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Wars of the Roses: Books 2: Trinity

Written by Conn Iggulden

Published by Michael Joseph

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Wars of the Roses

Book Two: Trinity

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MICHAEL JOSEPH
an imprint of
PENGUIN BOOKS

MICHAEL JOSEPH

Published by the Penguin Group
Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England
Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA
Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4P 2Y3
(a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)
Penguin Ireland, 25 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd)
Penguin Group (Australia), 707 Collins Street, Melbourne, Victoria 3008, Australia
(a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd)
Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi – 110 017, India
Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, Auckland 0632, New Zealand
(a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd)
Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, Block D, Rosebank Office Park,
181 Jan Smuts Avenue, Parktown North, Gauteng 2193, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

www.penguin.com

First published 2014
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Set in 13.75/16.25 pt Garamond MT Std
Typeset by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes
Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

HARDBACK ISBN: 978–0–718–15985–6
TRADE PAPERBACK ISBN: 978–0–718–15986–3

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Prologue

Vicomte Michel Gascault was certainly not a spy. He would have scorned the name if he had heard it used of him. Of course it went without saying that the French ambassador to the English court would report anything of interest to his monarch on his return. It was also true that Vicomte Gascault had considerable experience in the royal palaces of Europe as well as the field of war. He knew what King Charles of France might want to know and, with that in mind, Vicomte Gascault took careful note of all that went on around him, little though it was. Spies were grubby, low-born men, given to hiding in doorways and hissing secret passwords at each other. Vicomte Gascault, *de l'autre côté*, – 'on the other hand', as the English said – was a gentleman of France, as far above such things as the sun above the earth.

Those and similar thoughts were all he had to amuse him in his idle hours. He was certain to mention to King Charles how he had been ignored for three full days, left to kick his heels in a sumptuous chamber in the Palace of Westminster. The servants sent to attend his person were not even well washed, he had noticed, though they came promptly enough. One of them positively reeked of horse and urine, as if he found his usual employment in the royal stables.

Still, it was true Gascault's bodily needs were met, even

if his ambassadorial ones were not. Each day began with his own retainers dressing him in the most gorgeous raiments and cloaks he possessed, choosing them from among the garments pressed into the enormous trunks he had brought from France. He had not yet been forced to repeat a combination of colours and if he had overheard one of the English scullions refer to him as the 'French Peacock', it bothered him not at all. Bright colours raised his mood and he had precious little else to while away the time. He did not like to think of the food they set out for him. It was clear enough that they had engaged a French cook; equally as clear that the man had no love of his countrymen. Gascault shuddered at the thought of some of the flaccid things that had appeared at his table.

The hours crept by like a funeral and he had long ago read every scrap of his official papers. By the light of a candle-lamp, he turned at last to a dun-coloured book in his possession, marked throughout with his notes and comments. *De Sacra Coena* by Berengarius had become a favourite of Gascault's. The treatise on the Last Supper had been banned by the Church, of course. Any argument that strayed into the mysteries of body and blood brought the attention of Papal hounds.

Gascault had long been in the habit of seeking out books destined for the fire, to set his thoughts aflame in turn. He rubbed his hands over the wrappings. The original cover had been stripped and burned to ashes, of course, with those ashes carefully crumbled so that no questing hand could ever guess what they had once been. The rough, stained leather was a sad necessity in an age

where men took such delight in denouncing each other to their masters.

The summons, when it came at last, interrupted his reading. Gascault was used to the booming bell that rang each hour and half-hour, startling him from sleep and spoiling his digestion at least as much as the poor pigeons that lay so limply on his dinner platter. He had kept no count but still knew it was late when the horse-servant, as he thought of him, came rushing into the rooms.

'Viscount Gas-cart, you are summoned,' the boy said.

Gascault gave no sign of irritation at the way he mangled a proud name. The boy was surely a simpleton and the Good Lord expected mercy for those poor fellows, set among their betters to teach compassion, or so Gascault's mother had always said. With care, he laid his book on the arm of the chair and rose. His steward, Alphonse, was only a step behind the lad. Gascault let his eyes drift back to the book, knowing it would be enough of a signal for his servant to keep it from other hands in his absence. Alphonse nodded sharply, bowing low while the horse-boy stared in confusion at the dumbshow between the two men.

Vicomte Gascault strapped on his sword and allowed Alphonse to drape his yellow cloak around his shoulders. When his gaze dropped once more to the chair, the book had somehow vanished. Truly, his servant was the soul of discretion and not simply because he lacked a tongue. Gascault inclined his head in thanks and swept out behind the boy, passing through the outer rooms and into the chilly corridor beyond.

A party of five men awaited him there. Four of them

were evidently soldiers, wearing a royal tabard over mail. The last wore a cloak and tunic over hose, all as thick and well made as his own.

'Vicomte Michel Gascault?' the man said.

Gascault noted the perfect pronunciation and smiled.

'I have that honour. I am at your service . . . ?'

'Richard Neville, Earl of Salisbury and lord chancellor. I must apologize for the late hour, but you are expected, my lord, in the royal chambers.'

Gascault fell easily into step at the man's side, ignoring the soldiers clattering along in their wake. He had known stranger things than a midnight meeting, in his career.

'To see the king?' he asked mischievously, watching the earl closely. Salisbury was not a young man, though he seemed wiry and in good health to the Frenchman's eyes. It would not do to reveal how much the court of France knew of King Henry's poor health.

'I am sorry to report that His Royal Highness, King Henry, is suffering with an ague, a temporary illness. I hope you will take no offence, but I am to bring you to the Duke of York this evening.'

'My lord Salisbury, I am so *very* sorry to hear such a thing,' Gascault replied, letting the words spill out. He saw Salisbury's eyes tighten just a fraction and had to repress a smile. They both knew there were families in the English court with strong ties to France, whether by blood or titles. The idea that the French king would not know every detail of King Henry's collapse was a game to be played between them and nothing more. The English king had been near senseless for months, fallen so deeply into a stupor that he could not be raised to life. It was not

for nothing that his lords had appointed one of their number as 'Protector and Defender of the Realm'. Richard, Duke of York, was king in all but name and, in truth, Vicomte Gascault had no interest in meeting a royal lost in his dreaming. He had been sent to judge the strength of the English court and their willingness to defend their interests. Gascault allowed his pleasure to sparkle in his eyes for just an instant before snuffing the emotion. If he reported that they were weak and lost without King Henry, Gascault's word alone would bring a hundred ships from France, to raid and burn every English port. The English had done the same to France for long enough, he reminded himself. Perhaps it was time at last that the devil had his due of them as well.

Salisbury led the small group along an endless stretch of corridors, then climbed two flights of stairs to the royal apartments on the floors above. Even at such a late hour, the Palace of Westminster was ablaze with lamps set just a few paces apart. Yet Gascault could smell damp in the air, a reek of ancient mould from having the river so close. As they reached the final, guarded door, he had to control the desire to straighten his cloak and collar one last time. Alphonse would not have let him leave with anything awry.

The soldiers were dismissed and the door opened by guards within. Salisbury extended his hand to allow the ambassador to enter before him.

'After you, Vicomte,' he said. His eyes were sharp, Gascault realized, as he bowed and went in. The man missed nothing and he reminded himself to be wary of him. The English were many things: venal, short-tempered, greedy,

a whole host of sins. No one had ever called them stupid, however, not in all the history of the world. If God would only make it so! King Charles would have their towns and castles in his grip in just a single generation.

Salisbury closed the door softly at his back and Vicomte Gascault found himself in a smaller room than he had expected. Perhaps it was only right that a 'Protector and Defender' would not allow himself the trappings of a royal court, yet the stillness of that room made a shudder pass down Gascault's back. The windows were black with the night outside and the man who rose to greet him was dressed in the same colour, almost lost in the shadows of low-burning lamps as he came forward.

Richard, Duke of York, extended his hand, beckoning Gascault further into the room. The Frenchman felt his hackles stand up in superstitious fear, though he showed no sign of his discomfort. As he stepped forward, he glanced behind, seeing nothing stranger than Salisbury watching him steadily.

'Vicomte Gascault, I am York. It is my pleasure to welcome you and a source of great distress that I must send you home so soon.'

'*Milord*?' Gascault asked in confusion. He sat where York gestured and gathered his wits as the man took a seat across the wide table. The English duke was clean-shaven, square-jawed and yet slim enough in his black. As Gascault stared, York pushed loose hair off his forehead with one hand. He tilted his head as he did so, yet his eyes never left Gascault's own.

'I'm afraid I do not understand, my lord York. Forgive me, I have not yet learned the correct term of address for

a Protector and Defender.' Gascault looked around for some sign of wine, or food, but there was nothing in sight, just the deep golden oak of the table, stretching bare before him.

York regarded him without blinking, his brows lowering.

'I was the king's lieutenant in France, Vicomte Gascault. I am certain you were told as much. I have fought on French soil and I have lost estates and titles to your king. All this you know. I mention it only to remind you that, in turn, I know France. I know your king – and, Gascault, I know you.'

'My lord, I can only assume –'

York continued over him as if he had not spoken.

'The king of England sleeps, Vicomte Gascault. Will he wake, at all? Or will he die abed? It is the talk of all the markets here. I do not doubt it is the talk of Paris as well. Is this the chance for which your king has planned and waited for so very long? You, who are not strong enough to take Calais from us, you would dream of England?'

Gascault shook his head, his mouth open to begin a denial. York held up his hand.

'I invite you, Gascault. Throw your dice. Take your chance while King Henry drowses. I would walk again on lands that once were mine. I would march an army on French earth once more, if I had the chance. *Please*, consider my invitation. The Channel is just a thread. The king is just a man. A soldier, well, if he is an English soldier, he is still a man, is he not? He can fail. He can fall. Come against us while our king sleeps, Vicomte Gascault. Climb our walls. Set foot in our ports. I welcome it, as our people

will welcome you all. It may be a rough welcome, I grant you. We are rough folk. But we have debts to repay and we are generous with our enemies. For each blow landed on us, we give them three and we do not count the cost. Do you understand me, Vicomte Gascault? Son of Julien and Clémence? Brother to André, Arnaud and François? Husband to Elodie? Father to two sons and a daughter. Shall I name them, Gascault? Shall I describe your family home, with the red plum trees that bracket the gate?'

'Enough, *monsieur*,' Gascault said quietly. 'Your meaning is clear enough.'

'I wonder,' York said. 'Or should I send an order to wing faster than you can ride, faster than you can sail, so that you understand my meaning, as well and as fully as I intend it, when you return to your home? I am willing, Gascault.'

'Please don't, my lord,' Gascault replied.

'Please?' York said. His face was hard, darkened by the dimming lamps as if shadows crept over his jaw. 'I will decide, after you are gone. There is a ship waiting for you, Gascault – and men who will take you to the coast. Whatever news you report to your king, I wish you all the fortune you deserve. Good night, Vicomte Gascault. God speed.'

Gascault rose on trembling legs and went to the door. Salisbury kept his head down as he opened it for him and the Frenchman took a deep breath in fear as he saw the soldiers gathered beyond. In the gloom, they had a menacing aspect and he almost shrieked as they allowed him out and turned in place to march him away.

Salisbury closed the door softly.

‘I do not think they will come – at least, not this year,’ he said.

York snorted.

‘I swear, I am in two minds. We have the ships and the men, if they would follow me. Yet they wait like hounds, to see if Henry will wake.’

Salisbury did not reply at first. York saw his hesitation and smiled wearily.

‘It is not yet too late, I think. Send for the Spaniard as well. I will speak my lines to him.’

PART ONE

Late Summer 1454

People crushed by law have no hopes but from power. If laws are their enemies, they will be enemies to laws.

Edmund Burke

I

With the light still cold and grey, the castle came alive. Horses were brought from their stalls and rubbed down; dogs barked and fought with each other, kicked out of the way by those who found them in their path. Hundreds of young men were busy gathering tack and weapons, rushing around the main yard with armfuls of equipment.

In the great tower, Henry Percy, Earl of Northumberland, stared out of the window to the bustling sward all around his fortress. The castle stones were warm in the August heat, but the old man wore a cloak and mantle of fur around his shoulders even so, clutched tight to his chest. He was still both tall and broad, though age had bowed him down. His sixth decade had brought aches and creaking joints that made all movement painful and his temper short.

The earl glowered through the leaded glass. The town was waking. The world was rising with the sun and he was ready to act, after so long biding his time. He watched as armoured knights assembled, their servants passing out shields that had been painted black, or covered in sackcloth bound with twine. The Percy colours of blue and yellow were nowhere in evidence, hidden from view so that the soldiers waiting for his order had a sombre look. For a time, they would be grey men, hedge knights without house or family. Men without honour, when honour was a chain to bind them.

The old man sniffed, rubbing hard at his nose. The ruse would fool no one, but when the killing was over, he would still be able to claim no Percy knight or archer had been part of it. Most importantly of all, those who might have cried out against him would be cold in the ground.

As he stood there, deep in thought, he heard his son approach, the young man's spurred heels clicking and rattling on the wooden floor. The earl looked around, feeling his old heart thump with anticipation.

'God give you good day,' Thomas Percy said, bowing. He too allowed his gaze to stray through the window, down to the bustle of the castle grounds below. Thomas raised an eyebrow in silent question and his father grunted, irritated at the footsteps of servants all around.

'Come with me.' Without waiting for a reply, the earl swept along the corridor, the force of his authority pulling Thomas along behind him. He reached a doorway to his private chambers and almost dragged his son inside, slamming the door behind them. As Thomas stood and watched, the old man strode jerkily through the rooms, banging doors back and forth as he went. His suspicion showed in the deepening purple of his face, the skin made darker still by a stain of broken veins that stretched right across his cheeks and nose. The earl could never be pale, with that marbling. If it had been earned in strong spirits from over the Scottish border, it suited his mood well enough. Age had not mellowed the old man, though it had dried and hardened him.

Satisfied they were alone, the earl came back to his son, still waiting patiently with his back to the door. Thomas Percy, Baron Egremont, stood no taller than his father

once had though, without the stoop of age, he could see over the old man's head. At thirty-two, Thomas was in the prime of his manhood, his hair black and his forearms thick with sinew and muscle earned over six thousand days of training. As he stood there, he seemed almost to glow with health and strength, his ruddy skin unmarked by scar or disease. Despite the years between them, both men bore the Percy nose, that great wedge that could be seen in dozens of crofts and villages all around Alnwick.

'There, we are private,' the earl said at last. 'She has her ears everywhere, your mother. I cannot even talk to my own son without her people reporting every word.'

'What news, then?' his son replied. 'I saw the men, gathering swords and bows. Is it the border?'

'Not today. Those damned Scots are quiet, though I don't doubt the Douglas is forever sniffing round my lands. They'll come in winter when they starve, to try and steal my cows. And we'll send them running when they do.'

His son hid his impatience, knowing well that his father could rant about the 'cunning Douglas' for an hour if he was given the chance.

'The men though, father. They have covered the colours. Who threatens us who must be taken by hedge knights?'

His father stood close to him, reaching out and hooking a bony hand over the lip of the leather breastplate to draw him in.

'Your mother's Nevilles, boy, always and *forever* the Nevilles. Wherever I turn in my distress, there they are, in my path!' Earl Percy raised his other hand as he spoke,

holding it up with the fingers joined like a beak. He jabbed the air with it, close by his son's face. 'Standing in such numbers they can never be counted. Married into every noble line! Into every house! I have the damned Scots clawing away at my flank, raiding England, burning villages in my own land. If I did not stand against them, if I let but one season pass without killing the young men they send to test me, they would come south like a dam bursting. Where would England be then, without Percy arms to serve her? But the Nevilles care nothing for all that. No, they throw their weight and wealth to York, that *pup*. *He* rises, held aloft by Neville hands, while titles and estates of ours are stolen away.'

'Warden of the West March,' his son muttered wearily. He had heard his father's complaints many times before.

Earl Percy's glare intensified.

'One of many. A title that should have been your brother's, with fifteen hundred pounds a year, until that *Neville*, Salisbury, was given it. I have swallowed that, boy. I have swallowed him being made chancellor while my king dreams and sleeps and France was lost. I have swallowed so much from them that I find I am stuffed full.'

The old man had drawn his son so close their faces almost touched. He kissed Thomas briefly on the cheek, letting him go. From long habit, he checked the room around them once more, though they were alone.

'You have good Percy blood in you, Thomas. It will drive your mother's out in time, as I will drive out the Nevilles upon the land. They have been given to me, Thomas, do you understand? By the grace of God, I have been handed a chance to take back all they have stolen. If

I were twenty years younger, I would take Windstrike and ride them down myself, but . . . those days are behind.' The old man's eyes were almost feverish as he stared up at his son. 'You must be my right arm in this, Thomas. You must be my sword and flail.'

'You honour me,' Thomas murmured, his voice breaking. As a mere second son, he had grown to his prime with little of the old man's affection. His elder brother, Henry, was away with a thousand men across the border of Scotland, there to raid and burn and weaken the savage clans. Thomas thought of him and knew Henry's absence was the true reason his father had taken him aside. There was no one else to send. Though the knowledge made him bitter, he could not resist the chance to show his worth to the one man he allowed to judge him.

'Henry has the best of our fighting cocks,' his father said, echoing his thoughts. 'And I must keep some strong hands at Alnwick, in case the cunning Douglas slips your brother and comes south to rape and steal. That little man knows no greater pleasure than in taking what is mine. I swear he –'

'Father, I will not fail,' Thomas said. 'How many will you send with me?'

His father paused in irritation at being interrupted, his eyes sharp with rebuke. At last, he nodded, letting it go.

'Seven hundred, or thereabouts. Two hundred men-at-arms, though the rest are brickmakers and smiths and common men with bows. You *will* have Trunning and if you have wit, you will let him advise you – and listen well to him. He knows the land around York and he knows the men. Perhaps if you had not spent so much of your

youth on drink and whores, I would not doubt you. Whisht! Don't take it hard, boy. There must be a son of mine in this, to give the men heart. But they are *my* men, not yours. Follow Trunning. He will not lead you wrong.'

Thomas flushed, his own anger rising. The thought of the two old men planning out some scheme together brought a tension to his frame that his father noted.

'You understand?' Earl Percy snapped. 'Heed Trunning. That is my order to you.'

'I understand,' Thomas said, striving hard to conceal his disappointment. For one moment, he'd thought his father might trust him in command, rather than raising his brother, or some other man, over him. He felt the loss of something he'd never had.

'Will you tell me then where I must ride for you, or should I ask Trunning for that as well?' Thomas said.

His voice was strained, and his father's mouth quirked in response, amused and scornful.

'I said not to take it hard, boy. You've a good right arm and you are my son, but you've not led, not beyond a few skirmishes. The men do not respect you, as they do Trunning. How could they? He's fought for twenty years, in France and England both. He'll see you safe.'

The earl waited for some sign that his son had accepted the point, but Thomas glowered, wounded and angry. Earl Percy shook his head, going on.

'There is a Neville marriage tomorrow, Thomas, down at Tattershall. Your mother's clan has reached out to bring yet another into their grasp. That preening cockerel, Salisbury, will be there, to see his son wed. They will be at peace, content to take a new bride back to their holding

at the manor of Sheriff Hutton. My man told me all, risking his bones to reach me in time. I paid him well for it, mind. Now listen. They will be on horses and on foot, a merry wedding party traipsing back to feast on a fine summer day. And you will be there, Thomas. You will ride them down, leaving no one alive. That is my order to you. Do you understand it?'

Thomas swallowed hard as his father watched him. Earl Salisbury was his mother's brother, the man's sons his own cousins. Thomas had been thinking he would ride out after some weaker branch of the Neville tree, not the root itself and the head of the clan. If he did as he was told, he would make more blood-enemies in a day than in his entire life to that point. Even so, he nodded, unable to trust his voice. His father's mouth twisted sourly, seeing once again his son's weakness and indecision.

'Salisbury's boy is marrying Maud Cromwell. You know her uncle holds Percy manors, refusing my claim to them. It seems he thinks he can give *my* estates in dowry to the Nevilles, that they are now so strong I will be forced to drop my suits and cases against him. I am sending you to show them justice. To show them the authority Cromwell flouts as he seeks a greater shadow to hide beneath! Listen to me now. Take my seven hundred and kill them all, Thomas. Be sure Cromwell's niece is among the dead, that I may invoke her name when next I meet her weeping uncle in the king's court. Do you understand?'

'Of course I understand!' Thomas said, his voice hardening. He felt his hands tremble as he glared at his father, but he would not suffer the old man's scorn by refusing. He set his jaw, the decision made.

A knock sounded on the door at Thomas's back, making both men start like guilty conspirators. Thomas stood away to let it swing open, blanching at the sight of his mother standing there.

His father drew himself up, his chest puffing out.

'Go now, Thomas. Bring honour to your family and your name.'

'*Stay*, Thomas,' his mother said quickly, her expression cold.

Thomas hesitated, then dipped his head, slipping past her and striding away. Alone, Countess Eleanor Percy turned sharply to her husband.

'I see your guards and soldiers arming themselves, covering Percy colours. Now my son rushes from me like a whipped cur. Will you have me ask, then? What foul plan have you been whispering into his ears this time, Henry? What have you done?'

Earl Percy took a deep breath, his triumph showing clearly.

'Were you not listening at the door like a maid, then? I am surprised,' he said. 'What I have *done* is no business of yours.' As he spoke, he moved to go past her into the corridor outside. Eleanor stepped into his path to stop him, raising her hand against his chest. In response, the earl gripped it cruelly, crushing her fingers so that she cried out. He twisted further, controlling her with a hand on her elbow.

'Please, Henry. My arm . . .' she said, gasping.

He twisted harder at that, making her shriek. In the corridor, he caught a glimpse of a servant hurrying closer and kicked savagely at the door so that it slammed shut.

As his wife whimpered, the old man bent her forward, almost doubled over, with his grip tight on her hand and arm.

'I have done no more than your Nevilles would do to me, if I were ever at their mercy,' he said into her ear. 'Did you think I would allow your brother to rise above the Percy name? Chancellor to the Duke of York now, he threatens everything I am, everything I must protect. Do you understand? I took you on to give me sons, a fertile Neville bride. Well, you have done that. Now do not dare ask me the business of my house.'

'You are *hurting* me,' she said, her face crumpling in anger and pain. 'You see enemies where there are none. And if you seek my brother, he will see you dead, Henry. Richard will kill you.'

With a grunt of outrage, her husband heaved her across the room, sending her sprawling across the bed. He was on her before she could rise to her feet, tearing her dress and bawling at her in red-faced rage as he wrenched at the cloth and bared her skin. She sobbed and struggled, but he was infernally strong in his anger, ignoring her nails as she left red lines on his face and arms. He held her down with one hand, exposing the long pale line of her back as he drew his belt from his trousers and doubled it over into a short whip.

'You will not speak to *me* in such a *way*, in my own *house*.' He landed blow after blow with the snapping sounds as loud as her desperate cries. No one came, though he went on and on until she was still, no longer struggling. Long red welts seeped blood to stain the fine cloth as he gasped and panted, fat beads of sweat

dropping from his nose and brow on to her skin. With grim satisfaction, the earl replaced his belt and left his wife to sob into the coverlet.

Servants opened the door to the marshalling yard beyond as Thomas Percy, Baron Egremont, walked out. The noise of hundreds of men crashed over him under the blue sky, making his heart beat faster. With an irritated glance, he saw members of his own staff were already there, suborned by his father and waiting patiently for him. They carried armour and his weapons, while other men worked on Balion, the great black charger he had bought for a ruinous price the previous year. It seemed his father had been in no doubt as to the outcome of their conversation. Thomas frowned as he approached the group within the milling mass of men, taking in the sheer complexity of the scene. Far above them all, he could hear his mother screaming like a butchered sow, no doubt as the old man laid into her yet again. Thomas felt only irritation that she should intrude so on his thoughts. He was forced to look down rather than suffer the unwanted intimacy of other men's eyes. With each new wail, they either grinned or winced, while his anger at her only grew. The rise of the Neville family *ate* at his father, ruining the old man with suspicions and rages when the earl should have been enjoying quiet years and turning over the running of estates to his sons. As the sounds died away at last, Thomas looked up to the window of his father's private rooms. It was typical of the old man to set his plans in motion for days or weeks without even bothering to tell his own son what he intended.

With quick, neat motions, Thomas removed his leather breastplate and cloak, stripping down in the yard to hose and undertunic, already showing patches of dark sweat. There was no modesty there and scores of young men joked and shouted to one another as they hopped with an armoured boot, or called for some piece of their equipment that had found its way into someone else's spot. Thomas seated himself on a high stool, sitting patiently while his servants worked to fasten the padded gambeson jerkin and strap him into each plate of his personal armour. It fitted him well, and if the scars and marks were from the training yard rather than a battle, it was still a good set, well worn. As he raised his arms for the breastplate to be strapped on, he glared at the marks of a scourer, the metal dulled by some kitchen girl working it like a pot. The blue and yellow crest had been obliterated and he craned his neck to see his sword where it lay ready to be handed to him. Thomas swore softly then, seeing the fine enamel badge had been chiselled from the guard. It was on his father's orders, of course, but he had carried that sword since his twelfth birthday and it hurt to see it damaged.

Piece by piece, his armour was put on, until he stood, feeling the wonderful sense of strength and invulnerability it brought. Lord Egremont reached for the helmet his steward held out reverently to him. As he rammed it on to his head, Thomas heard the voice of his father's swordmaster echoing across the marshalling yard.

'When the gate opens, we are *gone*,' Trunning shouted to the gathered men. 'Be ready, for there'll be no riding back like lady's maids after a dropped glove. No personal

servants beyond those with mounts who can hold a sword or a bow and keep up. Dried beef and raw oats, a little ale and wine, no more! Provisions for six days, but ride light, or be left behind.'

Trunning paused, his gaze sweeping across the knights and men as he readied himself to give another half-dozen instructions. He caught sight of the Percy son and moved on the instant to come to his side. It gave Thomas some small satisfaction to look down on the shorter man.

'What is it, Trunning?' he said, deliberately keeping his voice cold. Trunning didn't reply at first, just stood, looking him over and chewing the white moustache that drooped over his lips. His father's swordmaster had trained both Percy sons in weapons and tactics, beginning so early in their lives that Thomas could not remember a time he had not been there, shouting in anger at some poor stroke, or demanding to know who had taught him to hold a shield 'like a Scots maid'. With no effort of memory, Thomas could recall five bones broken by the red-faced little man over the years: two in his right hand, two cracked forearms and a small bone in his foot where Trunning had once stamped down in a tussle. Each one had meant weeks of pain in splints and withering scorn for every groan he made while they were bound. It was not that Thomas hated or even feared his father's man. He knew Trunning was intensely loyal to the house of Percy and Northumberland, like a particularly savage old hound. Yet for all the differences in their station, Thomas, Lord Egremont, could not imagine the man ever accepting him as an equal, never mind his superior. The very fact that his father had placed Trunning in

command of the raid was proof of that. The pair of old bastards were cut from the same rough cloth, with not a drop of kindness or mercy in either of them. It was no wonder they got on so well.

'Your father has talked to you, then? Told you the way of it?' Trunning said at last. 'Has he said to mark my orders in all things, to bring you safe home with a couple of new scratches on that fine armour of yours?'

Thomas repressed a shudder at the man's voice. Perhaps the result of so many years bawling across fields and streets at those he trained, Trunning was always hoarse, his spoken words mingling with deep, wheezing breaths.

'He has told me you will command, Trunning, yes. To a point.'

Trunning blinked lazily, weighing him up.

'And what point would that be, my noble lord Egremont?'

To his dismay, Thomas felt his heart hammer in his chest and his own breathing grow tight. He hoped the swordmaster could not sense the strain in him, though it was near certain after knowing him for so long. Nonetheless, he spoke firmly, determined not to let his father's man rule him.

'The point where you and I disagree, Trunning. The honour of the house is mine to guard and protect. You may give orders to march and to attack and so forth, but I will consider the policy, the aims of what we are about.'

Trunning stared at him, tilting his head and rubbing at a spot above his right eye.

'If I tell your father you are chafing, he'll make you come along as a pot-boy, if at all,' he said, smiling

unpleasantly. He was surprised when the young man turned to face him fully, leaning down.

'If you carry tales to the old man, I *will* stay. See how far you get from the gates without a son of the Percy family at the head. And then, Trunning, you'll have made an enemy of Egremont. Now I've told you my terms. You do as you please.'

Thomas deliberately turned back to his servants then, beckoning for them to adjust and add a drop of oil to his visor. He felt Trunning's gaze and his heart continued to race, but he was certain of himself, in that one thing. He did not look round when the swordmaster stalked off, not even to see if Trunning would march into the castle and take his complaints to his father. Lord Egremont lowered his visor to conceal his expression. His father and Trunning were both old men and, for all their will and spite, old men fell away in the end. Thomas would take the archers and the swordsmen against his uncle's wedding party, either with Trunning or without him, it mattered not at all. He looked again at the small army his father had called to Percy service. Hundreds were no more than town men, summoned by their feudal lord. Yet whether they worked as smith, butcher or tanner, each of them had trained with axe or bow from their earliest years, developing skills that would make them useful to a man like Earl Percy of Alnwick. Thomas smiled to himself, raising his visor once again.

'Form on the gate!' he roared at them. From the corner of his eye, he saw Trunning's trim shape jerk round, but Thomas ignored him. Old men fell away, he told himself again, with satisfaction. Young men came to rule.