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The Autumn Throne

Written by Elizabeth Chadwick

Published by Sphere

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SPHERE

First published in Great Britain in 2016 by Sphere

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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

ISBN 978-1-84744-543-8

Typeset in Baskerville MT by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Falkirk, Stirlingshire
Printed and bound in TBC

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Sphere
An imprint of
Little, Brown Book Group
Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
London, EC4Y 0DZ

An Hachette UK Company
www.hachette.co.uk

www.littlebrown.co.uk

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Palace of Sarum, Wiltshire, April 1176



Alienor, Duchess of Aquitaine and Normandy, Countess of Anjou, Queen to King Henry the second of England, gazed around the bare, cold chamber that had been her prison for almost two years. Pale spring sunlight splashed through the window arches, and pooled in tepid gold on the floor boards. The hearth had been swept clean of ashes, and her few portable furnishings were loaded on the baggage cart waiting in the courtyard.

A chill breeze brushed her face. All winter the wind had swept across the Downs, howling around the white-washed palace buildings like a hungry wolf. Her joints had grown stiff, and her thoughts had become as turbid as the mud at the bottom of a frozen pond. It was difficult to stir, to awaken and face the world. A cramped limb returning to life always caused an agonising tingle. Holding out her hands she noticed the soft fawn age-mottles, but they bothered her less than the way they shook.

Her wedding ring glinted. Despite all she had suffered at Henry's behest she still wore it, for while it adorned her finger, she was his queen and duchess. Even incarcerated on this wind-scoured hill top, her titles retained their potency. Henry in his usual ruthless way had isolated her here. The world moved and she had been banished from moving with it, her sin that of defying his will in rebellion and interfering with his policies. He accused her of betraying him, but the greatest betrayals had always been his.

What news she received was filtered through her gaolers, who were disposed to tell her little, and then only details that

brought her low while exalting her husband. Now, however, he had summoned her to attend his Easter court at Winchester, and she was suspicious of the reason. Forgiveness in the season of Christ's rising? She doubted it. Further punishment? He must want something from her, even if only to parade her before his nobles and prove he had not had her murdered. He could ill afford to have another such accusation on his hands – not after his Archbishop of Canterbury had been hacked to death before the altar of his own cathedral by four knights of the royal household.

Hearing footsteps in the chamber beyond, she faced the door, concealing her anxiety behind regal hauteur. Much as she desired to leave this place, the notion of stepping into the world made her anxious because she did not know what she would find, or how long this reprieve from isolation would last.

She was expecting her gaoler Robert Maudit, and was astonished when the door opened and her eldest son stood on the threshold, dazzled in spring sunlight from the squint window on the stairs. His fair-brown hair was wind-tousled, and a magnificent white gyrfalcon rode on his gloved right wrist.

'Look Mama,' he greeted her with a broad smile. 'Is she not a beauty?'

Alienor's heart clenched and she felt as if all the breath had been snatched from her body. 'Harry,' she gasped as her knees started to buckle.

Immediately he was at her side, his grip firm beneath her arm as he escorted her to the window seat. 'I thought they would have told you.' His gaze was full of tender concern. 'Shall I summon your women?'

'No . . .' She shook her head and retrieved her stolen breath. 'They tell me nothing.' Her voice fractured. 'I am blind and this is too much.' She covered her eyes with a trembling hand.

He set his arm around her shoulders and she pressed into him, inhaling the scent of his healthy male body; feeling his

strength and vitality – qualities sapped from her own store by years of strife and then imprisonment.

The gyrfalcon bated her wings, jingling the silver bells on her jesses and uttering a series of harsh, piercing cries. 'Gently.' Her son's soft tone might have been either for her or the bird. 'Go gently.'

By the time Alienor had recovered sufficiently to look up, the falcon had settled down too and was diligently preening her flight feathers.

'My father sent me to bring you to Winchester.'

She gazed at the gyrfalcon, trapped on his glove. She could not fly until he released her, no matter the power in her wings. 'What does he want of me – other than to prove to the court that I am not dead?'

Harry's smile diminished. 'He says he wishes to speak with you – and make peace.'

'Is that so?' Bleak laughter lodged in Alienor's throat. 'And what will that entail?'

He avoided her gaze. 'He did not tell me.'

She looked round the empty room. What would she give to be free? More importantly, what would she not give? 'No, I do not suppose he would.' She struggled to contain her emotion as she thought of what might have been had Harry succeeded in overthrowing his father three years ago. 'I have so many regrets, none of them about reconciliation. Most of all I am sorry about being caught. I should have made better plans.'

'Mama . . .'

'I have had little to do here but think on what happened and my cup is full of remorse that I hesitated for too long and therefore lost the impetus.' She surged to her feet causing the gyrfalcon to dance on Harry's wrist. 'If your father has sent you to bring me to Winchester, it is because you are reconciled and we must go on from this. Truly, I am overjoyed to see you.' A grown man in his twenty-first year, the age at which his father had become England's king. 'Who else is at Winchester?'

'Everyone.' Harry stroked the bird until she resettled. 'Richard, Geoffrey, John, Joanna.' His smile was flippant and did not reach his eyes. 'Wives, bastards, kith and kin, all living cheek by jowl; you know how it is. No fights as yet, but plenty of opportunity.'

It would be like going from starvation to glut in a single step without time for adjustment. Her body was strung with tension as she faced leaving this chamber that was both her cage and her sanctuary. 'Well then' – her light tone was a shield – 'let us go and make the most of opportunity.'

Life's luxuries at Sarum were few and it required but a single cart to bear her belongings the twenty miles to Winchester. Harry had arrived to fetch her with a full complement of knights – mostly of his father's household, but with a few of his own retinue among them including his tutor in arms William Marshal, who awaited her at the bridle of a docile dappled-grey palfrey.

'My liege lady.' The instant he saw her, he knelt and bowed his head.

The sight of him, steadfast and strong, and his gesture of homage made Alienor tearful. 'William!' She touched his shoulder, signalling him to rise, and as he did so his dark eyes met hers in acknowledgement. Eight years ago as a young hearth knight he had saved her from ambush but had been captured himself while fighting off her attackers. She had purchased his liberty and entrusted him with protecting her eldest son while training him to knighthood. They were allies through thick and thin.

'You look well, madam.'

She gave him a reproving look. 'I find you guilty of flattery, messire. I know what I must look like after two years walled up in this place.'

'Never less than a queen,' he replied with gallantry, and she had to blink hard to clear her vision as he assisted her to mount the grey. The saddle faced sideways, with a padded

back support and footrest, a genteel style she had always eschewed in favour of riding astride. Chair seats slowed the pace and made her feel vulnerable and less in control. Typical of Henry that he would send one of these, thus putting her in her place before all.

'Madam, at court they say you are in fragile health and have been resting at Sarum,' William said with tactful neutrality.

She gathered the reins, her mouth twisting with contempt. 'I suppose such an excuse serves as a bandage of concealment.'

He said nothing, but his look was expressive before he turned to his horse.

Harry joined her, his chestnut palfrey dancing and arching its neck. 'Papa thought it best that you travelled like this because it is a long time since you have ridden.'

'And because it suits his purpose, Harry. I have not lost my wits or my ability to ride, only my freedom.'

Harry had the grace to look chagrined but swiftly brightened and fixed her with his disarming smile. 'Even so the sun is shining, and it is a fine day for riding – whether aside or astride.'

Alienor bit back the retort that it would be finer still to have a choice. Harry had the ability to live on the surface which she did not – to be a butterfly and enjoy a fine moment for as long as it lasted.

With a few adroit movements he transferred his hawking gauntlet and the white gyrfalcon to her wrist. 'Take her, Mama.'

She felt the balanced weight of the bird, the grip of the sword-grey talons on the padded glove, and gazed into its fierce ink-drop eyes.

He gave an approving nod. 'Now you are a great queen and duchess going about her business.'

Tears pricked her eyes once more. Until her incarceration at Sarum she had always kept a white gyrfalcon in her chamber and had taken fierce joy in flying her to hunt. The females were larger and stronger than the males. She had given Henry one at their marriage and every day she wished that gift undone.

'What is her name?' she asked.

'Alienor,' Harry said.

She bit her lip and strove not to weep. 'I will think of her soaring high and free,' she said when eventually she could speak.

As the cavalcade rode out from Sarum, the wind herded fresh white clouds across a sky of pale April-blue. Skylarks sang high above the Downs, the wind hissed through the new grass, and the pain in Alienor's heart was exquisite.

By the time they reached Winchester, at nightfall, Alienor was reeling with exhaustion and pain. Henry's doubts concerning her riding abilities had been borne out with a vengeance. Confined at Sarum for two years, deprived of exercise and company, she was both physically and mentally overwhelmed.

The gyrfalcon had been returned to her carrying cage several miles back and the symbolism of being shut away had not escaped Alienor. More worrisome to her was the fact that she almost envied the bird's enclosed security.

Summoning her last reserves, she projected a façade of regal detachment as they rode under archways and through sentried gateways, eventually drawing rein in a dark courtyard. Servants hastened out with lanterns that swayed in the gloom creating dances of ragged gold light. William Marshal was swiftly at her side, helping her to dismount and steadying her while she found her feet. Briefly she clung to his solid strength before pushing herself upright. To onlookers it must appear that she was indeed in fragile health and her arrival at night would only serve to compound that impression. No fanfares, no colourful parade through the street to celebrate the entry of a great and vibrant queen, but instead something subdued and nocturnal to greet a weary shadow-woman.

She turned to Harry who had been dismissing his entourage with good-humoured jests and shoulder slaps. 'It is late.' Her voice wobbled. 'I . . . I would retire immediately.'

'Of course, Mama, I should have realised.' Immediately he was attentive, issuing swift commands, and very soon a lantern

bearer was escorting her to the apartments she had always kept as Queen when staying at Winchester.

She swallowed tears as she was greeted by the soft light from hanging lamps of thick green glass, walls clad in colourful hangings and a bed made up with a coverlet of silk and fur. Two books bound in leather and panelled in ivory lay on a bench with a hinged seat, and a chess set stood on a table beside a rock crystal flagon and cups. A delicate smell of incense threaded the air and braziers filled with hot coals gave off welcome heat. All the luxuries she had taken for granted before her imprisonment. After two years of privation, this unsubtle statement by Henry about what he could give and what he could take away juxtaposed feelings within her of rage and antipathy that were almost paralysing.

As she eased down on the bed, servants arrived with bread, cheese and wine. Others brought her baggage into the room, supervised by her chamber lady, Amiria. She was the widowed sister of a Shropshire baron. In her mid-thirties, she was efficient and quick about her duties, but quiet and religious, preferring to avoid the stratagems and politics of the world – precisely the kind of attendant Henry deemed suitable. No servant of Alienor's was to have the remotest capacity for subterfuge unless they were reporting to him.

Amiria knelt at Alienor's feet to remove the cowhide ankle boots her mistress had worn for riding and replace them with a pair of soft sheepskin slippers.

Harry sauntered into the room on the heels of the baggage and glanced round with a proprietorial air. 'Does this suit you, Mama? Is there anything more you need tonight?'

She shook her head wearily. 'Only that which I cannot have.'

'I would give it if I could, you know I would.'

She drew in her feet as Amiria completed her task. 'Yes, we are each constrained in our different ways.'

He poured wine into one of the cups and brought it to her. 'It's all right,' he said when she hesitated. 'It's from my household, not Papa's.'

Alienor took a cautious sip. The usual state of the wine at court was halfway to vinegar. However, this was smooth and rich, tasting of her Poitevan homeland and bittersweet because of it.

'Shall I summon the others?'

'Not tonight,' she said with a jolt of trepidation. 'Let me sleep first.' She was desperate to embrace her other offspring, but they could not see her like this, tired, tearful and overwhelmed – especially Richard. Henry she could not bring herself to think about because her hatred for him curdled her stomach. 'You should go too.'

His look of relief worried her, for it was one she had seen children bestow on ageing relatives to whom they owed a duty. 'I will make sure you are not disturbed, Mama.'

'I am sure the guards outside my door will do the same.'

When he had gone she lay down and bade Amiria draw the bed curtains. Curling in upon herself, she sought the oblivion of sleep, too exhausted to bother disrobing.

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Winchester Castle, April 1176



The morning brought an initial moment of disorientation as Alienor woke and strove to remember where she was. She was stiff and sore, and the inside of her mouth tasted parched and stale. She gazed at the canopy above her head, painted with silver stars, while she drew herself together and sought the wherewithal to rise and face the world. Outside the curtains she could hear Amiria whispering to another maid and suspected that the hour was late. But why bother to rise at all? Why not just lie here and let time slide away?

Another woman addressed the maids, the voice gently enquiring, but firm with authority. An instant later the bed curtains rattled aside and Alienor's sister by marriage, Isabel de Warenne, stood in the rectangle of light, a goblet in her hand.

'I've sent away last night's wine and brought you fresh spring water,' Isabel announced. 'There is new bread and honey and I have taken the liberty of sending for a bath.'

Bemused, Alienor took the goblet and drank. The water was clear, cold and refreshing and the sight of Isabel comforted her sore heart because here was a true and stalwart friend.

'Harry told me last night you had arrived but insisted you were not to be disturbed, otherwise I would have come to you straight away.'

Alienor set her drink aside and opened her arms. Isabel fell into them and then burst into tears, which made Alienor cry too.

'You foolish woman,' she sniffed, wiping her eyes as she pulled away, 'look what you have made me do.'

'I cannot help it.' Isabel dabbed her face daintily on her sleeve lining.

'Your heart is too tender,' Alienor scolded. 'That is why I could not have borne to see you last night. I am not sure I can bear it even now.' She picked up the goblet again. 'Ah Isabel, it is so hard, to leave the grey and return to colour. You cannot begin to know what he has done to me.'

Several maids arrived bearing a tub and pails of steamy water.

'Perhaps not, but I want to help you.'

Alienor concealed a grimace. Isabel had a penchant for doing good deeds to better the lives of the afflicted. She suspected she was one of them in her eyes. 'Do not dare pity me,' she warned.

Isabel's hazel-brown eyes widened with hurt. 'I would never do that! You malign me.' She produced a vial of rose attar and, going to the steaming tub, tipped some precious drops

into the steaming water, causing a wonderful fragrance to billow into the room.

'You cannot help yourself.' Alienor softened the comment with a smile, although Isabel continued to look reproachful.

Once disrobed by Amiria, Alienor stepped into the tub and sank down into the blood-hot rose-scented water, uttering a soft gasp halfway between pain and pleasure.

Isabel refreshed Alienor's cup. 'John and Joanna were so excited to know you were coming,' she said.

Alienor's throat tightened. When Henry had shut her away from the world for rebelling against him, he had shut her away from her children too. Isabel, who was wed to Henry's half-brother Hamelin, had temporarily taken them into her household to raise with her own children, which had been one small grace amid the devastation. 'How are they faring?'

'Well indeed – as you will see,' Isabel said fondly. 'Joanna is a fine young lady and John and my William have become close friends as well as cousins.'

'It has been a great comfort to me knowing they are safe in your hands.'

Isabel waved away the acknowledgement but looked pleased. 'It has been my privilege. They are both so clever. I have never seen anyone so adept at working an exchequer board as John, and Joanna reads aloud with never a stumble.'

Alienor glowed with pride at Isabel's acclaim, but felt a guilty frisson of resentment. She should be the one praising such intelligence instead of hearing about it from the lips of another woman, even if Isabel was her sister by marriage and a good friend. Nevertheless, a new mood was clearing her path, like sun burning through fog. She had been shaken back to life and there was no turning back.

'Do you know why Henry has brought me to Winchester?' she asked as Amiria helped her to don a clean chemise, and a gown of scarlet wool. 'Harry says he wants to make peace, but I fear his motives will not be to my advantage.'

Isabel shook her head. 'Hamelin has said nothing.'

Alienor sent her a sharp look. 'He does not know, or he will not tell you?'

Isabel dropped her gaze. 'I do not know that either.'

And she would not venture to ask: Alienor knew Isabel's propensity for refusing to see life's harsher realities in their true light.

'I hope you can make peace,' Isabel said anxiously. 'It is no life for you at Sarum.'

Alienor curled her lip. 'I expect Henry will use life at Sarum as one of his levers. He imprisons me there for nigh on two years, denies me all contact with the world and my children and takes from me all things of grace and luxury. Now he brings me to Winchester and showers me with everything that I lack. But I tell you this: I will never yield him Aquitaine, if that is his price. I would rather return to Sarum. Indeed I would rather be dead.'

'Alienor . . .' Isabel extended an imploring hand.

'Do not look at me like that!' Alienor snapped, and then drew a long breath up through her body, filling herself with life and banking down her irritation. 'I bless you for waking me up,' she said in a gentler voice, and kissed Isabel's cheek. 'I may not be ready to speak to Henry, but I am desperate to see my children.'

Alienor had just finished breaking her fast on bread and honey when John and Joanna arrived with their nurses and Isabel's four offspring, their cousins. Alienor's heart turned over, for she barely recognised the son and daughter whom she had bidden farewell at Sarum's gates two years ago. Aged nine and ten they were still children, but standing on the final stepping stone before the perilous leap into adulthood.

John was first to come forward, smoothly bending one knee. 'My lady mother,' he said. Joanna curtseyed and murmured the same. Her hair was plaited in a gleaming braid, the light brown shot with distinct glints of her father's auburn.

The constraints binding the situation were like taut ropes at full strain. In a sudden flurry, Alienor slashed through the formality and gathered her youngest children to her heart. 'How you have grown!' She fought tears. 'Ah it has been too long but I have thought about you every day and prayed to see you again!'

'We prayed too, Mama,' John said, his expression innocent and open.

'Yes, they did.' Isabel confirmed. 'I never had to remind them.'

Wiping her eyes on her cuff, Alienor took John and Joanna to sit in the embrasure with her, while she recovered. Eventually she was able to greet Isabel's son and three daughters with composure and was astonished at how they too were no longer tender little infants but thriving youngsters on the swift path to maturity. Isabel's son William was the same age as John and the pair had formed the sort of young male bond that involved continually testing the boundaries and each other in cub-play while being united against the world. Isabel's eldest daughter, Belle, was a similar age to Joanna and possessed the alabaster skin and striking green-blue eyes of her grandsire Geoffrey, Count of Anjou, who had been famed for his beauty. 'I can tell this one is going to strew the road with broken hearts.' Alienor smiled. 'Have you betrothed her yet?'

Belle preened at the compliment, but kept her lids modestly lowered.

'No, we want her to be older, and to have a say in her choice.'

Alienor raised her brows. 'What if she sets her heart on a kitchen boy or a minstrel with pretty words in his mouth and nothing in his purse?'

Isabel waved her hand. 'Obviously there are limits, but within them she shall have a choice – as shall all my girls.'

'What does Hamelin say?'

'He agrees with me. There is plenty of time, and no one has yet made an offer we are unable to refuse.'

Alienor said nothing. For a conventional woman, Isabel could be stubborn and wayward in matters of the heart and home. Some might call her brave and truthful, others indulgent and foolish. She could see why Hamelin would agree with her. Henry's half-brother ruled his domestic household with benign but absolute authority and would be reluctant to change that state of affairs by giving his daughters in marriage at a young age and exposing them to the influences of other men. Alienor's own daughters had made matches before puberty in order to secure binding political alliances, but there were fewer onuses on Isabel and Hamelin.

She heard the sound of approaching male voices raised in jovial banter and an instant later her older sons surged into the chamber with their father, bringing with them the fresh scent of outdoors and stirring the atmosphere with vibrant energy. All four were laughing uproariously because Henry's favourite terrier had absconded with the Bishop of Ely's jewelled fur hat and had proceeded to murder it round the back of the stables.

Alienor's gaze went straight to Richard, the heir to her duchy. Her heart was open for all of her sons but Richard was its light. Count of Poitou, future Duke of Aquitaine. His red-gold hair gleamed with vitality, his eyes were the rich summer blue of cornflowers, and he was the tallest among them.

Abandoning the joke, he came to kneel at her feet in formal greeting and receive the kiss of peace. Alienor used the ritual to maintain her dignity, although her emotions were spiralling like a whirlwind. Their eyes met, filled with a multitude of things they dared not say in front of Henry and the others.

Richard rose and yielded his place to his brother Geoffrey, a year younger, brown-haired and slighter of build. He was being groomed to rule Brittany and was betrothed to Constance, its heiress duchess. Still waters in Geoffrey ran deep and the open expression on his face was not necessarily indicative of the complex thoughts flowing beneath. 'My lady mother.'

Taking her hand, he pressed it to his brow. His manner was pleasant but his eyes were guarded and inscrutable.

Harry kissed her warmly and squeezed her hand in reassurance. 'Are you feeling better now, Mama?'

'I have donned my armour,' she answered with bleak humour. Was she feeling better? Different perhaps; ready to do battle.

'These are for you.' He poured half a dozen gaudy jewels into her palm, including a large amethyst drilled with two holes, from one of which dangled a thread with scraps of squirrel fur attached. 'Spoils from the kill; don't tell the Bishop of Ely.' His eyes gleamed with laughter.

Alienor clasped the stones in her fist for a moment, knowing their value and how they might be put to good use. Henry would not confiscate them when there were so many witnesses and it was all part of the jest. Having locked the gems in her jewel casket, she turned, her body taut with resistance, to face her husband who had deliberately let his sons go first so that he could observe her interaction with them. She did not curtsey and he did not bow.

'Madam, I trust your sojourn in peace and solitude has been of benefit?' His eyes were as hard as chips of flint.

'Indeed, sire. I have had time to think on many matters and to see them more clearly than I did before.'

'I am pleased to hear it. As you see I have come to an understanding with our sons and there is no reason why we cannot all dwell in peace together.'

There were many reasons for the opposite but Alienor bit her tongue and said nothing.

He held out his arm. 'The court awaits us in the hall, if it please you.'

'Would it matter if it did not?'

'I think we both know the answer to that,' he said pleasantly, although his gaze remained cold.

She did not want to touch him, but she made herself place her hand on his sleeve and walk with him, knowing he had

no desire for this contact either, except as a means of exerting his power. She had perforce to play this game until she found out what he was up to, and then they would see.

3

Winchester Castle, Easter Court, April 1176



Alienor sat in a window embrasure with Isabel, embroidering the sleeve on Joanna's new gown. It was intricate work but her stitches were swift because her reprieve might end at any moment. At Sarum her sewing consisted of plain linen shirts and chemises for the poor and the sick – deemed part of her penance for encouraging her sons to rebel against their father – and it was a joy to work with silk and beauty again.

Yesterday had been one of family gathering and reunion, as bright on the surface as sunlit water concealing turbid undercurrents. Everyone had smiled, and at times the laughter had been genuine, but darker emotions lurked beneath the surface and no one had spoken of the matters that had caused the rifts. Instead there had been jesting and tales of the hunt. The demise of the Bishop of Ely's fur hat had been reprised several times, and the Bishop himself had taken the incident in good part, graciously conceding the gems to Alienor's custody. No mention was made of the strife that had turned son against father and resulted in Alienor's imprisoned isolation at Sarum, yet it was an episode of such enormity that there was no room in the chamber for anything else, and every breath and word was tainted with its presence.

This morning Henry had gone hunting with their sons, at pains to show her the hearty masculine rapport that existed between them. *See, they are mine. You tried to take them from me and you did not succeed.* That was the version he was vigorously