THE LAWLESS LAND

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THE LAWLESS LAND

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July, 1351

England

Gerard Fox's horse heard the approaching danger first. During his ride on the lonely forested road through Kent, Fox had been singing a selection of French drinking ballads to keep himself company. He was in the middle of a bawdy tune about a lecherous pirate and a clever tavern wench when Zephyr's ears pricked up. Fox went silent, and he heard the sound, too. It was the ominous rumble of pounding hooves sprinting toward them.

Fox's travels had trained him to be wary. Marauders roamed the highways preying on pilgrims and haggard families escaping from villages ravaged by the Pestilence, which had killed great swaths of people across Europe over the past four years. Most bandits were so poor that they couldn't afford horses and relied on rough knives for their robberies. During his encounters with them, Fox had discovered that the robbers usually left him alone when they saw a large man armed with a sword astride a warhorse, unless they thought they had the numbers to overpower him. In those few cases, they quickly learned that they should have listened to their instincts to leave him be.

He'd never encountered mounted bandits, but he couldn't be sure of anything these days. It sounded like a quartet of horses, enough to be trouble. Fox couldn't see them around the bend in the road, and he thought it sensible to be cautious.

He steered Zephyr into the woods, concealing himself behind a huge blackberry bush so that only his head peeked above the brambles. As a precaution, he strung his bow, a short recurved

design from the Holy Land created specifically for use by horsemen.

"*Tace*, Zephyr," he said, patting the horse's neck. *Quiet*. He always spoke in Latin to Zephyr, a rare mottled silver Arabian courser with a black mane and tail and a distinctive white swirl on his forehead. The animal went still.

The sprinting horses were almost in view. Now the sound of their galloping was joined by the clatter of rolling wheels, creaking wood, and rattling chains.

Fox lowered the hood of his tan chaperon. His long brown hair would blend in with the trees, though he didn't know if the rest of his face would. He hadn't seen his reflection in still water for weeks, so he didn't know what he currently looked like. His beard was cropped close with a sharp dagger and he scrubbed himself clean in streams as often as he could. Though sun-weathered, his face might still stand out, so he slouched to keep just his eyes over the shrubbery.

What could be causing such a din and who would be speeding so recklessly over rough terrain?

His imagination didn't come close to the reality.

Hurtling around the corner was a lavish carriage pulled by four white horses foaming at the mouth from the strain. He'd occasionally seen nobility parading in such coaches around the great cities of the continent pulled by a team of horses in single file. This carriage had an arched roof painted in red with white trim, and black silk curtains covered the window openings. The rear door was swinging wide, slamming back and forth with each bump in the road.

But it wasn't the carriage itself that astonished Fox as he watched it hurtle in his direction. It was the driver.

A woman.

An elegant lady lashed the reins from atop the saddle of the lead horse where the coachman would normally sit. She wore a bright blue silk surcoat that must have cost a fortune. The kirtle and fine linen chemise underneath were both torn at the shoulder, revealing unblemished alabaster skin. Her blonde curls

had escaped from their plaits and streamed wildly behind her in the wind. Her delicate face showed both determination and fear.

The coachman had fallen from his horse. He was dead, dragged along the ground by a foot caught in the stirrup. A crossbow bolt jutted from his chest. Another bolt was lodged in the coach.

The carriage wasn't out of control—that much was clear. The woman was actively driving the team, desperately trying to outrace someone following her. She whipped her head around to look behind.

Her pursuers had to be the same men who had killed the coachman. Not bandits. Bandits didn't use crossbows.

Fox heard the sound of additional hooves approaching. He guessed at least four more horses.

His curiosity had gotten the better of him. He craned his neck for a better view over the blackberry bush. A mistake. The woman saw his face.

They locked eyes for a moment. She wasn't afraid of him. Her look was pleading.

Help.

She didn't know who Fox was, but apparently she thought he couldn't be worse than whoever was after her.

The carriage flashed by and she disappeared from view. At the same time, her pursuers rounded the bend at full charge.

They weren't marauders, but men-at-arms, soldiers in service to a nobleman. Five, not four. Although they carried shields, none of them wore mail armor, and their tabards matched the colors painted on the coach. The coat of arms on their shoulder badges and shields bore the symbol of longswords arranged in the sign of the cross against a background of crimson and white. Two of them had crossbows at the ready and the others wielded broadswords. Their faces were contorted in vicious fury. It was clear that when they caught the woman, they would show no mercy.

She might have stolen the coach, but the sheer terror on her face implied that she had good reason to flee with it. The woman was no common thief, not the way she was dressed.

The soldiers were so intent on their quarry that they never even glanced in Fox's direction as they raced past.

Nobody else would ever know if Fox did nothing to save her. Five against one was not a fair fight.

Just let it go, he thought to himself.

But his instinct was urging him to go after her, that she didn't deserve the horrible fate that would befall her if she were captured. He knew his brother James would have quoted the Bible, as he often did from Proverbs.

Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in your power to act.

Fox sighed. He had the power to act.

The images of the woman's obvious terror and the soldiers' cruel savagery flashed in his mind. If he did nothing to help her, *he* would know, and *she* would know, and that was enough. At least he would have a death befitting a knight.

With his bow in hand, Fox kicked his legs.

"*Oppugna*, Zephyr!"

Attack.

Without hesitation, Zephyr reared up and launched himself into a gallop. He knew it was time to go into battle.