

A Man Lay Dead in Winter

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The fortified manor at Pain's Wyke had been one of the Countess of Gloucester's favourite retreats; when her husband had been away fighting, or in happier times attending to business, then she would take the chosen ladies of her household there. Were it high summer they could enjoy the clean air and the good honest country smells. It was an added advantage that the Lord of the Manor was such a handsome and courteous young man, and the unattached ladies (and one or two respectable matrons who should have known better) were content to flirt with him. It never came to anything, much to their regret, but it made for a pleasant pastime.

England had seen many an unhappy hour during the time that the King and his sister had fought for the throne and nearly torn the country apart in the process. Now, with the return of Maud to France, it was hoped that some sweeter times might be ahead, although not for the Countess, who found she had too many memories of happier times to let her be entirely at ease anywhere in England. Other people might come and stay at the manor, nonetheless; connections of the Earl or well bred travellers who couldn't complete the journey to the city of Gloucester before nightfall. The lesser folk might seek refuge with Roger, who had the church and served his flock with humility and humour, but the finery stayed with Horace Dumanoir.

Just such a fine young man had sought accommodation one summer morning and been welcomed heartily, his recommendation from Gloucester being impeccable. He was making a slow journey home from the crusade, in the steps of his natural father though determined to let him get home first. This man was second son of an Earl, born the wrong side of the blanket and dearly beloved of his sire, if not of the man's wife. They had felt it politic to let the nobleman return home first, to rapturous delight, before the by-blow made his appearance. The son might then be greeted rather more warmly, his half brother and step mother having had

their fill of the Earl's affection. The arrangement suited the younger man admirably as it gave time for reflection and rest, something which had been sorely lacking these last few years of hell. Johannes Fitzrichard had taken up arms in his saviour's cause and regretted almost every moment.

The first evening in Pain's Wyke he had fallen into the easiest of conversations with his host, Stephen's war having provided subject enough for men to discuss the next forty years. The crusade was a much less simple topic to consider, Horace anxious not to probe into such an obviously unhappy issue with his guest. He'd taken an immediate shine to this man; he found his company was de facto much more pleasant than that of the ladies of the court, and he wished to make his stay as agreeable as possible. They had soon taken to using their baptismal names, eschewing titles and grandeur for friendship and a degree of intimacy. But as the wine flowed and the candles burned down, the talk couldn't avoid the disagreeable for long.

"I know of men who have come home leprous or emasculated. I sometimes think that was a worse fate than for those whose bodies were trampled into the dust of Acre." Johannes drained his cup and stared bitterly at the dregs. Horace refilled it smoothly and without comment. They stared at the fire for a long while, before the latter spoke.

"Surely you were doing God's work, though?"

"The vengeful Old Testament God, perhaps. Not the loving father of the New. I tell you, Horace, Christ was scourged afresh every day between Dover and Acre. I saw very little Christian charity or piety practiced."

"And yet you carried on?"

"Moral cowardice on my part, I suspect. Or I could be generous to myself and say that I stayed so that the small band of reasonable voices wouldn't dwindle further. Truth to tell I cannot state why." Johannes laid down his cup and looked for a long time at his host. "You are a good man, Horace. I have heard your praises sung on many an occasion, in our camps. England is in need of honest men of stout heart, she has been this many a long year. I'm pleased to have met you at last."

They parted, each to an empty and lonely bed, one that hadn't seen a companion since childhood, when friendship and not lust had been the overriding principle. Neither of them had sought to take a wife, although

only their consciences and confessors knew why.

The next few days were spent riding and hunting, Johannes taking a fine stag which would provide a pair of many-branched antlers for the wall and haunches for the kitchens. The hall had supped on venison, rich and cloying, and Horace and his guest had sated themselves on conversation, exchanging question and answer and reaching deeper into each other's minds and hearts. Only one small cloud darkened the sky of their budding friendship—the steward had reported that the noble visitor was sleeping badly each night, murmuring so loudly in his sleep that he'd roused one of the servants who tended to the guests and this lad had gone to wake the steward. It had been obvious that Johannes was in deep distress.

Horace felt unaccountably upset himself at this report. He speculated that the horrors of the long march to Jerusalem were still being relived in his new acquaintance's mind, making the sleeping hours as much of a nightmare as the waking ones must have been under the merciless eastern sky. As the two men drank and conversed, Horace became resolved to keep a sharp ear later that night in case events repeated themselves. *Because he is my guest and it is my duty to attend him if necessary* he repeated in his mind, as if recapitulating the same words *ad nauseum* would make them more like the truth.

"What ails you?" Horace ran his hands over Johannes's hair, smoothing and calming. He'd hardly begun his own slumbers when he'd been roused by the sound of muffled cries and sorrowful noises. He had rushed from his bed in the adjoining room (not his own, but one of the guest chambers that he'd appropriated for the night) and was now at the side of Johannes's bed. "Is it some memory of the time in Damascus?"

"No," Johannes sounded like a drowning man searching for air, "No, it goes back much further." He looked into the clear brown eyes that held his, the light of the small lamp dancing in their depths. "Do you really want me to enlighten you? I would find it a relief, I tell you true."

"Then say all. Shall I send for a goblet of wine?"

"A cup of water would serve well, if it please you."

Horace poured the water from the ewer into the little horn cup with his

own hands; no servant, no matter how discreet, would be allowed to intrude upon this scene. He offered it and Johannes drank, with thanks.

“I was sent to the local priory when I was young, to learn my letters and other things as seemed to befit the Lord of the manor’s bastard. My stepmother felt it would be advantageous, although whether to her or to me I do not know. There was one of the monks, a brother Rhys, who took rather a fancy to me.” He shut his eyes, shivered at the memories. “Perhaps he took too literal a view of the instruction suffer little children.”

Horace gently laid his hand on the other man’s arm. “Such an abuse of trust,” he said simply. There was no point in offering anything more than the briefest of words and a friendly touch.

“It was indeed. But then I have seen many worse things these last few years; I had thought I was beyond feeling abhorrence. I was wrong.”

“What happened? Was there anyone you could tell?”

“I told my father, who raised hell. The monk left the priory in disgrace and was later found hanged by his own hand in the nearby woods. It was only years afterwards that I found out he might have had help in the process.”

Horace did not ask the obvious—*whose hand had helped with the deed*—the question wasn’t needed. He gently laid his hand over the other man’s. “I believe that the corruption of children is the most heinous sin. It grieves me beyond measure to know that you suffered this.”

“Thank you,” Johannes’s simple reply spoke chapter and verse, accompanied as it was by the merest pressure on the hand that grasped his.

Horace’s dark eyes looked down at the fingers which pressed his hand, considered for a moment and then entwined his fingers among them. “I would have you know that you are welcome to stay here as long as you wish. And when you decide to depart, then to return whenever the fancy takes you.”

“I would welcome a place to call home where I was truly wanted by all,” Johannes’s eyes stayed fixed on their intertwined hands.

“There is only myself to please here, no a chatelaine to fuss about, and I

believe that the ladies from the Gloucester will not be choosing to follow the example of the Earl's mother. The present Countess has finer tastes than I can accommodate here." Horace risked a glance at Johannes's face. The man's eyes were welling, although whether as an after effect of his seizure or in response to the emotion of the moment he couldn't be sure. He squeezed the hand within his a little more tightly.

Suddenly Johannes looked up, his blue eyes meeting Horace's. "I feel completely confident that my tastes would be entirely satisfied here; I could wish for nothing more than I find in this house." He leaned closer, gently kissed the tip of Horace's nose.

Horace smiled. "Roger, our priest, says that many go on pilgrimage needlessly, when they should search for what is good and true in their own hearts at their own fireside. I have always struggled to understand his meaning." He took his friend's hand to his lips. "Maybe you would help me learn his lesson."

"Perhaps. I have found very little peace either at my hearth or on my travels. Pray God I have crossed what feels like half the world only to discover my heart's content was no more than fourscore miles from my door."

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The first indication that something was amiss was the shying of Johannes' horse. Horace was far too concerned with his friend's wellbeing to notice anything else, until he was sure that the man had his mount back under control and was in no danger. Once that was established, they were both able to turn their attention to what had caused the horse such distress and what was making his own gelding uneasy; a dead body, stabbed and bloody, in the middle of the ride which cut through the woods that covered the hill where the old earthworks were.

Johannes was out of his saddle in an instant. He had seen plenty of men hurt and killed on the crusade and they held no terrors for him. He soon recognised from the quantity of blood that the wound had gone straight to the heart or one of the great vessels near it. The victim's clothes bore great patches of gore, the smell of which was causing the horses still to squirm and be troubled.

“Lead them away, Horace, upwind if you can. There is no more we can do for this poor soul.” Johannes carefully considered the body as his friend found somewhere to tether the mounts. It was a well-dressed young man, his scrip still at his waist and no evidence that his death had been part of a robbery, nor that there had been much of a struggle.

“We should raise the hue and cry. The Sherriff must be told.” Horace had returned and was staring at the body, his face almost as pale as that of the corpse. “If there are bands of cutthroats at work here...”

“If this were the work of robbers then the body would have been stripped. There’s no sign that such a thing was even started. Look at his clothes, Horace, this is good quality cloth and fur, and his scrip is still on him. Call for Kenwyn and send him for help. We should stay here and make sure that no-one comes upon the body by chance and cheats his family of what is due to them.”

“No man would rob a corpse, surely?”

“Men will do many a thing that you could not believe.”

Horace shook his head and wound his horn. Within a few minutes his groom rode along the path and found them. “My lord?” Kenwyn’s face was a picture of concern at having been called for, and then distress at seeing the body. “What happened?”

“We found this man, already beyond our aid. I would have you ride to Gloucester and fetch the Sheriff, Dinmont, or his deputy. There’s been murder done here.”

Kenwyn considered the sky; it had been darkening this last hour and now was grey and leaden. “I will, my lord, but I do not like the look of those clouds. There’s snow coming later or sooner. At the least it might delay my return, at worst it could make you cut off here. You must find shelter.”

“He’s right, Horace. We can’t stay out here with a dead body, it would be far too cold even if it doesn’t come on to snow. Hywel Dinmont will come here only to find three corpses.” Johannes smiled thoughtfully.

“There is a cot nearby—the grandfather of one of my cousins lives there, just off the main path through the forest.” Kenwyn pointed along the ride.

“Will he mind providing us with hospitality?” Horace was used to providing accommodation for others, but he had ample means. He wouldn’t wish to impose on a cottager so close to Christmas, at a time when food and fuel were often short, even if he could recompense the man handsomely afterwards.

“He is well provided for, my lord. We are a close family who always see to our own, whatever the need. And he is not at home at present. As I rode out to visit my cousin and her mother yesterday he was there, staying a day or two en route to spending the Holy days with his other daughter. He would not begrudge the use of his roof and hearth to someone in need; you could be warm there and keep this poor soul out of the way of the wild beasts.”

Horace shared an exchange of looks with his friend and an unspoken message of agreement passed between them. “Kenwyn, will you show us where this place is? There may be a pallet there we could transport the body on, behind one of the horses. If not, we will have to take it on the back of the gelding. He might be less bothered, especially if he has not far to bear such an unpleasant burden.”

“It can only be a matter of some hundred yards or so, my lord, I know the place well. I am glad now that I suggested we come up here to hunt. Although the sport has been poor, at least we have the satisfaction of helping our fellow man. Load him up on my mare, she is very placid and will go wherever I lead her, bearing whatever burden is required of her. She has a steady temperament and a dead man would not trouble her.”

It seemed a sensible solution all round, especially as the wind had begun to rise and the nip in the air grew sharper. When they reached the little clearing and saw the cottage, small but very sound, they were pleased to be able to find such suitable shelter. Horace tried to dissuade Kenwyn from going straight for the Sherriff—he was sure he had felt the first flake on his face as they had slowly paced along the ride and didn’t want his servant to be at risk. “Or let me go instead. Hugon is much more fleet of foot than your Cerys. She may be excellent at dealing with the smell of blood and death but she would not win a race.”

“I am happy to go, sir. You forget that I was brought up on these hills. I know all the short cuts and the best way to go when the weather draws in. There is much less danger in my going.” Kenwyn leapt onto his mare and turned her head, as if his decisiveness settled things. “I will see you as soon as the weather permits.”

Horace shouted at the rider's back, to tell him to remember to put his cloak on against the bitter air, but Fitzrichard didn't waste time watching the man depart. They had to get a fire started in the hearth—there seemed to be plenty of wood in a long, covered box—and they needed to find a place to put the corpse. Johannes may have had plenty of experience of the horrors of war but even he balked at sharing the cottage with a dead man. The wood store gave them the solution. The body could be placed there safe out of the way of beasts and if anyone tried to disturb it—Johannes had a niggling worry at the back of his mind about the murderer returning—then they would hear the person concerned and be able to defend themselves. The corpse was already beginning to stiffen and he was pleased they'd lain it out straight again after moving it from the horse, so there would be no undue unpleasantness.

Once they had performed their grisly deed Horace set about lighting the fire while his friend tethered their mounts out of the wind and assessed the likely provisions. There was a small well from which he was able to draw wholesome water, enabling him to fill a small bucket for the horses and two ewers for themselves. There was a little winter grass along the edges of the vegetable plot lying behind the cottage and he was happy for the animals to graze there. If it came on to snow they would have to find the beasts a little shelter among the trees.

The men had carried a flask of wine and some bread with them, the soldier's natural provision against the possibility of hunger en route. Johannes found some salted meat in the household stores, probably the remains of the last season's pig, which they might be able to broil over the flames. All in all they were not so badly off. Plenty of people would sup less well this night and many would have less pleasant company. For a man to have his lover at his side, who could reasonably ask for more?

As the fire drew and the edge was taken off the air they were able to assess what comforts they could find. There was a narrow pallet for a bed, with a thin mattress, but there was a good quality woollen cover which could give protection to them both and they were warmly dressed anyway, fur cloaks and furlined boots being the order of the day. By the time the meat had cooked, flakes the size of horse chestnuts were falling and Horace has moved the horses into a little stand of trees where he hoped they might not succumb to the cold. Two old rugs that had been on the cottage floor now graced the beasts' backs as a guard against the

weather. He returned to find a supper laid for him on rough wooden trenchers, the wine poured into a single horn cup.

“We’ll have to share, Horace. Perhaps the cottager has taken his finest golden tableware with him to grace his kin’s table while they welcome the Christ child afresh.” Johannes smiled kindly. He knew that the finery he enjoyed at Horace’s manor was far beyond the reach of most of the people he walked this life with.

“If it snows like this all night we’ll have been so grateful for the shelter that I’ll send him a pair of the finest goblets I can rustle up. Truly, dead man or no, I do not think we would have necessarily made our way safely back home before the weather set in. It’s coming from the south and I hope that Kenwyn can ride before it.”

“Then please God he makes it to Hywel safely and is given bed for the night. Perhaps we might see a thaw in the morning and they can reach us then. If not, we will have to make do. And our friend out there won’t be any the worse off for the cold.”

“Who was he, Johannes? We have his scrip safe here, is there any sign in it of his identity?”

Johannes laid the contents on the floor. There was a little money, the man’s seal and some personal items. “He must have had a horse, and it’s either been taken or fled. He would have his other things in his saddle bags, assuming he was en route somewhere. He might be local, but I can’t place him. I assume his face was not familiar to you?”

Horace shook his head. He picked up the seal and considered it. “This I have seen, though. It belonged to James, a friend of my father’s. He died not long after my own sire, both of them victim to the fever that ravaged us some ten years back. This man must be James’ son to have inherited the insignia.”

“What do you recall of him?”

“Very little. We must have met as boys but I have no lasting impression. All I know is that my father always spoke of Arthur with disapproval in his voice.”

“You were fond of your father, weren’t you? I suspect he never spoke of you with such dissatisfaction.” Johannes reached over and took his

friend's hand.

“He was very proud of me; it broke my heart when he died. He had acted as both father and mother to me since not long after I was born.” Horace was touched with emotion as he remembered with great affection the happy days of his youth. “And above all he valued fealty and steadfast love. James' son had been flighty, had got a girl into trouble and while the family looked after her well enough, my father could not find it in his heart to trust the man again. He was not welcome in our house like his father was. I believe that he has been living in Wales, as his mother had property there. Wherever he has been he has only recently returned as far as I know; I wonder if he has changed his ways.”

“Perhaps his sins caught up with him, Horace.”

“You believe that he was struck down by God?”

“More likely human vengeance, rather than divine. Some brother or father of a girl he ruined.” Johannes snuggled closer to his friend and they shared another cup of wine. “I shall never understand you, Horace, not if we live to be seventy and spend every moment of the day together. You do not believe in God and yet you think *he* might have killed this man for his transgressions.”

Horace had to admit the truth of the accusation; he turned the discussion back on his friend. “And you, who say you believe, see only a God of mercy and love. How can you after those years you spent in the East?”

“Because I have met him once or twice on that battlefield. He was there every time a dying man was given succour, especially when it was his enemy who provided the comfort. Men are capable of great evil and great good and I am sure the latter comes from some part within them that connects with a higher power. Oh I am no orator, Horace, I can't explain. I just know.”

Horace gently kissed his lover's brow. “You accept as true that there was a child born in a stable who changed the world?”

“I do, my heart. It's the fact of the stable that makes me believe even more. If it were all a tale he'd have had a more notable birth. And the fact that he fought with swords of love and shields of charity and in the end he gave up his own life for other people. I think it's that part you find so hard to understand, isn't it?”

Horace was very quiet for a while, studying the flames as they danced in the hearth. He was aware that Johannes understood him more completely than anyone, perhaps even more than he did himself, but Johannes had no areas of character he wished to keep hidden, no unplumbed depths of which he was frightened. He had spent the last year and more teasing Horace out of himself, winking the pearl of love and valour from the oyster of reserve and self-pity that had been created after the death of his father. The pearl had proved to be beyond price. "I do not know. I can understand the self-sacrifice, I can understand that very well. Had I gone to the crusades I might have fallen upon the sword of honour and valour, seeking to lose myself in the fight. I have wished it often enough but not had the courage to make it happen."

"Do you wish it now?"

"You know the answer to that question. Need I repeat it?" Horace's face softened into a smile. He appeared boyish and vulnerable by the light of the fire and Johannes knew he could never love anyone or anything as much as he loved this strange and dour fellow into whose manor he had come by accident some fifteen months back. "The part I find so hard is the idea of loving one's neighbour as oneself. Very hard to accomplish the former when the latter is beyond one's capabilities." He nestled his head onto Johannes's shoulder, finding all the comfort he needed in contact with the strong frame.

"Perhaps all the love I feel for you will kindle some dormant tinder within your heart and let you love yourself. Or at least *like* yourself. That would be a start."

"Perhaps. I believe you have love enough for both of us." Horace lifted his face and kissed his friend with as much tenderness as he could muster. "I wish we were at home in my bed."

"Aye. But we are not and we must be aware both of not intruding on our host's hospitality, especially when he is not aware that he gives it. And on the fact that either Kenwyn or Hywel or both might appear at any moment. A murder is scandalous enough. We do not want to risk disgrace on top."

Horace smiled, recognising that his lover was not just a seemingly infinite fount of love but of wisdom too. "Then let us drink our wine and try to get some sleep. That snow is not likely to leave off for a while and I

for one will want to have all my strength come morning.”

“Shall we take watch and watch? You should sleep first. I feel peculiarly awake and would welcome the chance to think.”

“And what will occupy your mind?”

“This scrip, Horace, and its contents. Perhaps they can tell us some more. I like a riddle; in my father’s house it was custom to entertain the assembled guests with games and word play. When I was but a boy I would sit for hours and try to join in solving the mysteries that were described.”

“What sort of mysteries? Not the sudden and unlawful death of a man on a winter’s day?”

“Sometimes. My paternal uncle had many a tale to relate of crimes that had been committed up in Shrewsbury and an exceptionally clever monk who had outwitted the culprits to bring them to justice. But often it was just silly things, puzzles to amaze and amuse. My favourite was about the man who rode into the Abbey on Lady Day, stayed the whole of two nights then rode out again on Lady Day.”

“That is not possible. Such a thing could not be.”

“Oh it could, Horace. I remember I had solved the problem long before the men of the household and whispered the answer in my father’s ear. He was so proud of me then—he always has been, bastard or not.”

“And will you tell me the solution? It must be a trick. The man stayed a year elsewhere and you did not tell me.” Horace didn’t like to be bested, especially by his lover.

“I will give you until morning then when we break our fast—it will be water from the well and any of that meat that remains—I will tell all. And perhaps I will have some ideas about our dead friend, too. Now sleep, you look done in.”

Johannes laid his lover’s head down on the makeshift pillow he’d fabricated from the saddle bags, and gently stroked his temples. Horace snuggled down like a babe with its mother and didn’t open his eyes again until he awoke with a start, convinced it was his turn to keep watch and that his lover had let him sleep over.

“Johannes, why didn’t you wake me?”

“Because you’ve only slept two hours, I would guess. The night is barely half through.”

“And you have a twinkle in your eye that I can even see by this firelight. What have you discovered, my faithful hound?”

“This.” Johannes produced a piece of parchment and laid it out where the glow of the fire might illuminate it. “I was looking to see if there was a lamp anywhere—to hope for candles would have been unrealistic—and I found a cache of things on a little shelf. Even in the dim light I could see that this meant something.” The paper carried a depiction of the seal which the dead man had carried.

“Extraordinary. What can it mean?”

“That the man who lives here, Kenwyn’s kin, had some reason to need to know what that seal looked like. I can’t believe he kept it for decoration. Could he have some connection to the dead man’s family?”

“I do not know. Was there anything else that you sniffed out?”

Johannes shook his head. “Nothing out of the everyday. But I have thought on that picture long and hard. I wondered why I would need a copy of someone’s seal and decided it could only be to recognise the man, if I had not met him before. Or to see that his mark was genuine when witnessing the sealing of a document or the certifying of someone’s identity. I can’t imagine that Kenwyn’s cousin’s grandfather would have much occasion for being a witness, so I guess he was given this so that he would know Arthur if he met him. In which case, why?”

“There may be some simpler explanation. Perhaps he took a fancy to the pattern and wished to have a copy?”

“Perhaps. Let us be charitable and assume that is just the working out of coincidence, but I have a feeling in my bones that there is a connection to what happened today, and it unsettles me.” Johannes moved closer to his lover; the fire had been kept well banked up but he sought for comfort, not just warmth. “How well do you know Kenwyn? He had not been with you long before we met, I believe.”

“Aye. His family are simple decent folk. His father served mine and it was long agreed that the son might follow suit once he had returned from Gloucester. He spent some time with Hywel’s men and could have had a place there in the guardhouse but he prefers the country to the city. Cleaner and more honest, he says. Perhaps this violent death will make him realise that there can be evil anywhere.”

“Has he ever spoken of Arthur or his father? Were you ever aware of a special connection between the two families?”

“Not that I know of, except that all families locally seem to know each other in the common run of things. Kenwyn has been a good groom. He is reliable and fiercely loyal and cares very much for his people. He did mention how fond he was of his cousin —I suppose it is the same one that the man who lives here has been visiting, as I believe Kenwyn said she was the only girl among a half dozen boys in the family.”

“How fond is fond, Horace? The fondness for someone he might regard almost as a sister or more than that? The fondness we share?”

“Perhaps the latter. I recall he was asking about what would happen should he take a wife, whether he could stay in my service. I was more than happy to agree to the proposition as he has been a very good servant to me and I would be loathe to lose him.”

“That seems fair. I know that many a man with a household to serve him might elect to have bachelors only, but it seems unfair to expect one’s men to be celibate when the master...” Johannes’s words petered out into a smile, a kiss, and then a great yawn. “I must sleep Horace. A great tiredness has come upon me and it can’t be fought off as easily as you can when you feel amorous and I am too weary. Exercise your mind on this mystery as I sleep and we might have something to give Hywel in the morning, or whenever this snow lets him come here, apart from just a dead body.”

Johannes laid his head on the makeshift pillow, declining the opportunity to use his lover’s legs for the same purpose. It would be unfair to deprive the man of part of the cover, which is what would be entailed if they moved into such a position, and anyway those particular limbs were not a little bony and needed a good feeding up before they would make an ample cushion. Horace’s chest would have been another matter, but it would not answer in these circumstances.

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When Johannes woke his face was warm, indicative of the fire still burning steadily in the hearth, but his back was cold, which meant that Horace had gone off about his business or whatever he thought his business might be this morning. As if Johannes's thinking of him had brought forth the man, the door opened and Horace entered, carrying a load of wood.

"Good morning. Is the world smothered in its winter blanket?"

"It's not so bad. The snow lies as thick as the breadth of my hand in places but it should be passable assuming they have not suffered worse in the valley. We should see Hywel before noon unless even more urgent business calls on him."

"And the horses?"

"Cold and hungry but surprisingly happy considering that they did not pass the night as comfortably as we did. I found some apples and even some bran in the store. This man is well looked after, Johannes, and we must replenish all his supplies twice over. And add a flask of wine or two." Horace smiled, something that he'd become accustomed to doing more often since his lover had entered his life the previous year. It had been the most fortuitous of circumstances and at times Horace was inappropriately grateful for the harsh times his friend had spent abroad as they'd brought him to Pain's Wyke and to his manor.

"Shall we make a warm mash for the beasts? Your Hugon is always fond of one or so Kenwyn says."

"Ah, Kenwyn." Horace said no more, turning to the store and filling a bucket with bran.

Johannes considered for a moment. He knew this man extremely well and could recognise when something was exercising his mind. He also knew better than to enquire of it until he knew that Horace was ready to share all his thoughts. "I'll get some water warming, then. Old crusaders know that it's best to look after your horse before yourself; our bacon can wait." He watched the pot carefully onto the hearth—no-one with any sense handled such an operation without care, risking as it did the pot tipping and the flames being put out. As it was settled safely, he felt strong arms around him and Horace's face nuzzling into his neck. "What

ails thee?" He reached his arms up to encircle his lover's head in a halo of affection.

"I've been thinking all this last watch and I do not like that thoughts I have forming in my mind."

"Will you tell me them while we wait for the pot to boil?" Johannes turned, took his friend by the hand and sat them down with the fur cloaks over their shoulders. The morning hadn't yet shaken off night's cold embrace and it seemed unlikely that the day should ever have any warmth in it.

"Yesterday morning, when I went to fetch Hugon, Kenwyn was not in the stables. He appeared soon after and said he had been out for a ride to visit his kin. He had some cloth for them and I had given him permission to take it, although I had assumed he had returned the night before."

"That's what he told us when we found the body. Do you believe he had been gone the night?"

"I do not know. I meant to ask him but then you appeared, all flustered because you had lost your bridle and we had to find it." Horace smiled in fond remembrance of how flustered his friend had been and what a joy it was to prove that the idiot's bridle was just where he had left it, despite his protestations of checking there. "It didn't seem so important then to establish what he had been up to. Many a young man pays a call which involves his staying away the night and is loathe to admit it."

"You think he had been courting his cousin; it would make sense. He always speaks of his kin with great affection. But this alone would not unsettle your mind. Tell me the rest."

"Last night I thought long and hard on all that Kenwyn said and did that morning and when we set off to hunt. He had seemed agitated when we were saddling up. Would you agree?"

"Perhaps. I was in too much agitation myself over that lost bridle and then embarrassed at my own stupidity, although I have an excuse for it, to have noticed much." Johannes considered, in his mind's eye putting himself back a day and picturing the scene. Normally Horace was the one who noticed details, recalling a place and the contents thereof with pinpoint accuracy, and Johannes who fixed on the feelings of the people involved, the quivering in the air and a hundred small signs which

indicated emotion. “I did notice that his mood changed during the day. When we were chasing the hind down by the stand of beeches he went off into the coppice to try to get around behind her and we lost track of him. When you wound your horn for him to return he seemed...”

Johannes strove for the right word to portray the mixture of elation and passion that Kenwyn had displayed, “... what you might call fey. I thought it was merely the thrill of the chase—it always makes you flushed and excited—but now I wonder if there was more to it. His face reminded me...” He stopped, hesitant. What he wanted to say would take them into deep waters.

“Reminded you of what? Johannes, I rely on your observation without question. You are always the one who spots the hawk on the rise or the boar in the undergrowth. I need to know what you saw.”

“His face bore the expression I have seen many a time on the battlefield. Elation after the kill.” Johannes clasped his lover’s hand to his bosom, trying to impart some calm, some sense. “That’s what you dreaded me saying, yet still expected, isn’t it? You believe that Kenwyn killed Arthur and has been covering his tracks ever since.”

“It is very much what I feared, although I have little true evidence for it, just a feeling.”

“I cannot believe that. You are much too sensible a man to be swayed by feelings alone. There must have been more, to make you forge such a chain of reasoning in which to bind a felon.”

“The water is ready. Let us feed the horses then I will tell you what I have thought of.”

Johannes nodded his agreement and they didn’t speak of the dead man again until their own breakfast was almost prepared. “I have had a notion too, as we fed Hugon and Carwyn. But it can wait to see whether it compliments or contradicts yours.”

Horace took a deep breath and began. He had analysed the entire proceedings of the day before and couldn’t help but find that Kenwyn’s attitude had been out of the ordinary. He knew, from the man’s own admission, that he had excellent knowledge of the woods and the tracks over the beacon, more so than any stranger could have had. And they had seen no strangers, not one, while they had hunted and enjoyed riding in the crisp winter air. None of this was more than circumstantial,

of course, “but for a copy of Arthur’s seal to be here seems more than coincidence. And I wondered whether it had been made so that the old man who lives here would know if he came across Arthur. So that he could recognise him if he met him.”

“For what purpose?” Johannes sought to tease the theory from his friend, piece by piece.

“Revenge. I wondered further—you must remember this is all speculation—whether Arthur had been up to his old tricks and had taken advantage in some way of Kenwyn’s cousin, his affianced girl. Maybe she gave her grandfather a drawing she or a friend had made of the man’s seal. And if Kenwyn had visited the old man he’d have been shown it, and would have recognised it too, I’ll warrant, with his family’s history of service on our lands.”

“And you think he met Arthur when we were out here yesterday? By chance?”

“I know that chance works out strangely enough. I have seen the most extraordinary coincidences, ones which would truly defy belief but had been none the less pure chance. But this I think was more a matter of design; Kenwyn went to see his young lady two days ago and I am speculating she told him that Arthur was hanging around again making a nuisance of himself. He knew that we were to be coming out hunting—it was his suggestion we rode up to these woods, was it not?—and arranged to meet his enemy somewhere along the ride. Or perhaps at this very cottage.”

“In which case they encountered each other early and came to blows. Perhaps it was even Kenwyn’s hunting knife which did the deed.”

Horace nodded. “But it is all no more than conjecture. There is not a scrap of evidence except for the sketch.”

Johannes shrugged. “Let me tell you about what crossed my mind as we tended to the beasts. Cerys is a very placid mare and she will do aught that Kenwyn asks of her; I have seen her take a ditch that many a gelding would have balked at. We had such creatures on the battlefield and they were invaluable for keeping their heads and their riders’ seats despite the flying limbs and gore. She might have made very little fuss over being witness to a stabbing. And if someone wanted to hide the fact that his mount had been spattered in the process, what better than to

offer her to carry the body for a while? Any blood which Hywel Dinmont might notice on Kenwyn's saddle or his clothes might be explained by the corpse having left its mark. And we would be witness to that fact."

"He did not wear his cloak." Horace stretched his long finger to point outside to where the three had stood and talked the day before. "I know he is a hardy soul but he had it on earlier in the day and I had to remind him to put it on again. It was folded into one of his saddle bags I think..."

"Well we can tell all this to Hywel when he comes," Johannes suddenly paused, "if he comes, Horace. It occurs to me that we have no way of knowing whether he ever intended to go to Gloucester. If he committed the deed then he could be half way into Wales by now."

"No, I do not think he went that far last night. If he did not go to the city, either as innocent man ill accused or guilty one brazening things out, then he stayed close by, either from fear of the law or the weather. There are two many imponderables in this matter. We should not speculate further."

"Then let us wait patiently to see what this morning brings us."

The morning, barely an hour later, brought Hywel Dinmont and one of his men. They knew of the body and had come with a horse drawn litter to carry it down to the castle where the men who worked for the Sherriff could begin to help him solve the mystery. Of Kenwyn there was no sign.

"I thank you, my lords, for keeping the body safe. This is bloody murder indeed and if wild beasts had got to the corpse then any evidence which remained might be spoiled."

"Is my groom not with you?" Horace had expected this development, really. If he and Johannes had been correct in their assumptions then he'd little doubt that the man had gone to ground, like the game he was so talented at tracking. He wondered whether Dinmont would be as capable of flushing Kenwyn out, at the very least to let him speak his part and establish his innocence, assuming he was blameless.

"Were you expecting him to be? He told me he had been given orders to return to you immediately he had delivered his message. We tried to restrain him, the snow being so heavy, but he would not be gainsaid. He left clear instructions as to where I could find you and I was anticipating meeting him here. I hope that he has not fallen foul of the weather; I

would not seek to have another corpse to find and another mother to bring sad news to.” Hywel regarded each man in turn. He’d known Dumanoir for many years and was aware of the favour he found with the old duchess. Fitzrichard he’d met and liked well enough, impressed by the tales he’d heard of the extreme valour the man had displayed in the Holy Land, both in fighting and in kindness. They were neither of them good at hiding the truth. “Gentlemen, what troubles thee? There is more to this story than I have heard.”

“What did Kenwyn tell you?” Horace was loathe to commit himself until he saw more clearly what events had happened between his groom leaving the cottage and then disappearing.

The Sherriff related what the man’s report had been and they could vouch for the truth of it. The finding of the body, its conveyance to safety, were all as they remembered, the only outright lie being Horace’s instructions to his groom to return forthwith. “And what will you add?” Hywel’s suspicions were becoming aroused now and he was keen to have the truth and have it soon.

“That he had no such order to return; we had expected him to come back with you. This morning we are less surprised at the fact he is not in your train. We have had time to think.”

“And your thoughts, you will impart them to me?” Dinmont was used to men protecting their own, seeking to mete out their own form of justice rather than let the King’s law take its course.

“I would never seek to impede your duties, Hywel, but I would add that much of our thoughts are mere speculation. We have one thing of substance to show you and that is all.” He gestured to Johannes, who produced the sketch of Arthur’s seal and explained where he’d found it and the significance they’d seen in it. Soon the whole of their theorising had been shared and each point had been met by Dinmont with a thoughtful look, especially when they touched on the matter of the mare.

“I noticed the blood on your groom’s cloak. He could not have avoided wearing it by the time he reached us or else he would have been half frozen. He even joked as he spoke of bearing the body on his mount and how he would have not have offered had he known the mess it would have made. I thought that it was black humour. I see it often on the occasion of sudden death but now I wonder if it was covering his tracks. Certainly his disappearance speaks more of guilt than misfortune.”

“I would not have you condemn the man out of hand. Any of these things could be explained away...” Horace’s voice faded uncertainly but he was heartened by the look in the Sherriff’s eye.

“They could indeed, and I will not make any assumptions. First of all I shall go and talk to the man whose cottage this is, and that granddaughter of his. I do not think that they will dissemble before me. Perhaps I might find your runaway there, too, if he’s not over the Severn and away by now. Only time will tell, but I will not harass or condemn an innocent man, you have my word.”

The body was by now safely strapped into the litter and Dinmont prepared to mount his own horse and go to find Kenwyn’s kin. He would take his stoutest man, both in spirit and in physique, with him to carry out this task. He didn’t want to end up another body by the wayside.

“I wish you success, sir.” Horace held out his hand in parting and nodded his gratitude at the men who were to bear their grizzly burden down into the city.

“And I wish you a blessed Christmas, both of you. Please God the New Year will bring us better times.”

“Amen to that.” Johannes said, with true feeling, as he watched the party move off along the path.

The sky suggested that the journey home should be less hazardous than the outward one had been; there seemed little risk of snow this day.

“You said that you had an excuse for misplacing your bridle. Would you care to lay it before me?” Horace’s spirits were low, this business—one of his own men perhaps a murderer—had hit him hard and he sought for any refuge from his dark thoughts. As always he found it in speech with his dearest friend and ardent lover.

Johannes sighed and made a concerted effort to raise both his own morale and that of his friend. “I was simply distracted. When we’d ridden in from Gloucester two days ago and I had been meaning to hang the thing where it would normally go. But while I saw to my horse, and yes, I know we have stable lads to do that but I was too long on crusade to let

any other tend my mount, except you naturally, I saw such a look in your eye. The fresh air and the fine winter sun had raised your spirits enormously and that expression made me think, well, it diverted me from the matter in hand and kept me distracted until events had run their natural course.”

Horace blushed, remembering the wondrous conclusion of the evening. “Can I be so much of a distraction? That an old warrior neglects his gear, thinking of an amorous liaison?”

“You are more than a distraction, my love.” Johannes laughed, an incongruous sound after the happenings of the last day.

“And you are incorrigible. *And...*” Horace found himself smiling and laughing too, intoxicated by this creature at his side whose smile could dismiss all sorrow, “you have not told me the answer to the riddle.”

“The riddle? Oh that. You should be ashamed of yourself, finding a solution to a murder but not solving a children’s puzzle.”

“But a man can’t ride into a place on a feast day then stay less than a week and ride out on the same feast day. You must be mistaken.”

“And you are being too literal. He rode in on Lady Day just as you ride on Hugon. It was his horse, Horace, and he rode out on it again some days later.” Johannes grinned and took a deep breath of the sweet air that blew through the trees, smelling of snow and a distant hearth. “Have I rendered you speechless? I must try that more often.”

“You are a knave, sir, and a rascal.” Horace spurred his horse on. “We need to be getting home. I don’t like the look of that sky again.”

“Look of that sky, my grandfather’s beard. I know why you want to be home; you may fool all the rest of the world but you cannot pull the wool over my eyes. Perhaps I should dawdle a bit.”

“You do and you’ll find the gates locked to you, snow or not.”

“Come then, let’s negotiate the hill and then I’ll race you over the plain if the snow permits. First one home sets the next riddle.”

Horace took a look over his shoulder at the place they had lodged. It could no longer be seen but he felt its presence keenly. It had been the

first place they had shared a bed, of sorts, outside his own demesne and irrespective of the bitter memories it would bear, murder and betrayal of trust, it would always have a special place in his heart. "I will take you up on the wager. And I'll find a conundrum so hard you'll never deduce it."

The two lovers laughed and nudged their horses on a little faster.