mother did?

"Queen Isabella." The old she-wolf was still alive, Ralph knew, living in splendour in her castle at Lynn, spending all her days reading romances in her native French, so people said.

"In short," said Gregory, "I need to find out whether the prioress has this letter or not. But no one must know of my interest."

"Either you have to go to the priory and search through the nuns' documents…or the documents must come to you."

"The second of those two."

Ralph nodded. He was beginning to understand what Gregory wanted him to do.

Gregory said: "I have made some very discreet inquiries, and discovered that no one knows exactly where the nuns' treasury is."

"The nuns must know, or some of them at least."

"But they won't say. However, I understand that you're an expert in…persuading people to reveal secrets."

So Gregory knew of the work Ralph had done in France. There was nothing casual or spontaneous about this conversation, Ralph realised: Gregory must have planned it well in

advance. Ralph said: "I think I may be able to help the kings' friends solve this problem…"

"Good."

"…if I were promised the earldom of Shiring as my reward."

Gregory frowned. "The new earl will have to marry the old countess."

Ralph decided to hide his true feelings from Gregory. Some instinct told him the councillor would have less respect for a man who was driven, even just partly, by lust. "Lady Philippa is ten years older than I am, but I have no objection to her."

Gregory looked askance. "She's a very beautiful woman," he said. "Whoever the king gives her to should think himself a lucky man."

Ralph realised he had gone a little too far. "I don't wish to appear indifferent," he said hastily. "She is indeed a beauty."

"But I thought you were already married," Gregory said. "Have I made a mistake?"

Ralph caught Alan's eye, and saw that he was keenly curious to hear what Ralph would say next.

Ralph sighed. "My wife is very ill," he said. "She has only a few weeks to live."

*

Gwenda lit the fire in the kitchen of the old house where Wulfric had lived since he was born. She found her cooking-pots, filled one with water at the well, and threw in some early onions, the first step in making a stew. Wulfric brought in more firewood. The boys happily went out to play with their old friends, unaware of the depth of the family tragedy through which they were living.

Gwenda busied herself with household chores as the evening darkened outside. She was trying not to think. Every thought that came into her mind just made her feel worse: the

future, the past, her husband, herself. Wulfric sat and looked into the flames. Neither of them spoke.

Their neighbour, John Peters, appeared with a big jug of ale. His wife followed him in. Gwenda was not happy to see them: she wanted to be miserable in private. But their intentions were kind, and it was impossible to spurn them. Gwenda glumly wiped the dust from some wooden cups, and John poured ale for all of them.

"We're sorry things worked out this way, but we're glad to see you," he said as they drank.

Wulfric emptied his cup with one huge swallow and held it out for more.

A moment later the widow Hughes came in carrying a basket of small loaves. "I knew you wouldn't have any bread, so I made some," she said. She handed them around, and the house filled with the mouth-watering smell. John Peters poured her a cup of ale, and she sat down. "Where did you get the courage to run away?" she said admiringly. "I would have died of fright!"

Gwenda began to tell the story of their adventures. Several more neighbours arrived, each bringing a gift of food or drink. Wulfric sampled everything, drinking deep. The atmosphere lightened, and Gwenda's mood lifted a little. When she told how the villagers of Outhenby with their spades and hoes had faced down Ralph and Alan, they rocked with delighted laughter.

Then she came to the events of today, and she descended into despair again. "Everything was against us," she said bitterly. "Not just Ralph and his ruffians, but the king and the church. We had no chance."

The neighbours nodded gloomily.

"And then, when he put a rope around my Wulfric's neck..." She was filled with bleak despair. Her voice cracked, and she could not go on. She took a gulp of ale, and tried again. "When he put a rope around Wulfric's neck—the strongest and bravest man I've ever know, any of us have ever known, led through the village like a beast, and that heartless, crass, bullying Ralph holding the rope—I just wanted he heavens to fall on us and kill us all."

These were strong words, but the others agreed. Of all the things that the gentry could do to peasants—starve them, cheat them, assault them, rob them—the worst was to humiliate them. They never forgot it.

Suddenly Gwenda wanted them all to go. The sun had gone down, and it was dusk outside. She needed to lie down and close her eyes and be alone with her thoughts. She did not even want to talk to Wulfric. She was about to tell everyone to leave when Nate Reeve walked in.

"What do you want?" she said abruptly.

"I bring you good news," he said brightly.

"There can be no good news for us today," she said sourly.

"I disagree. You haven't heard it yet."

"All right, what is it?"

"Sir Ralph says Wulfric is to have his father's lands back."

Wulfric leaped to his feet. "As a tenant?" he said. "Not just to labour on?"

"As a tenant, just like your father," said Nate expansively, as if he were making the concession himself, rather than simply passing on a message.

Wulfric beamed with joy. "That's wonderful!"

"Do you accept?" Nate said almost jovially, as if it were a mere formality.

Gwenda said: "Wulfric! Don't accept!"

He looked at her, bewildered. As usual, he was slow to see beyond the immediate.

"Discuss the terms!" she urged. "You'll never be in such a strong bargaining position again. Negotiate!"

"Negotiate?" he said. He wavered briefly, then gave in to the happiness of the occasion. "This is the moment I've been hoping for for the last twelve years. I'm not going to negotiate." He turned to Nate. "I accept," he said, and held up his cup.

They all cheered.

We have no idea what better terms she believes they should have or could obtain. Maybe she should suggest a specific concession and not use the word, negotiate. ✓ See p 1219.

Give a hint here of what he means – to be expanded on p 1219.

# 71

The hospital was full again. On the day after Easter Sunday, Caris looked wearily at the rows of mattresses crammed together in a herringbone pattern, packed so tightly that the masked nuns had to step gingerly between them. Moving around was made a little easier, however, because there were so few family members at the bedsides of the sick. Sitting with a dying relative was a good way of catching the plague yourself, and people had become ruthless. When the plague began, they had stayed with their loved ones regardless, mothers with children, husband with wives, the middle-aged with their elderly parents, love overcoming fear. But that had changed. The most powerful of family ties had been viciously corroded by the acid of death. Nowadays the patient was brought in by a mother or father, a husband or wife, who then simply walked away, ignoring the piteous cries that followed them out. Only the nuns, with their face masks and their vinegar-washed hands, defied the disease.

Surprisingly, Caris was not short of help. The nunnery had enjoyed a big influx of new novices to replace the nuns who had died. This was partly because of Caris's saintly reputation. But the monastery was experiencing the same kind of revival, and Thomas now had a class of novice monks to train. They were all desperately searching for order in a world gone mad.

This time, the plague had struck some leading townspeople who had previously

~~In what time of year are we?~~
How much time has passed? ✓

p1113
SC: they called a trentine or a quarantine,: that came much later, but closing gates as in Milan; Thirty days was not enough, they had found, but anyone who did not fall ill within forty days was not carrying the infection.=no such finding

SC: the flagellants hardly appeared anywhere in Britain and did not succeed; they were foreigners and the whipping was self-inflicted

escaped it. Caris was dismayed by the death of John Constable. She had never much liked his rough-and-ready approach to justice—which was to hit troublemakers over the head with a stick and ask questions afterwards—but it was going to be more difficult to maintain order without him. Sarah Taverner had always been a voice of reason at the parish guild, and she had gone, leaving two inns to her dissolute son. And Betty Baxter, tireless baker of special buns for every town festivity, was dead, the business awkwardly shared out between three squabbling daughters.

Caris and Merthin had been able to slow the spread of the disease by cancelling major public gatherings. There had been no big Easter procession in the cathedral, and there would be no Fleece Fair this Whitsun. The weekly market was held outside the town, in the priory's orchard across the river, and most townspeople stayed away. Caris had wanted such measures when the plague first struck, but Godwyn and Elfric had opposed her. It was now too late to keep the disease out, but Caris still thought the restrictions were better than nothing.

According to Merthin, some Italian cities had closed their gates and imposed what they called a trentine or a quarantine, a waiting period of thirty or forty days before anyone could enter the city. Thirty days was not enough, they had found, but anyone who did not fall ill within forty days was not carrying the infection. Caris wished she had been able to impose such a rule in Kingsbridge before it was too late.

One problem she did not have was money. More and more people bequeathed their wealth to the nunnery, having no surviving relatives; and many of the new novices brought with them lands, flocks, orchards, and gold. The nunnery had never been so rich.

It was small consolation. For the first time in her life she felt tired—not just weary from hard work, but drained of energy, short of will power, enfeebled by adversity. The

plague was back, worse than ever, killing two hundred people a week, and she did not know how she was going to carry on. Her muscles ached, her head hurt, and sometimes her vision seemed to blur. Expand on her depression and fear. What if they all were to die?

Two men staggered in through the door, both bleeding. Caris hurried forward. Before she got without touching distance she picked up the sweetly rotten smell of drink on them. They were both nearly helpless, although it was not yet dinner time. She groaned in frustration: this was all too common.

She knew the men vaguely: Barney and Lou, two strong young men employed in the abattoir owned by Edward Slaughterhouse. Barney had one arm hanging limp, possibly broken. Lou had a dreadful injury to his face: his nose was crushed and one eye was a ghastly pulp. Both seemed to be too drunk to feel any pain. "It was a fight," Barney slurred, his words only just comprehensible. "I didn't mean it. He's my best friend. I love him."

Caris and Sister Oonagh got the two drunks lying down on adjacent mattresses. Oonagh examined Barney and said his arm was not broken but dislocated, and sent a novice to fetch Matthew Barber, the surgeon, who would be able to relocate it. Caris bathed Lou's face. There was nothing she could do to save his eye: it had burst like a soft-boiled egg.

This kind of thing made her furious. The two men were not suffering from a disease, or an accidental injury: they had harmed one another because of drink. After the first wave of the plague, she had managed to galvanise the townspeople into restoring law and order; but the second wave had done something terrible to people's souls. When she called again for a return to normalcy, the response had been apathetic. She did not know what to do next, and she felt so tired.

Feels too vague

As she contemplated the two maimed men lying shoulder to shoulder on the floor in

SC: The flagellant movement never took hold in England. A group came over from the Netherlands to London, but the Londoners just looked on them with humour or horror and did not join the hysteria. I suppose you could invent or speculate that elsewhere they may have had more success, but: a) you should have Friar Bennet influenced by a foreign source, perhaps a stray Fleming who tried his hand (or whip) at London, failed and scooted over to Kingsbridge (telling us as an aside that he or she had no success in London); and (b) get the ritual straight: the leader did not whip the followers. On the ritual I have translated and paraphrased the two fullest sources I know—the section in Jean le Bel's chronicle and more importantly Gilles li Muisis's second chronicle, dedicated almost entirely to the penitent movements in Tourna during 1349. It's in my *Lust for Liberty* (Harvard UP, 2006). I'll bring you a copy on the 29th.

front of her, she heard a strange noise from outside. For an instant, she was transported back three years, to the battle of Crécy, and the terrifying booming sound made by King Edward's new machines that shot stone balls into the enemy ranks. A moment later the noise came again, and she realised it was a drum; several drums, in fact, being struck in no particular rhythm. Then she heard pipes and bells whose notes failed to form any kind of tune; then hoarse cries, wailing, and shouts that might have indicated triumph or agony, or both. It was not unlike the noise of battle, but without the swish of deadly arrows or the screams of maimed horses. Frowning, she went outside.

A group of forty or so people had come on to the cathedral green, dancing a mad antic jig. Some played on musical instruments, or rather sounded them, for there was no order or harmony to the noise. Their flimsy light-coloured clothes were ripped and stained, and some of the people were half-naked, carelessly exposing the intimate parts of their bodies. All those who did not have instruments were carrying whips. A large crowd of townspeople followed, staring in curiosity and amazement.

The dancers were led by Friar Bennet, fatter than ever but cavorting energetically, sweat pouring down his dirty face and dripping from his straggly beard. He led them to the great west door of the cathedral, where he turned to face them. "We have all sinned!" he roared.

His followers cried out in response, inarticulate shrieks and groans.

"We are dirt!" he said thrillingly. "We wallow in lasciviousness like pigs in filth. We yield, quivering with desire, to our fleshly lusts. We deserve the plague!"

"Yes!"

"What must we do?" he shouted.

"Suffer!" they called. "We must suffer!"

He flourished a whip. It had three leather thongs, each of which appeared to have sharp stones attached. One of the followers dashed forward and threw himself at Bennet's feet. "Punish me!" the man begged. Bennet leaned forward and lashed the man with the three-tailed whip. It tore the thin material of the man's robe and drew blood from the skin of his back. He cried out in pain, and the rest of Bennet's followers all groaned in sympathy.

Then a woman came forward with the same cry: "Punish me!" She pulled her robe down to her waist and turned, exposing her bare breasts to the crowd, and Bennet lashed her naked back with vigour. The followers moaned again.

As they came forward in ones and twos, begging to be flogged, Caris saw that many of them had bruises and half-healed cuts on their skin: they had done this before, many times in some cases. Did they go from town to down repeating the performance? Given Bennet's involvement, she felt sure that sooner or later they would start collecting money on some pretext or other.

A woman in the watching crowd suddenly ran forward, screaming: "Punish me, too!" Caris was surprised to see that it was Millie, the browbeaten young wife of Edward Butcher. Caris could not imagine that she had committed many sins, but perhaps she had at last seen a chance to make her life dramatic. She threw off her dress and stood stark naked before the friar. Her skin was unmarked, in fact she looked almost beautiful.

Bennet gazed at her for a long moment, then said: "Kiss my feet."

She knelt in front of him, exposing her rear obscenely to the crowd, and lowered her face to his filthy feet. As she did so, he brought the whip down on her bottom. She shrieked in pain, and red marks instantly appeared on her white skin.

"You have suffered!" Bennet cried.

Minnie got to her feet.

Bennet said: "You must thank me."

"Thank you," she said.

Several more ran forward eagerly from the crowd, mostly men, and Bennet went through the same ritual with them each, whipping them as they kissed his feet. People began flogging one another, taking turns. Others lashed themselves. When they were not whipping, they were banging their drums and clanging their bells and dancing their fiendish jig.

There was a mad abandon about their actions, but Caris's professional eye noted that the strokes of the whips, though dramatic and undoubtedly painful, did not appear to inflict permanent damage.

Merthin appeared beside Caris and said: "What do you think of this?"

She frowned and said: "Why does it make me feel indignant?"

"I don't know."

"If people want to whip one another and themselves, why should I object? Perhaps it makes them feel better."

"I agree with you, though," Merthin said. "There's generally something fraudulent about anything Bennet is involved in."

"That's not it."

The mood here was not one of penitence, she decided. These dancers were not looking back contemplatively on their lives, feeling sorrow and regret for sins committed. People who genuinely repented tended to be quiet, thoughtful, and undemonstrative. What Caris sensed in the air here was quite different. It was excitement.

"This is an orgy," she said.

"Only instead of drink, they're overindulging in self-loathing."

"And there's a kind of ecstasy in it."

"But no sex."

"Give them time."

Bennet led the procession off again, heading out of the priory precincts. Caris noticed that two or three of the flagellants had produced bowls and were begging coins from the crowd. They would go through the main streets of the town like this, she guessed. They would probably finish up at one of the larger taverns, where people would buy them food and drink.

Merthin touched her arm. "You look pale," he said. "How do you feel?"

"Just tired," she said curtly. She had to soldier on regardless of how she felt, and it did not help her to be reminded of her tiredness. However, it was kind of him to notice, and she softened her tone to say: "Come to the prior's house. It's almost dinner time."

They walked across the green as the procession disappeared. They stepped inside the palace. As soon as they were alone, Caris put her arms around Merthin and kissed him. She suddenly felt very physical, and she thrust her tongue into his mouth, which she knew he liked. In response, he took both her breasts in his hands and squeezed gently. They had never kissed like this inside the palace, and Caris realised vaguely that something about Friar Bennet's orgy had weakened her normal inhibitions. She wanted Merthin to pull down her robe and put his mouth to her nipples. She felt that she was losing control, and might find herself recklessly making love to Merthin right here, on the floor, where they might so easily be caught; but she could not stop.

Then a girl's voice said: "I didn't mean to spy."

Caris was shocked. She sprang away from Merthin guiltily. She turned around, looking for the speaker. At the far end of the room, sitting on a low bench, was a young woman holding a baby. It was Ralph Fitzgerald's young wife. "Tilly!" said Caris.

Tilly stood up. She looked exhausted and frightened. "I'm so sorry to startle you," she said.

Caris was relieved. Tilly could be trusted not to make a fuss about the kiss she had seen. But what was she doing here? "Are you all right?"

"I'm a bit tired," Tilly said. She staggered. Caris caught her arm. Merthin took the baby from her. The child grizzled, but Merthin rocked him expertly and he quietened again.

Caris said to Tilly: "How did you get here?"

"I walked."

"From Tench Hall? Carrying Gerry?" The baby was now six months old, and no easy burden.

"It took me three days."

"My goodness. Has something happened?"

"I ran away."

"Didn't Ralph come after you?"

"Yes, with Alan. I hid in the forest while they went by. Gerry was very good and didn't cry."

The picture brought a lump to Caris's throat. "But..." She swallowed. "But why did you run away?"

"Because my husband wants to kill me," Tilly said, and she burst into tears.

Caris sat her down and Merthin brought her a cup of wine. They let her sob as long as she wanted to. Caris sat on the bench beside her and put an arm around her shoulders while Merthin rocked the baby. When Tilly quietened, Caris said: "What has Ralph done?"

Tilly shook her head. "Nothing. It's just the way he looks at me. I know he wants to murder me."

Merthin muttered: "I wish I could say that my brother is incapable of that..."

Caris said: "Why would he want to do such a terrible thing?"

"I don't know," Tilly said. "Ralph went to Uncle William's funeral. There was a lawyer from London there, Sir Gregory Longfellow."

"I know him," Caris said. "A clever fellow, but I don't like him."

"Gregory went with Ralph to catch Wulfric and Gwenda and bring them home. It started after that. I have a feeling it's all to do with Gregory."

Caris said: "You wouldn't have walked all this way, carrying a baby, just because of something you imagined…"

"I know it sounds fanciful," Tilly said. "But he just sits and glares at me hatefully. How can a man look at his wife like that?"

"Well, you've come to the right place," Caris said. "You're safe here."

"Can I stay?" she begged. "You won't send me back, will you?"

"Certainly not," said Caris. She caught Merthin's eye. She knew what he was thinking. It would be rash to give Tilly a guarantee. Fugitives might take refuge in churches, as a general principle, but it was very doubtful whether a nunnery had the right to shelter a knight's wife and keep her from him indefinitely—and Ralph would certainly be able to force her to give up the baby, his son and heir. All the same, Caris put as much confidence as she

could into her voice and said: "You can stay here just as long as you like."

"Oh, thank you."

Caris silently prayed that she would be able to keep her promise.

"You could live in one of the special guest rooms upstairs in the hospital," she said.

Tilly looked troubled. "But what if Ralph should come in?"

"He wouldn't dare. But, if it makes you feel safer, you can have Mother Cecilia's old room, at the end of the nuns' dormitory."

"Yes, please."

A priory servant came in to lay the table for dinner. Caris said to Tilly: "I'll take you to the refectory. You can have dinner with the nuns, then lie down in the dormitory and rest." She stood up.

Suddenly she felt dizzy. She put a hand on the table to steady herself. Merthin, still holding Tilly's baby, said anxiously: "What's wrong?"

"I'll be fine in a moment," Caris said. "I'm just tired."

Then she fell to the floor.

*

Merthin felt a tidal wave of panic wash over him. For an instant, he was stunned. Caris had never been ill, never been helpless—she was the one who took care of the sick, and he could not think of her as a victim.

But the moment passed like a blink.

Fighting down his fear, he carefully handed baby Gerry to Tilly.

The servant had stopped laying the table and stood staring at the unconscious form of Caris. Merthin deliberately made his voice calm but urgent and said to her: "Run to the

hospital and tell them Mother Caris is ill. Bring Sister Oonagh. Go on, now, as quick as you can!" The woman hurried away.

Merthin knelt beside Caris. "Can you hear me, my darling?" he said. He picked up her limp hand and patted it, then touched her cheek, then lifted an eyelid. She was out cold.

Tilly said: "She's got the plague, hasn't she?"

"Oh, God." Merthin took Caris in his arms. He was a slight man, but he had always been able to lift heavy objects, building stones and timber beams. He embraced her and stood up, then laid her gently on the table. "Don't die," he whispered. "Please don't die."

He kissed her forehead and realised that her skin was hot. He had felt it when they embraced a few minutes ago, but he had been too excited to think about its significance. Now he realised she was feverish. Perhaps that was part of why she had been so passionate: fever could have that effect.

Sister Oonagh came in. Merthin was so grateful to see her that tears came to his eyes. She was a young nun, only a year or two out of her novitiate, but Caris thought highly of her nursing skill, and was grooming her to take responsibility for the hospital one day.

Oonagh wrapped a linen mask over her mouth and nose and tied it in a knot behind her neck.

Then she touched Caris's forehead and cheek. "Did she sneeze?" she said.

Merthin wiped his eyes. "No," he answered. He felt sure he would have noticed: a sneeze was such an ominous sign.

Oonagh pulled down the front of Caris's robe. To Merthin, she looked agonisingly vulnerable with her small breasts exposed. But he was glad to see that there was no rash of pink spots on her chest. Oonagh covered her up again.

She bent over Caris and looked up her nostrils. "No bleeding," she said. She felt Caris's pulse thoughtfully.

After a minute she looked at Merthin. "This may not be the plague. But it appears to be a serious illness. She's feverish, her pulse is rapid, and her breathing is shallow. Carry her upstairs, lie her down, and bathe her face with rose water. Anyone who attends her should wear a mask and wash their hands as if she had the plague."

Merthin did as she said. He put Caris down on the mattress in her room and straightened her clothing. The nuns brought vinegar for hand washing and rose water to cool Caris. Merthin told them of Caris's instructions regarding Tilly, and they took the young mother and baby to the refectory. Merthin sat beside Caris, patting her forehead and cheeks with a rag damped with the fragrant liquid, praying for her to come round.

At last she did. She opened her eyes, frowned in puzzlement, then looked anxious and said: "What happened?"

"You fainted," he said.

She tried to sit upright.

"Keep still," he said. "You're sick. It's probably not the plague, but you have a serious illness of some kind."

She must have felt weak, for she lay back on the pillow without further protest. "I'll just rest for an hour," she said.

She was in bed for two weeks.

*

After three days the whites of her eyes turned the colour of mustard, and Sister Oonagh said she had the yellow jaundice. Oonagh prepared an infusion of herbs sweetened with honey

which Caris drank hot three times a day. The fever receded, but Caris remained weak. She inquired anxiously about Tilly every day, and Oonagh answered her questions, but refused to discuss any other aspect of life in the nunnery, in case it should tire Caris. Caris was too enfeebled to fight her.

Merthin did not leave the house. In the daytime he sat downstairs, close enough to hear her call, and his employees came to him for instructions about the various buildings they were putting up or tearing down. At night he lay on a mattress beside her and slept lightly, waking every time her breathing changed or she turned over in her bed. Lolla slept in the next room.

At the end of the first week, Ralph showed up.

"My wife has disappeared," he said as he walked into the hall of the prior's palace.

Merthin looked up from a drawing he was making on a large slate. "Hello, brother," he said. Ralph looked shifty, he thought. Clearly he had mixed feelings about Tilly's disappearance.

what mixture?

Perhaps I have too, Merthin thought guiltily. After all, I did help his wife to leave him.

Ralph sat down on a bench. "Have you got any wine? I'm parched."

Merthin went to the sideboard and poured wine from a jug. It crossed his mind to say he had no idea where Tilly could be; but his instinct revolted against the idea of lying to his own brother, especially about something so important. Besides, there was a good chance someone else would let the information out: Tilly's presence at the priory was not a secret. It was always best to be honest, Merthin thought, except in dire emergency. Handing the cup to Ralph, he said: "Tilly is here, at the nunnery, with the baby."

Wouldn't Tilly have requested secrecy?

"I thought she might be." Ralph lifted the cup in his left hand, and Merthin noticed the stumps of his three severed fingers. He took a long draught. "What's the matter with her?"

"She ran away from you, Ralph."

"You should have let me know."

"I feel bad about that. But I couldn't betray her. She's frightened of you."

"Why take sides with her against me? I'm your brother!"

"Because I know you. If she's scared, there's probably a reason."

"This is outrageous." Ralph was trying to appear indignant, but the act was unconvincing, and Merthin wondered what he really felt.

"We can't throw her out," Merthin said. "She's asked for sanctuary."

"You can't keep Gerry from me—he's my son and heir."

"Not indefinitely, no. If you start a legal action in the courts, I'm sure you'll win. But you wouldn't try to separate him from his mother, would you?"

"If he comes home, she will."

That was probably true. Merthin was casting about for another way of persuading Ralph when Brother Thomas came in, bringing Alan Fernhill with him. With his one hand, Thomas was holding Alan's arm, as if to prevent him from running away. "I found him snooping," he said.

"I was just looking around," Alan protested. "I thought the monastery was empty."

Merthin said: "As you see, it's not. We've got one monk, six novices, and a couple of dozen orphan boys."

Thomas said: "Anyway, he wasn't in the monastery, he was in the nuns' cloisters."

Merthin frowned. He could hear a psalm being sung in the distance. Alan had timed

his visit well: all the nuns and novices were in the cathedral for the service of Sext. Most of the priory buildings were deserted at this hour. Alan had possibly been walking around unhindered for some time.

This did not seem like idle curiosity.

Thomas added: "Fortunately, a kitchen hand saw him and came to fetch me out of the church."

Merthin wondered what Alan had been looking for. Tilly? Surely he would not have dared to snatch her from a nunnery in broad daylight. He turned to Ralph. "What are you two plotting?"

Ralph batted the question off to Alan. "What did you think you were doing?" he said said wrathfully, though Merthin thought the anger was faked.

Alan shrugged. "Just looking around while I waited for you."

"Well…don't do it again."

Merthin realised that Ralph was going to stick with this story. I was honest with him, but he's not being honest with me, he thought sadly. He returned to the more important subject. "Why don't you leave Tilly be for a while?" he said to Ralph. "She'll come to no harm here. And perhaps, after a while, she realise you mean her no harm, and come back to you."

"It's too shaming," Ralph said.

"Not really. A noblewoman sometimes spends a few weeks at a monastery, if she feels the need to retire from the world for a while."

"Usually when she's been widowed, or her husband has gone off to war."

"Not always, though."

"When there's no obvious reason, people always say she wants to get away from her husband."

"How bad is that? You might like some time away from your wife."

"Perhaps you're right," Ralph said.

Merthin was startled by this response. He had not expected Ralph to be so easily persuaded. It took him a moment to get over the surprise. Then he said: "That's it. Give her three months, then come back and talk to her." Merthin had a feeling Tilly would never relent, but at least this proposal would postpone the crisis.

"Three months," Ralph said. "All right." He stood up to go.

Merthin got up and shook his hand. "How are Mother and Father? I haven't seen them for months."

"Getting old. Father doesn't leave their house now."

"I'll come and visit as soon as Caris is better. She's recovering from the yellow jaundice."

"Give her my best wishes."

Merthin went to the door and watched Ralph and Alan ride away. He felt deeply disturbed. Ralph was up to something, and it was not simply getting Tilly back.

He returned to his drawing and sat staring at it, without seeing it, for a long time.

*

By the end of the second week, it was clear Caris was going to get better. Merthin was exhausted but happy. Feeling like a man reprieved, he put Lolla to bed early and went out for the first time.

It was a mild spring evening, and the sun and balmy air made him light-headed. His

Wouldn't Philippa have been notified about Tilly? It was she who raised her, no?

own tavern, the Bell, was closed for rebuilding, but the Holly Bush was doing brisk business, customers sitting outside on benches in the sun with their tankards. There were so many people out enjoying the weather that Merthin stopped and asked the drinkers if it was a holiday today, thinking he might have lost track of the date. "Every day's a holiday now," one said. "What's the point in working, when we're all going to die of the plague? Have a cup of ale."

"No, thanks." Merthin walked on.

He noticed that many of the townspeople were wearing very fancy clothes, elaborate headgear and embroidered tunics that they would not normally have been able to afford. He presumed they had inherited these garments, or perhaps just taken them from wealthy corpses. The effect was nightmarish: velvet hats on filthy hair, gold threads and food stains, ragged hose and jewel-encrusted shoes.

He saw two men dressed all in women's clothing, floor-length gowns and wimples. They were walking along the main street arm in arm, like merchants' wives showing off their wealth—but they were unmistakably male, with big hands and feet and hair on their chins. Merthin began to feel disoriented, as if nothing could be relied upon any more.

As the dusk thickened, he crossed the bridge to Leper Island. He had built a street of shops and taverns there, between the two parts of the bridge. The work was finished, but the buildings were untenanted, with boards nailed across their doors and windows to keep vagrants out. No one lived there but rabbits. The premises would remain empty until the plague died out, and Kingsbridge returned to normal, Merthin supposed. If the plague never went away, they would never be occupied; but, in that eventuality, renting his property would be the least of his worries.

He returned to the city just as the gate was closing. There seemed to be a huge party going on at the White Horse inn. The house was full of lights, and the crowd filled the road in front of the building. "What's going on?" Merthin asked a drinker.

"Young Davey's got the plague, and he's got no one to leave the inn to, so he's giving all the beer away," the man said, grinning with delight. "Drink as much as you can hold, it's free!"

He and many other people had clearly been working on the same principle, and dozens of them were reeling drunk. Merthin pushed his way into the crowd. Someone was banging a drum and others were dancing. He saw a circle of men, and looked over their shoulders to see what they were hiding. A very drunk woman of about twenty years was bending over a table while a man had sexual intercourse with her from behind. Several other men were clearly waiting their turn. Merthin turned away in distaste. At the side of the building, half concealed by a stack of empty barrels, his eye lit on Ozzie Ostler, a wealthy horse dealer, kneeling in front of a younger man and sucking his penis. That was against the law, in fact the penalty was death, but clearly no one cared. Ozzie, a married man who sat on the parish guild with Merthin, caught his eye and looked away, but did not stop what he was doing, in fact he seemed to continue with even more enthusiasm, as if excited by being seen. Merthin shook his head, amazed. Just outside the tavern was a table laden with partly-eaten food: joints of roasted meat, smoked fish, puddings, and cheese. A dog was standing on the table tearing at a ham. A man was throwing up into a bowl of stew. Beside the tavern door Davey Whitehorse sat in a big wooden chair with a huge cup of wine. He was sneezing and sweating, and the characteristic trickle of blood came from his nose, but he was looking around and cheering the revellers on. He seemed to want to kill himself with drink before the

plague finished him off.

Merthin felt nauseated. He left the scene and hurried back to the priory.

To his surprise, he found Caris up and dressed. "I'm better," she said. "I'm going to return to my usual work tomorrow." Seeing his sceptical look, she added: "Sister Oonagh said I could."

"If you're taking orders from someone else, you can't be back to normal," he said; and she laughed. The sight brought tears to his eyes. She had not laughed for two weeks, and there had been moments when he had wondered whether he would ever hear the sound again.

"Where have you been?" she asked.

He told her about his walk around the town, and the disturbing sights he had seen. "None of it was very wicked," he said. "I just wonder what they'll do next. When all their inhibitions have gone, will they start to kill one another?"

A kitchen hand brought a tureen of soup for their supper. Caris sipped warily. For a long time, all food had made her feel sick. However, she seemed to find the leek soup palatable, and drank a bowlful.

When they had finished and the maid had cleared away, she said: "While I was ill, I thought a lot about dying."

"You didn't ask for a priest."

"Whether I've been good or bad, I don't think God will be fooled by a last-minute change of heart."

"What, then?"

"I asked myself if there was anything in my life I really regretted."

"And was there?"

"Lots of things. I'm bad friends with my sister. I haven't any children. I lost that scarlet coat my father gave my mother on the day she died."

"How did you lose it?"

"I wasn't allowed to bring it with me when I entered the nunnery. I left it with my father. I suspect he couldn't bear to have it in the house. He probably gave it to a tinker."

"What was your biggest regret?"

"There were two. That I haven't built my hospital; and that I've spent too little time in bed with you."

He raised his eyebrows. "Well, the second one is easily rectified."

"I know."

"What about the nuns?"

"Nobody cares any more. You saw what it was like in the town. Here in the nunnery, we're too busy dealing with the dying to fuss about the old rules. Jean and Oonagh sleep together every night in one of the upstairs rooms of the hospital. It doesn't matter."

Merthin frowned. "It's odd that they do that, and still go to church services in the middle of the night. How do they reconcile the two things?"

"The Bible says: 'He that hath two coats, let him impart to him that hath none.' How do you think the Bishop of Shiring reconciles that with his chest full of robes? Everybody takes what they like from the teachings of the church, and forgets the parts that don't suit them."

"And you?

"I do the same, but I'm honest about it. So I'm going to live with you, as your wife, and if anyone asks why, I shall tell them that these are strange times." She got up, went to the

door, and barred it. "You've been sleeping here for two weeks. Don't move out."

"You don't have to lock me in," he said with a laugh. "I'll stay voluntarily." He put his arms around her.

She said: "We started something, a few minutes before I fainted. Tilly interrupted us."

"You were feverish."

"In that way, I still am."

"Perhaps we should pick up where we left off."

"We could go to bed first."

"All right."

Holding hands, they went up the stairs.

# 72

Ralph and his men hid in the forest north of Kingsbridge, waiting. It was May, and the evenings were long. When night fell, Ralph set a watch, and encouraged the others to take a nap.

With him were Alan Fernhill and four hired men, soldiers demobilized from the king's army, fighters who had failed to find a niche in peacetime. Alan had hired them in a rough tavern in Gloucester. They did not know who he was and they had never seen Ralph in daylight. They would take their money, do as they were told, and ask no questions.

Ralph stayed awake, noting the passing of time automatically, as he had when with the king in France. He had found that, if he tried too hard to figure out how many hours had passed, he became doubtful; but, if he simply guessed, what came into his head was always right. Monks used a burning candle, marked with rings for the hours, but Ralph had a better measure in his head.

He sat very still, with his back to a tree, staring into the low fire they had built. He could hear the rustle of small animals in the undergrowth and the occasional hoot of a predatory owl. He never felt so calm as in the waiting hours before action. There was quiet, and darkness, and time to think. The knowledge of danger to come, which made most men jumpy, actually soothed him.

The risk tonight did not in fact come from the hazards of fighting. There might well be some hand-to-hand combat but, if there was, the enemy would consist of fat townsmen or soft-skinned monks. The real peril was that he might be recognised. What he was about to do was shocking. It would be talked of with outrage in every church in the land, perhaps in Europe. Gregory Longfellow, for whom Ralph was doing this, would be the loudest in condemning it. If it ever got out that Ralph Fitzgerald was the villain, he would be hanged in disgrace.

But if he succeeded, he would be the earl of Shiring.

When he judged it was two hours past midnight, he roused the others.

They left their horses and walked out of the woodland and along the road to the city. Alan was carrying the equipment, as he had when they fought in France. He had a short ladder, a coil of rope, and a grappling iron they had used when attacking city walls in Normandy. In his belt were a mason's chisel and a hammer. They might not need these tools, but they had learned that it was best to be prepared.

Alan also had several large sacks, rolled up tightly and tied with string to make them easy to carry.

When they came within sight of the city. Ralph gave out masks with holes for the eyes and mouth, and they all put them on. Ralph also wore a mitten on his left hand, to conceal the tell-tale stumps of the three missing fingers. He was completely unrecognisable—unless, of course, he should be captured.

They all pulled felt bags over their boots, tying them to their knees, to muffle their footsteps.

It was hundreds of years since Kingsbridge had been attacked by an army, and

security was slack, especially since the advent of the plague. Nevertheless, the southern entrance to the town was firmly closed. At the townward end of Merthin's great bridge was a stone gatehouse barred with a mighty wooden door. But the river defended the town only on the east and south sides. To the north and west, no bridge was needed, and the town was protected by a wall which was in poor repair. That was why Ralph was approaching from the north.

This is the first we've heard of this wall. It is mentioned in Part II.

Mean houses huddled outside the walls like dogs at the back of a butcher's shop. Alan had scouted the route several days ago, when the two of them had come to Kingsbridge on the pretext of looking for Tilly. Now Ralph and the hired men followed him, padding between the hovels, trying to be as silent as possible. Even paupers in the suburbs could raise the alarm if awakened. A dog barked, and Ralph tensed, but someone cursed the animal and it fell silent. In another moment they came to a place where the wall was broken down and they could easily clamber over the fallen stones.

They found themselves in a narrow alley behind some warehouses. It came out alongside the north gate of the city? At the gate, Ralph knew, was a sentry in a booth. The six men approached the booth silently. Although they were now within the walls, a sentry would question them if he saw them, and call for help if he was not satisfied with their answers. But, to Ralph's relief, the man was fast asleep, sitting on a stool and leaning against the side of his box, a stub of candle guttering on a shelf beside him.

All the same, Ralph decided not to risk the man's waking up. He tiptoed close, leaned into the booth, and slit the sentry's throat with a long knife. The man woke up and tried to scream with pain, but all that came out of his mouth was blood. As he slumped, Ralph caught him and held him there for the few seconds it took him to lose consciousness. Then he

propped the body back up against the wall of the booth.

He wiped the bloody blade on the dead man's tunic and sheathed his knife.

The large double door that stopped the gateway had within it a smaller, man-sized door. Ralph unbarred this little door, ready for a quick getaway later.

The six men walked silently into the dark city.

There was no moon—Ralph had chosen tonight for that reason—but unfortunately they were faintly lit by starlight. He looked anxiously at the upstairs windows of the houses on either side. If sleepless people happened to look out, they would see the unmistakably sinister sight of six masked men entering the town. Fortunately it was not quite warm enough for people to leave their windows open at night, and the shutters were closed. All the same, Ralph pulled up the hood of his cloak and dragged it as far forward as it would go, in the hope of shadowing his face and concealing the mask; and he motioned the others to do the same.

This was the city in which he had spent his adolescence, and the streets were familiar. Ralph's brother, Merthin, still lived here, although Ralph was not sure exactly where.

They went down the main street, past the Holly Bush and the Bell, both closed for the night and locked up hours ago. They turned into the cathedral close. The entrance had tall ironbound timber gates, but they stood open, not having been closed for years, their hinges rusted and seized up.

The priory was dark except for a dim light in the windows of the hospital. Ralph reckoned this would be the time when the monks and nuns were sleeping most deeply. In an hour or so they would be wakened for the service of Matins, which started and finished before dawn.

Alan, who had reconnoitred the priory, led the team around the north side of the church. They walked silently through the graveyard and past the prior's palace, then turned along the narrow strip of land that divided the east end of the cathedral from the river bank. They came to a blank wall. Alan propped his short ladder up against the wall and whispered: "Nuns' cloisters. Follow me."

He went up the wall and over the roof. His feet made little noise on the slates. Happily, he did not need to use the grappling iron, which might have made an alarming clang.

The others followed, Ralph coming last.

On the inside, they dropped from the roof and landed with soft thumps on the turf of the quadrangle. Once there, Ralph looked warily at the regular stone columns of the cloisters around him. The arches seemed to stare at him like watchmen, but nothing stirred. It was a good thing monks and nuns were not allowed to own pet dogs.

Alan led them around the deep-shadowed walkway and through a heavy door. "Kitchen," he whispered. The room was dimly lit by the embers of a big fire. "Move slowly so that you don't knock over any pots."

Ralph waited, letting his eyes adjust. Soon he could make out the outlines of a big table, several barrels, and a stack of cooking vessels. "Find somewhere to sit or lie down, and try to make yourselves comfortable," he said to them. "We stay here until they all get up and go into the church."

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Peering out of the kitchen an hour later, Ralph counted the nuns and novices shuffling out of the dormitory and heading through the cloisters towards the cathedral, some of them carrying

lamps that threw antic shadows upon the vaulted ceilings above them. "Twenty-five," he whispered to Alan. As he had expected, Tilly was not among them. Visiting noblewomen were not expected to attend services in the middle of the night.

When they had all disappeared, he moved. The others remained behind.

There were only two places in the nunnery where Tilly might be sleeping. One was the hospital, the other the nuns' dormitory. Ralph had guessed she would feel safer in the dormitory, and headed there first.

He went softly up the stone steps, his boots still muffled by felt overshoes. He peeped into the room. It was lit by a single candle. He was hoping that all the nuns would be in the church, for he did not want miscellaneous people confusing the situation. He was afraid one or two might have stayed behind, because of illness or laziness or for some more obscure reason. But the room was empty—not even Tilly was there. He was about to retreat when he noticed a door at the far end.

He padded the length of the dormitory, picking up the candle, and went through the door silently. The unsteady light revealed the young head of his wife on a pillow, her hair in disarray around her face. She looked so innocent and pretty that Ralph felt a stab of remorse, and had to remind himself of how much he hated her for standing in the way of his advancement.

The baby, his son Gerry, lay in a crib next to her, eyes closed, mouth open, sleeping peacefully.

Ralph crept closer and, with a swift movement, clamped his right hand hard over Tilly's mouth, waking her and at the same time stopping her making any noise.

Tilly opened her eyes wide and stared at him in dread.

He put the candle down. In his pocket he had an assortment of useful odds and ends, including rags and leather thongs. He stuffed a rag into Tilly's mouth to keep her quiet. Despite his mask and glove, he had a feeling she had recognised him, even though he had not spoken. Perhaps she could smell him, like a dog. It did not matter. She was not going to tell anyone.

He tied her hands and feet with leather thongs. She was not struggling now, but she would later. He checked that her gag was secure. Then he settled down to wait.

He could hear the singing from the church: a strong choir of females, and a ragged few male voices trying to match them. Tilly kept staring at him with big, pleading eyes. He turned her over so that he could not see her face.

She had known he was going to kill her. She had read his mind. She must be a witch. Perhaps all women were witches. Anyway, she had known his intention almost as soon as he had formed it. She had started to watch him, especially in the evenings, her fearful eyes following him around the room, no matter what he did. She had lain stiff and alert beside him at night while he fell asleep, and in the mornings when he awoke she was invariably up already. Then, after a few days of this, she had disappeared. Ralph and Alan had searched for her without success, and then he had heard a rumour that she had taken refuge in Kingsbridge Priory.

Which happened to fit in with his plans quite neatly.

The baby snuffled in his sleep, and it occurred to Ralph that he might cry. What if the nuns came back just then? He thought it through. One or two would probably come in here to see if Tilly needed help. He would just kill them, he decided. It would not be the first time. He had killed nuns in France.

At last he heard them shuffling back into the dormitory.

Alan Fernhill would be watching from the kitchen, counting them as they returned. When they were all safely inside the room, Alan and the other four men would draw their swords and make their move.

Ralph lifted Tilly to her feet. Her face was streaked with tears. He turned her so that her back was to him, then put an arm around her waist and lifted her, hoisting her on to his hip. She was as light as a child.

He drew his long dagger.

From outside, he heard a man say: "Silence, or you die!" It was Alan, he knew, although the hood muffled the voice and made it unrecognisable.

This was a crucial moment. There were other people on the premises—nuns and patients in the hospital, monks in their own quarters—and Ralph did not want them to wake and confuse the situation.

Despite Alan's warning, there were several shouts of shock and shrieks of fear—but, Ralph thought, not too loud. So far, so good.

He threw open the door, stepped into the dormitory, and held his knife to Tilly's throat.

He could see by the light of the nuns' lamps. At the far end of the room, Alan had a woman in his grasp, his knife to her throat, in the same pose as Ralph with Tilly. Two more men stood behind him. The other two hirelings would be on guard at the foot of the stairs.

"Listen to me," Ralph said.

At the sound of his voice, Tilly jerked convulsively. She had recognised it. But that did not matter so long as no one else did.

There was a terrified silence.

"Which one of you is the treasurer?"

No one spoke.

Ralph put his knife to Tilly's throat. She began to struggle, but she was too small, and he held her easily. Now, he thought; now is the time to kill her; but he hesitated. He had killed many people, women as well as men, but suddenly it seemed a terrible thing to stick a knife into the body of someone he had embraced and kissed and slept with, the woman who had borne his child.

Also, he told himself, the effect on the nuns would be more shocking if one of their own died.

He nodded to Alan.

With one strong cut, Alan slit the throat of the nun he was holding. Blood gushed out of her neck on to the floor.

Someone screamed.

It was not a mere cry or a shriek, but a fortissimo yell of pure terror that might have awakened the dead, and it went on until one of the hired men hit the screamer a mighty blow over the head with his club and she fell unconscious to the floor, blood trickling down her cheek.

Ralph said again: "Which one of you is the treasurer?"

*

Merthin had woken up briefly when the bell rang for Matins and Caris slipped out of bed. As usual, he turned over and fell into a light doze, so that when she returned it seemed as if she had been away for only a minute or two. She was cold when she got back into bed, and he

p1142
SC: "And more than half the priests." but not the bishops; also, not a great different between the mortality of priests and what is seen in manorial rolls for serfs

drew her to him and wrapped his arms around her. They often stayed awake for a while, talking, and usually made love before going to sleep. It was Merthin's favourite time.

She pressed up against him, her breasts squashed comfortably against his chest. He kissed her forehead. When she had warmed up, he reached between her legs and gently stroked the soft hair there.

But she was feeling talkative. "Did you hear yesterday's rumour? Outlaws in the woods north of town."

"It seems a bit unlikely," he said.

"I don't know. The walls are decrepit on that side."

"But what are they going to steal? Anything they want is theirs for the taking. If they need meat, there are thousands of sheep and cattle unguarded in the fields, with no one to claim ownership."

"That's what makes it strange."

"Stealing nowadays is like leaning over the fence to breathe your neighbour's air."

She sighed. "Three months ago, I thought this terrible plague was over."

"How many more people have we lost?"

"A thousand since Easter." Where is their horror at this tidal wave of death? Or are they now too hardened?

That seemed about right to Merthin. "I hear that other towns are similar."

He felt her hair move against his shoulder as she nodded in the dark. She said: "I believe something like a quarter of the population of England is gone already."

"And more than half the priests."

"That's because they make contact with so many people every time they hold a service. They can hardly escape."

"So half the churches are closed."

"A good thing, if you ask me. I'm sure crowds spread the plague faster than anything."

"Anyway, most people have lost all respect for religion."

To Caris, that was no great tragedy. She said: "Perhaps they'll stop believing in mumbo-jumbo medicine now, and start thinking about what treatments actually make a difference."

"You say that, but it's hard for ordinary people to know what is a genuine cure and what a false remedy."

"I'll give you four rules."

He smiled fondly in the dark. She always had a list. "All right."

"One: If there are dozens of different remedies for a complaint, you can be sure none of them works."

"Why?"

"Because if one of them worked, people would forget the rest. Two: Just because a remedy is unpleasant doesn't mean it's any good. Raw larks' brains do nothing for a sore throat, even though they make you heave; whereas a nice cup of hot water and honey will soothe you. Three: Human and animal dung never does anyone any good. It usually makes them worse."

"I'm relieved to hear it."

"Four: If the remedy looks like the disease—the spotted breast feathers of a thrush for the pox, say, or sheep's urine for yellow jaundice—it's probably imaginative rubbish."

"You should write a book about this."

p1144
CM: Tam Hiding is dead of course, though it hardly matters here. It's the perfect name for Ralph to claim – one that will frighten people whether they think it's his true name or not. Do you want, thought, to close the loophole down and make it plain that Ralph is aware of this? Or are you planning "you can't be Tam Hiding because I buried him" moment?

She made a scornful noise. "Universities are wedded to ancient Greek texts."

"Not a book for university students. One for people like you, nuns and barbers and wise women and midwives."

"Wise women and midwives can't read."

"Some can, and others will have people who can read for them."

"I suppose people might like a little book that tells them what to do about the plague."

She was thoughtful for a few moments.

In the silence, there was a scream.

"What was that?" Merthin said.

"It sounded like a shrew being caught by an owl."

"No, it didn't," he said, and he got up.

*

One of the older nuns stepped forward and addressed Ralph.

"Please don't hurt Tilly," she begged. "I'm Sister Beth, the treasurer. We'll give you anything you want. Please don't do any more violence."

"I am Tam Hiding," Ralph said: "Where are the keys to the nuns' treasury?"

"I have them here, on my belt."

"Take me there."

Beth hesitated. Perhaps she sensed that Ralph did not know where the treasury was. On their reconnaissance trip, Alan had been able to scout the nunnery quite thoroughly. He had plotted their way in, identified the kitchen as a good hiding-place, and located the nuns' dormitory; but he had not been able to find the treasury. Clearly Beth did not want to reveal the secret.

Ralph had no time to lose. He did not know who might have heard that scream. He pressed the point of his knife into Tilly's throat until it drew blood. "I want to go to the treasury," he said.

"All right," Beth said. "I'll show you the way."

"I thought you would," Ralph said.

He left two of the hired men in the dormitory to keep the nuns quiet. He and Alan followed Beth down the steps to the cloisters, taking Tilly.

At the foot of the stairs, the other two hired men were detaining at knife point three more nuns. Ralph guessed that those on duty in the hospital had come to investigate the scream. He was pleased: another threat had been neutralised. But where were the monks?

He sent the extra nuns up into the dormitory. He left one hired man on guard at the foot of the stairs and took the other with him.

Beth led them into the refectory, which was at ground level underneath the dormitory. Her flickering lamp revealed trestle tables, benches, a lectern, and a wall painting of Jesus at a wedding feast.

At the far end of the room Beth moved a table to reveal a trapdoor in the floor. It had a keyhole just like a normal upright door. She unlocked it and lifted it. It gave on to a narrow spiral of stone steps. She descended the stairs. Ralph left the hired man on guard and went down, awkwardly carrying Tilly, and Alan followed him.

Ralph reached the bottom of the staircase and looked around with a satisfied air. This was the holy of holies, the nuns' secret treasury. It was a cramped underground room like a dungeon, but better built: the walls were of ashlar, smoothly squared-off stones as used in the cathedral, and the floor was paved with closely-set flagstones. Ralph put Tilly, trussed like a

chicken, on the floor.

Most of the room was taken up by a huge lidded box, like a coffin for a giant, chained to a ring in the wall. There was not much else: two stools, a writing desk, and a shelf bearing a stack of vellum rolls, presumably the nunnery's account books.

The box was far too large to have come down the spiral staircase. It must have been brought in pieces and assembled here in the treasury. Ralph pointed to the clasp, and Beth unlocked it with another of the keys on her belt.

Ralph looked inside. There were scores more vellum rolls, obviously all the charters and title deeds that proved the nunnery's ownership of its property and rights; a pile of leather bags that undoubtedly held jewelled ornaments; and another, smaller chest that probably contained money.

At this point, he had to be subtle. His object was those charters, but he did not want that to be apparent. He had to steal them, but appear not to have done so.

He ordered Beth to open the small chest. It contained a few gold coins. Ralph was puzzled by how little there was. Perhaps more was hidden somewhere in this room, possibly behind stones in the wall. However, he did not stop to ponder: he was only pretending to be interested in the money. He poured the coins into the wallet at his belt. Meanwhile, Alan unrolled a capacious sack and began filling it with the cathedral ornaments.

Having let Beth see that, Ralph ordered her back up the stairs.

Tilly was still here, watching with wide, terrified eyes, but it did not matter what she saw. She would never be able to tell.

Ralph unrolled another sack and began loading the vellum rolls into it as fast as he could.

p1147
ML: l. 7 A small point, but I suspect that vellum might be rather hard to set fire to, especially when it has been stored in a (probably damp) stone building. I have never tried to set fire to it and am reluctant to try it with my own documents!

When they had done, Ralph took a hasty look at the other rolls, the ones on the shelf. He untied the strings around several of them and glanced at the contents. He was not much of a reader, but he could see that all the sheets had rows of figures written on them. As he had suspected, these were not legal charters but accounts.

He did not want to take those, but they gave him an idea.

He made a pile of the account rolls on top of the wooden box. Then he held the tip of the candle flame to a particularly old and dried-up roll. It caught fire immediately. He used the roll to light several others. In a minute there was a good fire blazing.

Ralph looked at Tilly, lying helpless on the floor. He drew his knife. Then, once again, he hesitated.

*

From the prior's palace, a small door led directly into the chapter house, which itself communicated with the north transept of the cathedral. Merthin and Caris took this route in their search for the source of the scream. The chapter house was empty, and they went on into the church. Their single candle was too dim to illuminate the vast interior of the cathedral, but they stood still in the centre of the crossing and listened hard.

They heard the click of a latch.

Merthin said: "Who's there?" and was ashamed of the fear that made his voice tremble.

"Brother Thomas," came the reply.

The voice came from the south transept, and Thomas moved into the light of their candle. "I thought I heard someone scream," he said.

"So did we. But there's no one here in the church."

"Let's look around."

"What about the novices, and the boys?"

"I told them to go back to sleep."

They passed through the south transept into the monks' cloisters. Once again they saw no one and heard nothing. From here, they followed a passage through the kitchen stores to the hospital. The patients lay in their beds as normal, some sleeping and some moving and groaning in pain—but, Merthin realised after a moment, there were no nuns with them.

"This is very strange," Caris said.

The scream might have come from here, but there was no sign of emergency, or of any kind of disturbance.

They went into the kitchen, which was deserted as they would have expected.

Thomas sniffed deeply, as if trying to pick up a scent.

Merthin said: "What is it?" He found himself whispering.

"Monks are clean," Thomas murmured in reply. "Someone dirty has been here."

Merthin could not smell anything unusual.

Thomas picked up a heavy cleaver, the kind the cook would use to chop through meat and bones.

They went to the kitchen door. Thomas held up his left arm, the one with no hand, and they stopped. There was a faint light in the nuns' cloisters. It seemed to be coming from the recess at the near end. It was the reflected gleam of a distant candle or two, Merthin guessed. It might be coming from the nuns' refectory, or from the flight of stone steps that led up to their dormitory; or both.

Thomas stepped out of his sandals and went forward, his bare feet making no sound

on the flagstones.

He melted into the shadows of the cloister. Merthin could just about make him out as he edged towards the recess.

A faint but pungent aroma came to Merthin's nose. It was not the smell of dirty bodies that Thomas had detected in the kitchen, but something quite different and new. A second later Merthin identified it as smoke.

Thomas must have picked it up too, for he froze in place up against the wall.

Someone unseen gave a grunt of surprise, then a figure stepped out from the recess into the cloister walk, faintly but clearly visible, the weak light outlining the silhouette of a man with some kind of headdress covering his entire head and face. The man turned towards the refectory door.

Thomas struck.

The cleaver glinted in the darkness, then there was a sickening thud as it sank into the man's body. He gave a shout of terror and pain. As he fell Thomas swung again, and the man's cry turned into a sickening gurgle then stopped. He hit the stone pavement with a lifeless thump.

Beside Merthin, Caris gasped with horror.

Merthin ran forward. "What's going on?" he cried.

Thomas turned to him, making go-back motions with the cleaver. "Quiet!" he hissed.

The light changed in a heartbeat. Suddenly the cloisters were illuminated with the bright glow of a flame.

Someone came pounding out of the refectory with a heavy tread. It was a big man carrying a sack in one hand and a blazing torch in the other. He looked like a ghost, until

Merthin realised he was wearing a crude hood with holes for his eyes and mouth. The running man cannoned into Thomas, who went flying.

Thomas crashed into a pillar, and there was a crack that sounded like his head hitting the stone. He slumped to the ground, out cold. The running man lost his balance and fell to his knees.

Caris pushed past Merthin, ran to Thomas and knelt beside him.

Several more men appeared, all hooded, some carrying torches. It seemed to Merthin that some emerged from the refectory and others came down the steps. At the same time the sound of screaming and wailing came from the dormitory. For a moment the scene was chaos.

Merthin rushed to Caris's side and tried to protect her, with his body, from the stampede.

The intruders saw their fallen comrade, and they all paused in their rush, suddenly shocked into stillness. He was unquestionably dead, his neck sliced almost all the way through, his blood spilled copiously all over the stone floor of the cloisters. They looked around, moving their heads from side to side, peering through the holes in their hoods, looking like fish in a tank.

For better illumination, they held their torches high. Merthin saw, with a kind of bewildered amazement, that their burning brands were in fact vellum account rolls, and a small section of his brain wondered what part such things could possibly play in this nightmare.

One of the men spotted Thomas's cleaver, red with blood, lying on the ground next to Thomas and Caris, and pointed at it to show the others. With a grunt of anger, he drew a

sword.

Merthin was terrified for Caris. He stepped forward, attracting the swordsman's attention. The man moved towards Merthin and raised his weapon. Merthin retreated, drawing the swordsman away from Caris. As the danger to Caris receded, he became more frightened for himself. Walking backwards, shaking with fear, he slipped on the dead man's blood. His feet flew from under him and he fell flat on his back.

The swordsman stood over him, weapon raised high to kill him.

Then one of the others intervened. He was the tallest of the intruders, and moved with surprising speed. With his left hand, he grabbed the upraised arm of Merthin's assailant. He must have had authority, for without speaking he simply shook his hooded head from side to side in negation, and the swordsman lowered his weapon obediently.

Merthin noticed that his saviour wore a mitten on his left hand, but nothing on the right.

The interaction had lasted only a few moments, as long as it might take a man to count to ten. The interlude ended as suddenly as it had begun. One of the hooded men turned towards the kitchen and broke into a run, and the others followed. They must have planned to escape that way, Merthin realised: the kitchen had a door that gave on to the cathedral green, and that was the quickest way out from the nuns' cloisters. They disappeared, and the cloisters went dark again.

Merthin stood still, unsure what to do. Should he run after the intruders, go up the steps to the dormitory and find out why the nuns were screaming, or find out where the fire was?

He knelt beside Caris. "Is Thomas alive?" he said.

"I think he's banged his head, and he's unconscious, but he's breathing, and there's no blood."

Behind him, Merthin heard the familiar voice of Sister Beth. "Help me, please!" He turned. She stood in the doorway of the refectory, her face lit up grotesquely by the candle lamp in her hand, her head wreathed in smoke like a fashionable hat. "For God's sake, come, quickly!"

He stood up. Beth disappeared back into the refectory, and Merthin ran after her.

Her lamp threw confusing shadows, but he managed to avoid falling over the furniture as he followed her to the far end of the room. Smoke was pouring out of a hole in the floor. Merthin saw immediately that the hole was the work of a careful builder: it was perfectly square, with neat edges and a well made trapdoor. He guessed this was the nuns' hidden treasury, built in secrecy by Jeremiah. But tonight's intruders had found it.

He got a lungful of smoke, and coughed. He wondered what was burning down there, and why; but he had no intention of finding out—it looked too dangerous.

Then Beth screamed at him: "Tilly is in there!"

"Dear God," Merthin said despairingly; and he went down the steps.

He had to hold his breath. He peered through the smoke. Despite his fear, his builder's eye noticed that the spiral stone staircase was well made, each step exactly the same size and shape, and each set at precisely the same angle to the next; so that he was able to go down with confidence even when he could not see what was under foot.

In a second he reached the underground chamber. He could see flames near the middle of the room. The heat was intense, and he knew he would not be able to stand it for more than a few seconds. The smoke was thick. He was still holding his breath, but now his

eyes began to water, and his vision blurred. He wiped his eyes with his sleeve and peered into the murk. Where was Tilly? He could not see the floor.

He dropped to his knees. Visibility improved slightly: the smoke seemed less dense closer to the floor. He moved around on all fours, staring into the corners of the room, sweeping with his hands where he could not see.. "Tilly!" he shouted. "Tilly, where are you?" The smoke caught in his throat and he suffered a coughing fit that would probably have drowned any reply she made.

He could not last much longer. He was coughing convulsively, but every breath seemed to choke him with more smoke. His eyes watered copiously and he was nearly blind. In desperation, he went so close to the fire that the flames began to singe his sleeve. If he collapsed and lost consciousness, he would die for certain.

Then his hand touched flesh.

He grabbed. It was a human leg, a small leg, a girl's leg. He pulled her towards him. Her clothes were smouldering. He could hardly see her face and could not tell whether she was conscious, but she was tied hand and foot with leather thongs, so she could not move of her own accord. Striving to stop coughing, he got his arms under her and picked her up.

As soon as he stood upright, the smoke became blindingly thick. Suddenly he could not remember which way the stairs were. He staggered away from the flames and crashed into the wall, almost dropping Tilly. Left or right? He went left and came to a corner. Changing his mind, he retraced his steps.

He felt as if he was drowning. His strength gone, he dropped to his knees. That saved him. Once again he found he could see a little better close to the ground, and a stone step appeared, like a vision from heaven, right in front of him.

p1154
MCF: Who dragged Merthin away? Some nuns? Nice if it were Caris.

Desperately holding on to the limp form of Tilly, he moved forward on his knees and made it to the staircase. With a last effort, he got to his feet. He put one foot on the lowest step and hauled himself up; then he managed the next step. Coughing helplessly, he forced himself upward until there were no more steps. He staggered, fell to his knees, dropped Tilly, and collapsed on to the refectory floor.

Someone bent over him. He spluttered: "Close the trapdoor—stop the fire!" A moment later he heard a bang as the wooden door slammed shut.

He was grabbed under the arms and dragged away. The smoke thinned and he began to suck air into his lungs. He sensed the transition from indoors to out, and tasted clean night air. He gasped, coughed, gasped, and coughed. Slowly he began to breathe more normally. His eyes stopped watering, and he saw that dawn was breaking. The faint light showed him a crowd of nuns standing around him.

He sat upright. Tilly lay stretched out beside him. Caris was bending over her. Merthin tried to speak, coughed, and tried again. "How is she?"

"She's been stabbed through the heart," Caris said. She began to cry. "She was dead before you got to her."

# Chapter Sixteen

(16)
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# 73

Merthin opened his eyes to bright daylight. He had slept late: the angle of the sun's rays shining through the bedroom window told him it was the middle of the morning. The events of the previous night came back to him like a bad dream, and for a moment he cherished the thought that they might not really have happened. But his chest hurt when he breathed, and the skin of his face was painfully scorched. The horror of Tilly's murder came back to him. And Lettie, too—both innocent young women. How could God permit such things to happen?

He realised what had awakened him when his eye lit on Caris, putting a tray down on the small table near the bed. Her back was to him, but even so he could tell, by the hunch of her shoulders and the set of her head, that she was angry. It was not surprising. She was grieving for Tilly, and enraged that the sanctity and safety of the nunnery had been violated.

Merthin got up. Caris pulled two stools to the table and they both sat down. He studied her face fondly. There were lines of strain around her eyes. He wondered if she had slept. There was a smear of ash on one cheek, and he licked his thumb and gently wiped it off.

She had brought new bread with fresh butter and a jug of cider. Merthin found he was hungry and thirsty, and he tucked in. Caris, bottling up fury, ate nothing.

p1157
IT: Do we, the reader, need Tam's death explained here?

Through a mouthful of bread, Merthin said: "How is Thomas this morning?"

"He's lying down in the hospital. His head hurts, but he can talk coherently and answer questions, so there's probably no permanent damage to his brain."

"Good. There will have to be an inquest on Tilly and Lettie."

"I've sent a message to the sheriff of Shiring."

"They will probably blame it on Tam Hiding."

"Tam Hiding is dead."

He nodded. He knew what was coming. His spirits had been lifted by the breakfast, but now they sank again. He swallowed and pushed away his plate.

Caris went on: "Whoever it was that came here last night, he wanted to conceal his identity, so he told a lie—not knowing that Tam died in my hospital three months ago."

"Who do you think it could have been?"

"Someone we know—hence the masks."

"Perhaps."

"Outlaws don't wear masks."

It was true. Living outside the law, they did not care who knew about them and the crimes they committed. Last night's intruders were different. The masks strongly suggested that they were respected citizens who were afraid of being recognised.

Caris went on with merciless logic. "They killed Lettie to make Beth open up the treasury—but they had no need to kill Tilly: they were already inside the treasury by then. They wanted her dead for some other reason. And they were not content to leave her to be suffocated by smoke and burned to death: they also stabbed her fatally. For some reason, they had to be sure she was dead."

"What does that tell you?"

Caris did not answer the question. "Tilly thought Ralph wanted to kill her."

"I know."

"One of the hooded men was about to do away with you, at one point." Her voice caught in her throat, and she had to stop. She took a sip of Merthin's cider, composing herself; then she went on. "But the leader stopped him. Why would he do that? They had already murdered a novice nun and a noblewoman—why scruple to kill a builder?"

"You think it was Ralph."

"Don't you?"

"Yes." Merthin sighed heavily. "Did you see his mitten?"

"I noticed he was wearing gloves."

Merthin shook his head. "Only one. On his left hand. Not a glove with fingers, but a mitten."

"To hide his injury."

"I'm afraid so. I can't be sure, and we certainly couldn't prove anything, but I have a dreadful conviction about it."

Caris stood up. "Let's inspect the damage."

They left the prior's house and went to the nuns' cloisters. In the middle of the quadrangle, Sister Beth was sorting through burnt fragments of vellum, salvaging what she could of the rolls. The novices and the orphan girls were cleaning the treasury, bringing sacks of charred wood and ashes up the spiral staircase, giving anything not completely destroyed to Beth, and carrying the detritus out to the dunghill.

Laid out on a refectory table, Merthin saw the cathedral ornaments: gold and silver

p1159
GH: 'a gold salver painted with a depiction of the Feeding of the 5000'. I've never heard of gold being used as a support for painting

KF: Enamel over copper is more likely.

candlesticks, crucifixes, and chalices, all finely wrought and studded with precious stones. He was surprised. "Didn't they take these?" he said.

"Yes—but they seem to have had second thoughts, and dumped them in a ditch outside town. A peasant on his way to town with eggs to sell found them this morning. Luckily he was honest."

Merthin picked up a gold salver painted with a depiction of the feeding of the five thousand. "It's hard to sell something like this. Only a few people could afford to buy it, and most of those would guess it had been stolen."

"The thieves would have had to melt it down and sell the gold."

"Obviously they decided that was too much trouble."

"Perhaps."

She was not convinced, Merthin could tell. Nor was he: the explanation did not fit well enough. The robbery had been carefully planned, there was no doubt about that. So why would the thieves not have made up their minds in advance what to do about the ornaments? Either to take them, and melt them down, or to leave them behind?

Caris and Merthin went down the steps—Merthin's stomach clenching in fear as he was grimly reminded of last night's ordeal—and into the chamber. More novices were cleaning the walls and floor with mops and buckets.

Caris sent the novices away to take a break. When she and Merthin were alone, she picked up an innocuous-looking length of wood from a shelf and used it to prise up one of the flagstones underfoot. Merthin had not previously noticed that the stone was not fitted as tightly as most, and there was a narrow gap all around it. Now he saw that underneath was a spacious vault containing a wooden box. Caris reached into the hole and pulled out the box.

She opened it with a key from her belt. It was full of gold.

Merthin was surprised. "They missed that!"

"There are four more concealed vaults," Caris told him. "One more in the floor and two in the walls. They missed them all."

"They can't have looked very hard. Most treasuries have hiding-places. People know that."

"Especially robbers."

"So maybe the cash wasn't their first priority."

"Exactly." Caris locked the chest and put it back in its hole.

"If they didn't really want the ornaments, and they were not sufficiently interested in the cash to search the treasury for hidden vaults, why did they come here at all?"

"To kill Tilly. The robbery was a cover."

Merthin thought about that as they climbed back up the steps and left the vault. Outside in the cloisters, he stared at Beth, sorting the fragments of vellum. "They didn't need such an elaborate cover story. If all they wanted was to kill Tilly, they could have done it in the dormitory and been far away from here by the time the nuns got back from Matins. If they had done it carefully—suffocated her with a feather pillow, say—we would not even have been sure she had been murdered. It would have looked as if she had died in her sleep."

"Then there's no explanation for the attack. They ended up with next to nothing—a few gold coins."

Merthin was looking at Beth's surviving fragments. He had noticed last night that they were mostly account rolls. Now he studied the writing on the vellum scraps the treasurer was sorting. These, too, were covered with numbers. "I don't see any charters," he said.

"It doesn't much matter," Caris replied. "I've got copies of everything."

"I'm suggesting that they stole your charters. Perhaps they burned the account rolls to cover the theft."

"Who would want our charters? They're no use to anyone else."

Merthin followed the thread of his own logic, just to see where it might lead. "Suppose that there's a document that you've got—or you might have, or they *think* you might have—and they want it."

"What could it be?"

Merthin frowned. "Documents are intended to be public. The whole point of writing something down is so that people can look at it when they need to resolve disputes. A secret document is a strange thing…" Then he thought of something. "But, of course, we do know of one."

Caris looked blank. "What?"

"The letter that Thomas Langley buried in the forest."

"Why would anyone imagine that Thomas's letter—whatever it may contain—would be in the nunnery's possession?"

"Well, think. Has anything happened lately that might arouse such a suspicion?"

A look of dismay came over Caris's face. "Oh, my soul," she said.

"There is something."

"I told you about Lynn Grange being given to us by Queen Isabella for accepting Thomas, all those years ago."

"Did you speak to anyone else about it?"

"Yes—the prior of Lynn. And Thomas was angry that I had done so, and said there

would be dire consequences."

"So someone is afraid you might have got hold of Thomas's secret letter."

"Ralph?"

"I don't think Ralph is aware of the letter. I was the only one of us children who saw Thomas burying it. Those men-at-arms yelled something about a letter, but I doubt whether Ralph ✓ ~~Thomas~~ remembers that or even noted it at the time. He's certainly never mentioned it."

"So Ralph must be acting on behalf of someone else."

"Yes."

"But who?"

But they both know that this letter implicates the Queen in the murder of her husband, don't they?

No. *

Gregory Longfellow met Ralph and Alan two days later at Wigleigh, in the small timber manor house. They chose Wigleigh for their rendezvous, rather than Tench Hall, because it was more discreet. At Tench Hall there were too many people watching Ralph's every move: servants, followers, his parents. Here in Wigleigh the peasants had their own backbreaking business to do, and no one would question Ralph about the contents of the sack Alan was carrying.

"I gather it went off as planned," Gregory said. News of the invasion of the nunnery had spread all over the county in no time.

"No trouble," Ralph said. He was a bit let down by Gregory's muted reaction. After all the trouble that had been taken to get the charters, Gregory might have shown some elation.

"The sheriff has announced an inquest, of course," Gregory said dourly.

"They'll blame it on outlaws."

"You were not recognised?"

"We wore hoods."

Gregory looked at Ralph strangely. "I did not know that your wife was at Kingsbridge."

"A useful coincidence," Ralph said. "It enabled me to kill two birds with one stone."

The strange look intensified. Ralph waited for Gregory to speak. But, after a long pause, all he said was: "Let's have a look at these charters." Wouldn't Ralph have at least an inner reaction to this silent condemnation?

They sent the housekeeper, Vira, off on a lengthy errand, then Gregory sat beside the fire in the hall and took a roll out of the sack. He untied the string, read a few lines in the strong sunlight coming through the open windows, then threw the charter on the fire and took out another.

Ralph had no idea what Gregory was looking for. He had only said that it might embarrass the king. Ralph could not imagine what kind of document Caris might possess that would embarrass the king.

He got bored watching Gregory reading, but he was not going to leave. He had delivered what Gregory wanted, and he was going to sit here until Gregory reconfirmed his half of the deal.

The tall lawyer worked his way patiently through the rolls. One caught his attention, and he read it all the way through, then set it aside; but he gave no sign that he was pleased.

Ralph and Alan had spent most of the week in Bristol. It was not likely they would be asked to account for their movements, but they had taken precautions anyway. They had caroused at taverns every evening except the night they went to Kingsbridge. Their companions would remember the free drinks, but probably would not recall that on one night

of the week Ralph and Alan had been absent—or, if they did, they certainly would not know whether it was the fourth Wednesday after Easter or the Thursday but two before Whitsun.

At last the sack was empty, and all the rolls but one were on the fire.

Ralph said: "Do you have what you were looking for?"

Gregory did not answer the question. "You brought everything."

"Except the account rolls. We burned those to cover up the theft of the charters."

"You're sure."

"I looked at every roll we burned. They were all covered with numbers."

"Good."

"So you haven't found it?"

Gregory chose his words carefully, as always. "The specific item is not here. The one deed I have kept from the flames back may explain why this…issue…has arisen in recent months."

"So you're satisfied," Ralph persisted.

"Yes."

"And the king need no longer be anxious."

Gregory looked a little impatient. "You need not concern yourself with the king's anxieties. I'll do that."

"Then I can expect my reward immediately."

"Oh, yes," said Gregory. "You shall be earl of Shiring by harvest time."

Would he feel thrilled? Jubilant? Do something to show his pleasure?

"Thank you."

"If I were you," said Gregory, "I should go and woo Lady Philippa."

"Woo her?" Ralph was astonished.

Gregory shrugged. "She has no real choice in the matter, of course. But still, the formalities should be observed. Tell her that the king has given you permission to ask for her hand in marriage, and say that you hope she will learn to love you as much as you love her."

"Oh," said Ralph. "All right." But is he stumped, scared, confused as to what to do?

"Take her a present," said Gregory.

**Sc.74**

AZ: Have Merthin and Caris both decided there is nothing they can do to accuse or implicate Ralph in the raid and the murder of Tilly? KF: They also have to decide whether or not to tell (a) people in general (b) Philippa in particular.

KF: All through this scene, don't forget that Merthin and Caris both believe that Ralph murdered Tilly. They must think of that when they see him.

1166
IT: End of second para, reference to two surviving relatives, but Tilly's baby survives, doesn't he?

# 74

? Is it flat? Explain.

On the morning of Tilly's burial, Caris and Merthin met on the roof of the cathedral at dawn.

The priory was already busy. This would be a big funeral. Tilly had been a nobody in life, but now she was the victim of a notorious murder, a noblewoman killed in a nunnery, and she would be mourned by people who had never spoken three words to her.

The bishop was already here, in the best room of the prior's palace—which was why Caris and Merthin had spent the night apart: she had slept in the nuns' dormitory, and he and Lolla had temporarily moved into the Holly Bush. The grieving husband, Ralph, was in a private room upstairs at the hospital. Next door to him were Lady Philippa and her daughter Odila, the only two surviving relatives of the dead girl.

While these important personages slept, the nuns and the priory employees were already hard at work preparing the funeral dinner. Smoke was rising from the bakery, where dozens of long four-pound loaves of wheat bread were already in the oven. Two men were rolling a new barrel of wine across to the prior's house. Several novice nuns were setting up benches and a trestle table on the green for the common mourners.

As the sun rose beyond the river, throwing a slanting yellow light on the rooftops of Kingsbridge, Caris studied the marks made on the town by nine months of plague. From this height she could see gaps in the rows of houses, like bad teeth. Timber buildings collapsed all

p1167
ML: l. 1 That is quite quick for buildings to decay - at least without help. People in the town may have been helping themselves to building materials of course.

the time, of course—because of fire, rain damage, incompetent construction or just old age. What was different now was that no one bothered to repair or rebuild them. There were hundreds of empty buildings: if your house fell down you just moved into another one. The only person who was building anything was Merthin, and he was generally seen as a mad optimist with too much money.

Where would it end? Would the houses just continue to fall down, one at a time, until there was nothing left, and the town was a wasteland of broken tiles and scorched timbers with an empty cathedral in the middle?

"I'm not going to let this happen," she said.

Merthin did not understand her at first. "The funeral?" he said, frowning?

Caris made a sweeping gesture to take in the town and the world beyond it. "Everything. Drunks maiming one another. Parents abandoning their sick children on the doorstep of my hospital. Men queuing up to fuck a drunken woman on a table outside the White Horse. Livestock dying in the pastures. Friar Bennet whipping half-naked penitents then collecting pennies from bystanders. And, most of all, a young mother brutally murdered here in my nunnery. I don't care if it is a punishment for sin. I'm not going to let it happen."

"What are you going to do?"

She smiled gratefully at Merthin. Most people would have told her there was nothing she could do, but he was always ready to believe in her. She looked at the stone angels carved on a pinnacle, their faces blurred by two hundred years of wind and rain, and she thought of the spirit that had moved the builders of the cathedral. She said: "We're going to re-establish order and routine here. We're going to force Kingsbridge people to return to normal, whether they like it or not. We're going to rebuild this town and its life."

But what about the plague? Is that now gone? And if it's not, isn't she in danger of her life?

p1168

ML: l.21 The population suggested here is about 1,000 survivors out of a population of 7,000 - that is a very high mortality rate. The accepted average these days is about one-third, with some places as low as 20% and others as high as 50%. There may in any city have been emigration from the urban areas which would have brought the population down at least in the short term. For coffins see general notes above.
SC: Most historians now think that the Black Death killed around half or less in English towns. Maybe, it is better to say 600.

"All right," he said.

"This is the moment to do it."

"Because everyone is so angry about Tilly?"

"And because they're frightened at the thought that armed men can come into the town at night and murder a noblewoman in the heart of the priory. They think no one's safe now."

"What will you do?"

"I'm going to tell them it must never happen again."

*

"This must never happen again!" she cried, and her voice rang out across the graveyard and echoed off the ancient grey walls of the cathedral.

A woman could never speak as part of a service in church, of course, but the graveside ceremony was a grey area, a solemn moment that took place outside the church, a time when laymen and the family of the deceased would sometimes make speeches or pray aloud.

All the same, Caris was sticking her neck out. Bishop Henri was officiating, backed up by Archdeacon Lloyd and Canon Claude. Lloyd had been the diocesan clerk for decades, and Claude was a colleague of Henri's from France. In such distinguished clerical company, it was audacious for a nun to make an unscheduled speech.

Such considerations had never meant much to Caris, of course.

She spoke just as the small coffin was being lowered into the grave. Several of the congregation had begun to cry. The crowd was at least five hundred strong—which was about half the inhabitants left alive in Kingsbridge—but they fell silent at the sound of her

voice.

"Armed men have come into our town at night and killed a young woman in the nunnery—and I will not stand for it," she said.

There was a rumble of assent from the crowd.

She raised her voice. "The priory will not stand for it—the bishop will not stand for it—and the men and women of Kingsbridge will not stand for it!"

The support became louder, the crowd shouting: "No!" and "Amen!"

"People say that the plague is sent by God. I say that when God sends rain we take shelter. When God sends winter, we build up the fire. When God sends weeds, we pull them up by the roots. We must defend ourselves!"

She glanced at Bishop Henri. He was looking bemused. He had had no warning of this sermon, and if he had been asked for his permission he would have refused it; but he could tell that Caris had the crowd on her side, and he did not have the nerve to intervene.

"What can we do?"

She looked around the crowd. Their faces were turned towards her expectantly. They had no idea what to do, but they wanted a solution from her. They would cheer at anything she said, if it gave them hope.

"We must rebuild the city wall!" she cried.

They roared their approval.

"A new wall that is taller, and stronger, and longer than the broken-down old one. A wall that will keep murderers out!"

"Yes!"

"And we must elect a new constable, and a force of deputies and sentries, to uphold

the law and enforce good behaviour."

"Yes!"

"There will be a meeting of the parish guild tonight to work out the practical details, and the guild's decisions will be announced in church next Sunday. Thank you all and God bless you."

*

At the funeral banquet, in the grand dining hall of the prior's palace, Bishop Henri sat at the head of the table. On his right was Lady Philippa, the widowed countess of Shiring. Next to her was seated the chief mourner, Tilly's widower, Sir Ralph Fitzgerald.

Ralph was delighted to be next to Philippa. He could stare at her breasts while she concentrated on her food, and every time she leaned forward he could peek down the square neckline of her light summer dress. She did not know it yet, but the time was not far away when he would command her to take off her clothes and stand naked in front of him, and he could see those magnificent breasts in their entirety.

The dinner provided by Caris was ample but not extravagant, he noted. There were no gilded swans or towers of sugar, but there was plenty of roasted meat, boiled fish, new bread, beans and spring berries. He helped Philippa to some soup made of ground chicken with almond milk.

She said to him gravely: "This is a terrible tragedy. You have my most profound sympathy."

"Thank you. Tilly was so young. But we soldiers get used to sudden death. One day a man will save your life, and you swear eternal friendship and loyalty; and the next day he is struck down by a crossbow bolt through the heart, and you forget him."

She gave him an odd look that reminded him of the way Sir Gregory had regarded him, with a mixture of curiosity and distaste, and he wondered what it was about his attitude to Tilly's death that provoked this reaction.

Philippa said: "You have a baby boy."

"Gerry. The nuns are looking after him today, but I'll take him home to Tench Hall tomorrow. I've found a wet nurse for him." He saw an opportunity to drop a hint. "Of course, he needs someone to mother him properly."

"Yes."

He recalled her own bereavement. "But you know what it is to lose your spouse."

"I was fortunate to have my beloved William for twenty-five years."

"You must be lonely." This might not be the moment to propose, but he thought to edge the conversation towards the subject.

"Indeed. I lost my three men, William and our two sons. The castle seems so empty."

"But not for long, perhaps."

She stared at him as if she could not believe her ears, and he realised he had said something offensive. She turned away and spoke to Bishop Henri on her other side.

On Ralph's right was Philippa's daughter, Odila. "Would you like some of this pasty?" he said to her. "It's made with peacocks and hares." She nodded, and he cut her a slice. "How old are you?" he said.

"I'll be fifteen this year."

She was tall, and had her mother's figure already, a full bosom and wide, womanly hips. "You seem older," he said, looking at her breasts.

He intended it as a compliment—young people generally wanted to seem older—but

p1172

KF: AZ is bored by this scene. Focus on the drama.

IT: 'That was a bravura performance' there's something strange about this phrase here.

AZ: How does Caris feel sitting at a table with the murderer Ralph?

she blushed and looked away.

Ralph looked down at his trencher and speared a chunk of pork cooked with ginger. He ate it moodily. He was not very good at what Gregory called wooing.

*

Caris was seated on the left of Bishop Henri, with Merthin, as alderman, on her other side. Next to Merthin was Sir Gregory Longfellow, who had come for the funeral of Earl William three months ago and had not yet left the neighbourhood. Caris poured the bishop a goblet of clear red Gascon wine, and he took a long draught. He wiped his mouth and said: "That was a bravura performance."

(Would this be worth Caris' puzzling over? And if he wants this letter, wouldn't he think to approach Thomas? He is not here for the letter. Say what he is here for.

"Thank you. I'm sure you agree with me that we must restore order."

"It's a little late to ask whether I agree with you. However, I do." Henri was a practical man who did not re-fight lost battles.

She served herself some heron roasted with pepper and cloves. "There's more to my plan than the walls and the constabulary."

"I thought there might be."

"I believe that you, as the bishop of Kingsbridge, should have the tallest cathedral in England."

He raised his eyebrows. "I wasn't expecting that."

"Two hundred years ago, this was one of England's most important priories. It should be so again. A new church tower would symbolise the revival—and your eminence among bishops."

He smiled wryly, but he was pleased. He knew he was being flattered, and he liked it.

Caris said: "The tower would also serve the town. Being visible from a distance, it

p1173

ML: (Repeating note on p1078) ML: The contrast of landlords - the situation of lay and ecclesiastical landlordship laid out here is the reverse of the normal situation in 14th century England. Lay landlords were more likely to be flexible, while monastic institutions were amongst some of the most repressive. Of course, in any generalisation there are exceptions and Ralph may have been one of those. There is some suggestion that lords with only one or two manors did interfere and could be more difficult.

would help pilgrims and traders find their way here."

"How would you pay for it?"

"The priory is wealthy."

He was surprised again. "Prior Godwyn was always complaining of money problems." Need to know this soon after we meet Caris as a man. And what will he spend it on?

"Because he thought only about spending it, never about making it. All that has changed. I've sacked most of our bailiffs. I've converted about half the land to grazing, which is easier to manage in these times of labour shortage. The rest I've leased for cash rents with no customary obligations. And we've benefited from inheritance taxes and from the legacies of people who died without heirs because of the plague. The monastery is now as rich as the nunnery."

"So all your tenants are free?"

"Most. Instead of working one day a week on the demesne farm, and carting the landlord's hay, and folding their sheep on the landlord's field, and all those complicated services, they just pay money. They like it better and it certainly makes our life simpler."

"A lot of noblemen revile that type of tenancy. They say it ruins the peasantry."

Caris shrugged. "What have we lost? The power to impose petty variations, favouring some serfs and persecuting others, keeping them all subservient. Monks and nuns have no business tyrannising peasants. They work better left to themselves."

The bishop looked suspicious. "So you feel the priory can pay for a new tower?"

He had been expecting her to ask him for money, she guessed. "Yes—with some assistance from the town's merchants. And that's where you can help us."

"I thought there must be something."

We have seen him refuse to repair the fulling mill (which would have brought him an income) and spend money on a palace.

p1174
IT: Do we need this reminder of Caris being accused by Godwyn of witchcraft?

"I'm not asking you for money. What I want from you is worth much more than money."

"Go on."

"I want to apply to the king for a borough charter." As she said the words, Caris felt her hands begin to shake, and she clasped them together in her lap to keep them still. The last time she had proposed a borough charter, she had nearly died for it.

"I see," said Henri non-committally.

Caris swallowed hard and went on. "It's essential for the revival of the town's commercial life. For a long time Kingsbridge has been held back by the dead hand of priory rule. Priors are cautious and conservative, and instinctively say No to any change or innovation. Merchants live by change—they're always looking for new ways to make money, it's in their blood. If we want the men of Kingsbridge to help pay for our new tower, we must give them the freedom they need to prosper."

"A borough charter."

"The town would have its own court, set its own regulations, and be ruled by a proper guild, rather than the parish guild we have now, which has no real power."

"But would the king grant it?"

"Kings like boroughs, which pay lots of taxes. But, in the past, the prior of Kingsbridge has always opposed a charter." So ferociously had Godwyn fought against the charter than he had accused Caris of witchcraft, and had been ready to see her executed, for proposing it.

But Godwyn was dead.

"You think that priors are simply too conservative—rather like the noblemen who

Condense this. We're already familiar with what she's saying. Or maybe let it happen off-stage

oppose free tenancies."

"Exactly. Sheer timidity."

"Well," said the bishop with a laugh, "timidity is a thing you'll never be accused of."

Caris pressed her point. "I think a charter is essential if we're to build the new tower."

"Yes, I can see that."

"So, do you agree?"

"To the tower, or to the charter?"

"To both, of course."

Henri seemed amused. "Are you making a deal with me, Mother Caris?"

"If you're willing, yes."

"All right. Build me a tower, and I'll help you get a charter."

"It has to be the other way around. We need the charter first."

"So I must trust you."

"Is that difficult?"

"To be honest, no."

"Good. Then we're agreed?"

"Yes."

Caris leaned forward and looked past Merthin. "Sir Gregory?"

"Yes, Mother Caris?"

"Have you tried this rabbit in sugar gravy? I recommend it."

Gregory accepted the bowl and took some. "Thank you."

Caris said to him: "You will recall that Kingsbridge is not a borough."

"I certainly do."

p1176
AZ: Feel more of Ralph's malaise, frustration and anger all through this scene (pps1176-1179). But then pleasure in imagining his new pleasures and privileges as an earl.

Need a turning point. She's offering now to give up her power. Why at this moment? Would the town need the charter for these new security measures?

1176

As a lawyer Gregory had represented Godwyn at the royal court, more than a decade ago, in the row over the fulling mill. The town's status as a feudal holding rather than a borough had enabled Gregory to win on a technicality and deny the townspeople their rights. Caris was still angry when she thought about it.

Now she said: "The bishop thinks it's time for us to ask the king for a charter."

Gregory nodded. "I believe the king might look favourably on such a plea, especially if it was presented to him in the right way."

"Perhaps you would advise us."

"May we discuss this in more detail later?"

Gregory would ask for a bribe, Caris assumed; although he would undoubtedly call it a lawyer's fee. "I would be very happy to do that," she said.

He would be worth the money.

*

"Our families are related," Ralph was saying to Lady Philippa. "Not closely, of course," he added hastily. "But my father is descended from that Earl of Shiring who was the son of Lady Aliena and Jack Builder." He looked across the table at his brother, the alderman, ~~known as Merthin Bridger~~. "I think I inherited the blood of the earls, and my brother that of the builders."

He looked at Philippa to see how she took that. She did not seem impressed.

"I was brought up in the household of your later father-in-law, Earl Roland," he went on.

"I remember you as a squire."

"I served under the earl in the king's army in France. At the battle of Crécy, I saved

the life of the Prince of Wales."

"My goodness, how splendid," she said politely.

He was trying to get her to see him as an equal, so that it would seem more natural when he told her she was to be his wife. But he did not seem to be getting through to her. She just seemed bored and a bit puzzled about the direction of his conversation.

The dessert was served: sugared strawberries, honey wafers, dates and raisins, and spiced wine. Ralph drank a cup of the wine and poured more, hoping that the drink would help him relax with Philippa. He was not sure why he found it so difficult to talk to her. Because this was his wife's funeral? Because Philippa was a countess? Or because he had been hopelessly in love with her for years, and could not believe that now, at last, she really was to be his wife?

"When you leave here, will you go back to Earlscastle?" he asked her.

"Yes. We depart tomorrow."

"Will you stay there long?"

"Where else would I go?" She frowned. "Why do you ask?"

"I will come and visit you there, if I may."

Her response was frosty. "To what end?"

"I want to discuss with you a subject that it would not be appropriate to raise here and now."

"What on earth do you mean?"

"I'll come and see you in the next few days."

She looked agitated. In a raised voice, she said: "What could you possibly have to say to me?"

p1178
ML: p. 1178-9 The remarriage of widows of child-bearing age was commonplace, but pressure was often much greater on rich widows, and the king was most likely to be interested in them, as the person who bought the marriage would pay a fine appropriate to the wealth of the prospective wife. Philippa would have retained dower rights to some of the Earl's lands which would have made her attractive as a wife wince husbands gained control over the lands of their wives on marriage. However, a woman's birth relations could be expected to have some say in the matter. Poor widows were less attractive, although merchant widows were much prized.

"As I said, it wouldn't be right to speak of it today."

"Why not? Because this is your wife's funeral?"

He nodded.

She went pale. "Oh, my God," she said. "You can't mean to suggest…"

"I told you, I don't want to discuss it here and now."

"But I must know!" she cried. "Are you planning to propose marriage to me?"

He hesitated; shrugged; and nodded.

"But on what grounds?" she said. "Surely the king has not given you permission?"

He nodded again.

She stood up suddenly. "No!" she said.

Everyone around the table looked at her.

She stared across the table at Gregory. "Is this true?" she said. "Is the king going to marry me to *him?"* She jerked a contemptuous thumb at Ralph.

Gregory looked reproachfully at Ralph. "This was not the right moment to raise the matter."

Philippa cried: "So it's true! God save me!"

Ralph caught Odila's eye. She was staring at him in horror.

Philippa said: "I can't bear it."

"Why?" Ralph said. "What is so wrong? What right have *you* to look down on me and my family?"

She ignored the question. Addressing Gregory, she said: "I will not do it! I will not, do you hear me?" She was white with rage, but tears ran down her cheeks. Even now Ralph thought how beautiful she was.

p1179
NN: When Lady Philippa yells at Ralph and storms out of the funeral banquet, we see no reaction from anybody else, including Caris or Merthin – and they're sitting right there.

GH: P 1179 and P 1183 I do not think widows were subject to the king in matters of marriage post Magna Carta. Clause VIII : 'No widow shall be compelled to marry, so long as she prefers to live without a husband; provided always that she give security not to marry without our consent, if she hold of us, or without the consent of the lord of whom she holds, if she hold of another.' So far as I know this was not nullified by any subsequent legislation. Though it is true that the crown was liable to oblige her to swear not to marry without licence before her dower was assigned to her in chancery.

Kf. Okay, one reason - and the is forced by Magna Carta to accept her refusal - then he proposes to marry Odile to Ralph.

Suggest we feel more of Ralph's malaise, frustration and anger all through this scene. But then pleasure in imagining this new pleasures and privileges as an Earl.

Gregory said coolly: "It is not your decision and it certainly is not mine. The king will do as he pleases."

"You may force me into a wedding dress, and you may march me up the aisle," Philippa said. She pointed at the bishop. "But when he asks me if I take Ralph Fitzgerald to be my husband I will not say Yes! I will not! Never, never, never!"

She stormed out of the room, and Odila followed.

*

When the banquet was over, the townspeople returned to their homes, and the important guests went to their rooms to sleep off the feast. Caris supervised the clearing up, but her mind was on the revival. Things had gone better than she could have imagined. The townspeople had cheered her, and the bishop had agreed to everything she proposed.

Did she hear Philippa's outburst? What effect on her? And how has she coped with the presence of Ralph? Isn't she certain that he is the murderer?

Outside the back door, where there was a pile of meat bones and crusts of bread, she saw Godwyn's cat, Archbishop, delicately picking at the carcase of a duck. She shooed it away. It scampered a few yards then slowed to a stiff walk, its white-tipped tail arrogantly upstanding.

Deep in thought, she went up the stairs of the prior's house, thinking of how she would begin implementing the changes agreed to by Bishop Henri. Without pausing, she opened the door of the bedroom she shared with Merthin and stepped inside.

For a moment, she was disoriented. Two men stood in the middle of the room, and she thought *I must be in the wrong house* and then *I must be in the wrong room* before she remembered that her room, being the best bedroom, had naturally been given to Henri.

The two men were the bishop and his assistant, Canon Claude. It took Caris a moment to realise that they were both naked, with their arms around one another, kissing.

She stared at them in shock. "Oh!" she said.

They had not heard the door. Until she spoke, they did not realise that they were observed. When they heard her gasp of surprise they both turned towards her. A look of horrified guilt came over Henri's face, and his mouth fell open.

"I'm sorry!" Caris said.

The men sprang apart, as if hoping they might deny what was going on; but then they remembered they were naked. The bishop was plump, with a round belly and fat arms and legs, and grey hair on his chest. Claude was younger and slimmer, with very little body hair except for a blaze of chestnut at his groin. Caris had never before looked at two erect penises at the same time.

"I beg your pardon!" she said, mortified with embarrassment. "My mistake. I forgot." She realised that she was babbling, and they were dumbstruck. It did not matter: nothing anyone could say could make the situation any better.

Coming to her senses, she backed out of the room and slammed the door.

*

Merthin walked away from the banquet with Madge Weaver. He was fond of the small, chunky woman, with her chin jutting out in front and her bottom jutting out behind. He admired the way she had carried on after her husband and all her children had died of the plague. She had continued the enterprise, weaving cloth and dyeing it red according to Caris's recipe. She said to him: "Good for Caris. She's right, as usual. We can't go on like this."

"You've carried on as normal, despite everything," he said.

"My only problem is finding the people to do the work."

"Everyone is the same. I can't get builders."

"Raw wool is cheap, but rich people will still pay high prices for good scarlet cloth," Madge said. "I could sell much more if I could manufacture it."

Merthin said thoughtfully: "You know, I saw a faster type of loom in Florence—a treadle loom."

"Oh?" She looked at him with alert curiosity. "I never heard of that."

He wondered how to explain. "In any loom you stretch a number of threads over the frame to form what you call the warp, then you weave another thread crossways through the warp, under one thread and over the next, under and over, from one side to the other and back again, to form the weft."

"That's how simple looms work, yes. Ours are better."

"I know. To make the process quicker, you attach every second warp thread to a movable bar, called a heddle, so that when you shift the heddle, half the threads are pulled away from the rest. Then, instead of going under and over, under and over, you can simply pass the weft thread straight through the gap in one easy movement. Then you move the heddle in the opposite direction for the return pass."

"Yes. By the way, the weft thread is wound on a bobbin."

"Each time you pass the bobbin through the warp from left to right, you have to put it down, then use both hands to move the heddle, then pick up the bobbin again and bring it back from right to left."

"Exactly."

"In a treadle loom, you move the heddle with your feet. So you never have to put the bobbin down."

Not sure we need this page

"Really? My soul!"

"That would make a difference, wouldn't it?"

"A huge difference. You could weave twice as much—more!"

"That's what I thought. Shall I build one for you to try?"

"Yes, please!"

"I don't remember exactly how it was constructed. I think the treadle operated a system of pulleys and levers…" He frowned, thinking. "Anyway, I'm sure I can figure it out."

*

Late in the afternoon, Caris went to her pharmacy. As she was passing the library, Canon Claude came out, carrying a small book. He caught her eye and stopped. They both immediately thought of the scene Caris had stumbled upon an hour ago. At first he looked embarrassed, but then a grin lifted the corners of his mouth. He put his hand to his face to cover it, obviously feeling it was wrong to be amused. Caris remembered how startled the two naked men had been, and she, too, felt inappropriate laughter bubbling up inside her. On impulse, she said what was in her mind: "The two of you did look funny!" Claude giggled despite himself, and Caris could not help giggling too, and they made each other worse, until they felt into one another's arms, tears streaming down their cheeks, helpless with laughter.

*

That evening, Caris took Merthin to the south-west corner of the priory grounds, where the vegetable garden grew alongside the river. The air was mild, and the moist earth gave up a fragrance of new growth. Caris could see spring onions and radishes growing. "So, your brother is to be the earl of Shiring," she said.

Wouldn't there be some reference, afterlock, to the murder of Tilly? ✓

p1183

P 1179 and P 1183 I do not think widows were subject to the king in matters of marriage post Magna Carta. Clause VIII : 'No widow shall be compelled to marry, so long as she prefers to live without a husband; provided always that she give security not to marry without our consent, if she hold of us, or without the consent of the lord of whom she holds, if she hold of another.' So far as I know this was not nullified by any subsequent legislation. Though it is true that the crown was liable to oblige her to swear not to marry without licence before her dower was assigned to her in chancery.

"Not if Lady Philippa has anything to do with it."

"A countess has to do as she is told by the king, doesn't she?"

"All women should be subservient to men, in theory," Merthin said with a grin. "Some defy convention, though."

"I can't think who you mean."

"Why have you brought me here?"

"To talk about the final element in my plan."

"Which is…?"

"The new hospital."

"Ah. I was wondering…"

"Could you build it here?"

Merthin looked around. "I don't see why not. It's a sloping site, but the entire priory is built on a slope, and we're not talking about building a cathedral. One storey or two?"

"Two. But I want the hospital divided into medium-sized rooms, each containing just four or six beds, so that diseases don't spread so quickly from one patient to everyone else in the place. It must have its own pharmacy—a large, well-lit room—for the preparation of medicines, with a herb garden alongside. And a spacious, airy latrine with piped water, very easy to keep clean. In fact the whole building must have lots of light and space. And fireplaces—it does patients no good to be cold. But, most importantly, it has to be at least a hundred yards from the rest of the priory buildings. We have to separate the sick from the well. That's the key feature."

"I'll do some drawings in the morning."

She kissed him. "This is going to be the culmination of my life's work, do you realise

that?"

"You're only thirty-two—isn't it a little early to be talking about the culmination of your life's work?"

"It hasn't happened yet."

"It won't take long. I'll start on it while I'm digging the foundations for the new cathedral tower. Then, as soon as the hospital is built, I can switch the stone masons to working on the tower."

They started to walk back towards the cathedral. She could tell that his real enthusiasm was for the tower. "How tall will it be?"

"Four hundred and five feet."

"How high is Salisbury?"

"Four hundred and four."

"So it *will* be the highest building in England."

"Until someone builds a higher one, yes."

So he would achieve his ambition, too, she thought. She put her arm through his as they walked to the prior's house. She felt happy. That was strange, wasn't it? Thousands of Kingsbridge people had died of the plague, and Tilly had been murdered, but Caris felt hopeful. It was because she had a plan, of course. She always felt good when she had a plan. The new town walls, the constabulary, the tower, the borough charter, the treadle loom, and most of all the new hospital: how would she find time to organise it all?

Arm in arm with Merthin, she walked into the prior's house. Bishop Henri and Sir Gregory were there, deep in conversation with a man who had his back to Caris. There was something unpleasantly familiar about the newcomer, even from behind, and Caris felt a

tremor of unease. Then he turned around, and she saw his face: sardonic, triumphant, sneering, and full of malice.

It was Philemon.