Shadows and Strongholds

Elizabeth Chadwick

Boy and Girl

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St Peter's Fair, Shrewsbury, August 1148

On the day that Brunin FitzWarin encountered the men who were to change and shape his life, he was ten years old and wandering the booths of St Peter's Fair unchaperoned.

Mark, his father's serjeant, who should have been keeping an eye on him, had allowed his attention to be diverted by a brimming pitcher and an alewife's buxom daughter at one of the refreshment stalls. Growing bored with the adult dalliance, Brunin had meandered off to explore the booths on his own. He was a lanky child with an olive complexion and eyes of so deep a brown that they were almost black, hence his nickname, his true ¬appellation being Fulke, the same as his father. His five brothers were fair like their parents. Brunin, it was said by the charitable, was a throwback to his grandsire, a Lorraine mercenary of doubtful origins. Those less ¬generous muttered that he was a changeling child, a cuckoo laid in the nest by the faery folk of the Welsh hills.

He passed a cookstall where soft oatcakes were being smartly turned on a griddle and sold to passers-by. A woman had bought several and was dividing them amongst her swarming offspring. She reprimanded one child with exasperation, but a moment later ruffled his hair. Catching Brunin's wistful gaze, she smiled, tore a side from a remaining oatcake and offered it to him as if coaxing a wild thing. Brunin shook his head and moved quickly away. It was not the oatcake that had caused his yearning look.

'Jugs and pitchers!' a trader shouted in his ear. 'Pottles and pots! Finest wares of Stamford and Nottingham!' The man waved aloft a green-glazed jug with the design of a grinning face carved in the spout. Red-cheeked and pugnacious, a thrifty housewife was haggling vigorously with his assistant over the price of a cooking jar.

For three days every summer traders came to Shrewsbury and arrayed their wares in the shadow of the great Benedictine abbey of SS Peter and Paul. Even the unrest of the civil war between the supporters of King Stephen and the Empress Matilda could not dampen people's enthusiasm for bargains and rarities. Brunin's father said that, if anything, the unrest made the fair even more popular because men could meet allies and discuss common ground whilst seen to be engaged in legitimate pursuits.

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Published by Time Warner Books

That's where his father was now, talking to old friends, and that was why Brunin had been put in Mark's charge. They were supposed to meet FitzWarin at the horse market when the abbey bell rang the hour of sext. Brunin was to have a new pony since he was rapidly outgrowing the small Welsh bay that had served him since he was six years old. Spider legs his grandmother had called him last week, as if his sudden growth spurt was a sin.

The language of trade assaulted his ears from all ¬quarters. The Latin and French of wealthier stall-¬holders were familiar to him. Here and there, a Welsh voice soared above a babbling undercurrent of English. Brunin spoke a smattering of the two latter tongues – but never in his grandmother's hearing unless he deliberately wanted to annoy her.

The cloth stalls were heaving with women who eyed and fingered, discussed, longed for and occasionally bought. Brunin's mother had a silk dress of the same shimmering red-gold as one of the bolts draped over a booth counter. He had seen it in her clothing coffer, but she rarely wore it. She had told him once with blank eyes that it was her wedding gown.

Brunin paused at a trader's cart to fondle a litter of brindle hound pups. The trader also had a pair of tiny dogs with long, silky fur and colourful ribbons tied around their necks. The sound of their yapping hurt Brunin's ears. He tried to imagine his father entertaining such lap rats in his household and grinned at the image. FitzWarin was strictly a hound man, the larger the better.

Ambling towards the horse market Brunin wondered if he could steer his father's eye in the direction of a pied or jet-black pony this time – something that would stand out from common chestnut and brown. Of course, unusual colours cost more and if the price was not reasonable, his father would refuse to buy.

To reach the horse fair, Brunin had to cut down the thoroughfare where the weapon smiths had set out their stalls. The sight of the shining sword blades, the axes, daggers, shields, hauberks, helms and sundry accoutrements of the warrior's craft seized both his sight and his ¬imagination. Here was a knife in a tooled leather sheath just like the one Mark wore at his hip, here a sword with a grip of red braid and an inscription scrolled in Latin down the raised fuller. Brunin's mouth watered. Sometimes he would draw his father's sword from its scabbard and pretend that he was the great warrior Roland, defending the pass at Roncesvalles against the Infidel. His grandmother had caught him once and thrashed him for ¬leaving sticky fingerprints on the polished iron. He had been more circumspect since – and, mindful of her words, he always cleaned the sword on his tunic before putting it away.

A nobleman and his entourage arrived at the booth where Brunin was eyeing up the weaponry, and began inspecting the swords. Brunin watched the lord heft the blade that the craftsman handed to him.

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'Good balance,' the lord nodded. 'Grip's a little short. I don't want to lose my finger ends in battle.' He swiped the sword through the air, testing the feel, following through with a deft backswing before handing the weapon round for an opinion.

'That can be changed if you like the blade, my lord,' said the trader. 'Or there's this one.' He presented another sword, this one scabbarded in tactile, rose-coloured leather.

Captivated, Brunin moved closer and was immediately pushed aside by a fair-haired squire attending the noble. 'Out of the way, brat,' he sneered. 'Get back to your nursemaid.'

Brunin flushed. The youth was wearing a tunic of blood-red wool and had a knife at his belt not much smaller than Mark's. One hand hovered close to the hilt as if he were thinking of drawing it. Eyeing the implied threat, Brunin began to feel queasy.

'He's lost his tongue,' grinned a younger, stocky youth in blue. 'Unless he's Welsh and doesn't understand us. He looks Welsh, doesn't he?'

Brunin lifted his chin. Every muscle was stiff with the effort of holding his ground. 'I'm not W-Welsh,' he said.

The lord ceased examining his second sword and glanced around. 'Ernalt, Gerald, leave the boy alone. Let him look if he desires.' His tone was tolerant. 'What's your name, boy?'

Brunin delved for his manners. 'Fulke, sir,' he said, using his formal birth name. 'Fulke F-FitzWarin . . .'

The humour faded from the man's eyes. 'Of Whittington?'

'Yes, sir.'

'And what might you be doing strolling the booths on your own?'

'Waiting for my father,' Brunin answered.

The noble raised his head and gazed around as if expecting to see Brunin's father among the crowd. 'Then perhaps you would do better not to wait in my vicinity,' he said. His voice had lost its warmth. 'If your sire is as careless with his lands as he is with his son, he may well end up losing both.' Turning his back on Brunin with a deliberate air of dismissal, he handed the sword to the craftsman and set about discussing terms.

Brunin was bewildered. He did not understand the sudden change, but knew enough to realise that his ¬presence was unwelcome and that it must have something to do with his father. He started to walk away, and received a hefty shove

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in the middle of his back. Stumbling, surprised, he turned to find himself facing the blond squire and his companion.

'Know what happens to a cub when it wanders too far from the den?' the blond one asked in a voice straining in the space between boy and man. He drew his knife.

Brunin swallowed and his queasiness increased.

'You think he's afraid?' The stocky boy gave Brunin another shove, a predatory glint in his eyes.

'Of course he is.'

'I'm n-not!' Brunin contradicted. Something strange was happening to his bladder, as if the blond squire's blade was sawing through his ability to control it.

The youth thumbed the tip of the weapon and then ran his finger lightly across the edge. 'You should be, whelp,' he said. 'Perhaps I'll cut off your little tail and send you home to your pack with a stump, eh?' He sliced the steel descriptively under Brunin's nose.

Brunin flinched. He knew it wasn't manly but ¬couldn't help himself. He wished he were back at the guest house with his mother and brothers and even his grandmother. He wished he were still with Mark and bored stiff.

The squire in blue grabbed Brunin's arm. 'Shall I hold him down?'

'If you like.'

Terror shot through Brunin like a molten wire. Drawing back his foot he kicked his captor in the shin and, twisting, bit the hand that was gripping his elbow. The youth yelled and let go. Brunin took to his heels. Winding among the booths, he was as swift and pliable as an eel between rocks, but his pursuers were fast too and there were two of them. Brunin darted towards the stall where he had left Mark supping ale and cozening the girl but, to his horror, the young serjeant was no longer there.

The girl scowled over the counter at the wild-eyed, ¬panting boy. 'He's gone searching for you.' Her tone ¬indicated that she was furious at having her flirtation curtailed. 'You're in trouble, you are.'

He didn't need to be told. 'Please . . .' he croaked, but it was too late. The squires grabbed him one either side and held him fast. When the girl looked askance, the fair-haired one winked at her. 'Young rascal,' he said. Reassured, she turned away, abandoning Brunin to his fate.

He fought the youths with every shred of strength in his narrow body, but he was no match for their adolescent brawn. Their fingers bruised his flesh as they dragged him across the fairground. A hard hand cupped his mouth to stifle his yells,

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and when he tried again to bite, he felt the cold burn of the knife at his throat. A sudden, ¬shameful heat flooded his braies and stained his hose.

'God's bones, the weakling's pissed himself!' the stocky youth jeered.

His blond companion snorted. 'What do you expect of blood like his? The wonder is it's red, not yellow.' He showed Brunin his smeared fingers then dragged them down the boy's cheek.

'If you cut out his liver, I'll warrant you half a mark that it would be the colour of buttercups.'

'Half a mark? Done.'

'Boys!' The voice was peremptory and stern. Through a stinging blur of tears Brunin saw the dark figure of a Benedictine monk blocking their path, arms folded high on his chest and expression stern. 'What are you doing?'

'None of your business,' sneered the older youth.

The monk raised one thin silver eyebrow. 'I can make it so very quickly indeed,' he said coldly. 'Let him go and be on your way.'

The stand-off was short. Bravado the squires possessed in bucketloads, but they were lads, not grown men. Faced by the charisma and authority of the Church, they ¬grudgingly capitulated and, pushing Brunin to his knees, swaggered off. At a distance, the blond one turned.

'Your liver's mine, piss-hose!' he shouted. 'And I'll come back for it!'

Brunin stared at the dusty grass inches from his eyes. A dark drop of blood plopped from the knife wound and ran down the stems to soak into the soil. He could hear his breath sawing in his chest and breaking over his larynx in hoarse sobs. He wondered if he was dying and wished that he were already dead.

'How now, child.' The monk stooped and raised Brunin to his feet. 'What had you done to them to make them set on you?'

'Nothing,' Brunin gulped in a quavering voice and sleeved his eyes. He felt sick and his legs wobbled like a foal's.

'I see.' The monk's tone was neutral. He gently tilted Brunin's head to one side so that he could see the cut on his throat. 'No more than a nick,' he said, 'but it could have been nasty indeed.' He clucked his tongue and spoke more to himself than Brunin. 'Every year, with the revenues, this fair brings us these squalid troubles, the more so since men quarrel over who rules the kingdom.' He drew Brunin gently towards the abbey precincts. 'Come, child, let us find some salve for that scratch and a place for you to sit a moment.' His gaze was shrewd. 'If you are not a foundling, which I judge not by the cut of your tunic, someone will be looking for you.'

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Fulke FitzWarin, lord of the castles of Whittington and Alberbury and more than fifteen estates in the counties of Shropshire, Staffordshire, Devonshire and Cambridge¬shire, took a drink of wine, rolled it experimentally round his mouth, and swallowed. He handed the cup to his companion. 'What do you think?'

Joscelin de Dinan sniffed the brew and, under the anxious eyes of the hovering vintner, set the rim to his lips. 'Not bad,' he said, wiping his mouth. The creases at his eye corners deepened as he smiled. 'Certainly I ¬wouldn't be insulted if you served it to me.'

FitzWarin grunted with amusement. 'Useful to know I don't have to broach my best wine to satisfy you then.' He raised his forefinger to the vintner. 'I'll take thirty barrels. You can haggle the price with my steward.' He set the cup under the spigot of the sample barrel and refilled it. Around them the crowds ebbed and flowed in rapid tidal surges. The vintners' booths were always busy and it was best to visit them early while there was plenty of choice.

It was good to be out in the sun-soaked morning with no more pressing business than the pleasure of talking to old friends, restocking the wine supplies and the later prospect of exploring the horse market and weapon booths.

'Your steward?' Joscelin raised his brows. 'Not your mother?'

FitzWarin laughed and pushed his heavy hazel-brown hair off his forehead. 'Doubtless she'll have her say but for the nonce her mind is fixed on buying cloth and thread for sewing. Sometimes there are just more pies than she has fingers.' His mother's reputation was legendary among the baronial community of the Welsh Marches. It was said by many, sometimes to his face, that the lady Mellette was a match for any dragon that happened out of Wales. She was five years past three score but had more stamina than FitzWarin's wife who was less than half her age.

The men enjoyed a few more samples. Joscelin wanted some Rhenish and FitzWarin bought a firkin of sweet, potent ice-wine.

'There is something I have been meaning to ask you,' FitzWarin said as they sauntered companionably away from the wine booths. His feet were steady, his balance good, but he could feel his tongue wanting to run away with him. Joscelin's cheekbones bore a red flush that made his smoke-grey eyes gleam like polished flints.

'As long as it is not about my daughters,' Joscelin said, only half in jest. With two stepdaughters, two girls of his own blood and no son, Joscelin de Dinan was constantly being petitioned by men who desired a future stake in the strategic castle and prosperous town of Ludlow.

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'No.' FitzWarin shook his head. 'It is about my son . . . my eldest,' he qualified, for he had six. 'It is past time that he began his training. The lad's ten years old now. I was wondering if you . . .'

Joscelin raised his brows, for usually a man kept his heir at his side and fostered the sons of other men as his companions. It was the younger sons who went to other households in the hopes that they would find a niche through marriage or as household knights. 'You are not keeping him at Whittington?'

They paused to let a string of pack ponies through, bells jingling on their harness, wicker panniers piled with belts of gilded leather like a tangle of flattened snakes.

FitzWarin sighed and gave the telltale hair-push. 'No,' he said. 'If it was Ralf, or Richard, or Warin, I would do so, but Brunin needs to spread his wings. I can think of no better place for him to receive his training than at Ludlow . . . if you will have him.'

Joscelin looked thoughtful and sought for the meaning in FitzWarin's words. He had no doubt that Ralf, Richard and Warin would prove engaging lads, easy to train into manhood. However, a boy who needed to 'spread his wings' suggested one who was going to be more of a ¬challenge. 'It is no small responsibility to raise your friend's heir,' he said.

'I trust you.'

'And you don't trust yourself?'

FitzWarin glowered. 'I was sent away for training because I was a younger son, but it was the making of me . . . and provident too, since my older brother died and left me to inherit. Brunin is like me. He will have more opportunity to flourish in a different household, and I would like it to be yours.'

Joscelin frowned. 'Have you discussed the matter with your wife?'

'Eve will do as I say, and I will deal with my mother,' FitzWarin said brusquely.

Joscelin thought of his own comfortable domestic ¬situation and knew that, despite Eve FitzWarin's astonishing beauty, he would not change places with his friend for one minute of one day.

'I'm buying Brunin a new pony,' FitzWarin added on a lighter note. 'Mark's taking him around the fair just now, but we're meeting at the horse market at the sext bell. If you want to see the boy, you are welcome to join us.'

'So that I can look in his mouth too as if he were a colt for sale?'

Joscelin's sarcasm was lost on FitzWarin. 'Well, yes, if you put it like that . . . After all, you wouldn't buy a horse without looking it over.'

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Joscelin was spared from making an answer as a worried-looking young man came hastening towards them from the thicket of cookstall booths. He was wearing the quilted tunic of a man-at-arms and his left hand rested on the hilt of a long hunting knife.

'Mark?' FitzWarin's expression sharpened. 'Where's Brunin?'

The young man bowed his head in deference and chagrin. 'I do not know, my lord.'

FitzWarin's glare could have cut steel. 'You do not know?'

The serjeant licked his lips. 'We became separated by the crowds, my lord. I was on my way to the horse market to see if he was there. He knew it was our meeting place and I thought . . .'

'How in God's sweet name did you become separated?' FitzWarin's raised voice boded ill for his serjeant.

'I . . . One minute he was there, the next he was gone.'

'He was where?' Joscelin asked. 'Where precisely did you lose him? At which booth?'

The serjeant blenched. 'At one of the cookstalls, my lord.'

FitzWarin's eyes flashed. 'I suppose you were drinking and filling your belly when you should have been ¬watching the boy.'

'I only looked away for a moment, I swear it.'

'A moment is all it takes.' FitzWarin made a terse gesture with his clenched fist. 'I have no time for this now; I'll deal with you later. For the nonce, we had better find my son.'

Joscelin cleared his throat. 'Doubtless your serjeant is right and the lad will make for the horse market. I suppose he has the sense?'

FitzWarin glowered at Mark. 'Yes,' he muttered. 'He has the sense if he chooses to use it . . . more than this muttonwit here.'

The men began making their way among the booths. FitzWarin sent Mark to fetch the other household knights and serjeants and set them to searching. 'But don't alert the women,' he commanded. 'The last thing I need is panic in the hen house.'

FitzWarin and Joscelin went straight to the horse fair, but although there were plenty of boys standing at bridles and helping the grooms, there was no sign of the one they sought. Small hand clasped in the protection of a toil-reddened fist, a son walked past the men with his father. The pair paused side by side to inspect a well-

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fed dappled pony. FitzWarin looked at the child's earnest, upturned face, then at the father's indulgent smile, and knew that God was punishing him. 'If anything has happened to Brunin, I will have my serjeant's guts for hose bindings,' he muttered through clenched teeth.

Joscelin's initial instinct was to murmur the platitude that the boy would turn up unharmed, but he bit his tongue. Doubtless, if one of his daughters were lost in this vast tide of humanity, he would feel less sanguine. Prudently he said nothing and applied himself to the hunt.

Mark and the other soldiers searched along the banks of the Severn where the traders' barges bobbed at their moorings, but there was no sign of Brunin and no one had seen him. The river, although it looked innocent, was treacherous and deep and would quickly swallow a child if he fell in. Millrace, brook and pond were investigated too, but without result. FitzWarin had walked the circuit of the fair with Joscelin to no avail and his agitation had increased from simmer to boil when a young monk approached them.

'My lords, I hear you are searching for a lost child?'

FitzWarin's eyes lit up. 'Praise God, you have found him?'

'Yes, my lord. Brother Anselm has him at the porter's lodge.' The monk pointed behind him, indicating a low stone building near the Foregate.

FitzWarin set off at a rapid walk, clapping his hand to his scabbard to keep it still. Joscelin strode beside him. 'If he went to the monks for help, that too shows sense,' he said.

FitzWarin grunted. 'Sense would have been staying with my serjeant,' he said. 'I'll have both their hides in recompense.'

Seated on a bench outside the porter's lodge a thickset monk of middle years was comforting a woebegone child. Tear tracks snailed the boy's smooth olive skin and his dark eyes were glazed and heavy. Marks resembling bloody fingerprints painted one cheek and a yellow salve had been smeared over a cut on his neck. There was a tell-tale stain at the crotch of his hose.

FitzWarin slewed to a halt and his eyes widened. 'God's sweet bones, Brunin?'

The monk removed his arm from around the boy's shoulders and rose to his feet. If he was disturbed by the use of blasphemy in God's own precincts, he kept it to himself. 'The boy is yours, my lord?'

'He's my son,' FitzWarin snapped. 'What has happened to him?' Striding to the bench he stooped to Brunin and turned his jaw to the light. 'Who did this?'

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The boy's expression was blank. FitzWarin knew the look of old. Whatever pain Brunin had suffered had been drawn within where he would feed upon it in silence, and it would feed on him.

'Some older youths were making sport with him and it was becoming ugly,' the monk said. 'I intervened and brought him to the lodge. When I heard from one of my brethren that there was a search going on, I sent Brother Simon to direct it here.' He gestured. 'He's badly shaken but no lasting harm seems to have been done.'

FitzWarin turned to Brunin. 'Would you know the youths again?' he demanded and clamped his jaw as he saw terror fill his son's eyes. 'Would you?' He heard his voice rising, but could do nothing to prevent it.

'Yes, sir.' Brunin's throat rippled.

FitzWarin jerked him to his feet. 'Then let us go and find them, and let us see what they have to say when they taste my sword.'

'My lord, violence only begets more violence,' the monk intervened. 'Surely we have all seen enough in this lifetime not to seek out more.'

'Save your homilies for church,' FitzWarin snarled. 'I've swallowed enough of them in the past to last me a lifetime too!' Rudely turning his back on the monk, he scowled down at his son who was quivering in his clutch. 'What did they look like?'

Brunin stammered out a description, his complexion paling until he was ashen.

'It might be best to leave him behind,' Joscelin said neutrally. 'Look at him. He is in no state to be walking around the fair.'

'I can see the state he is in,' FitzWarin snapped. 'And when I find those who did this, they will pay. Come on, boy, you've the blood of kings in your veins. Show your worth.'

Brunin had been clenching his teeth and swallowing convulsively while the men were in discussion, but his body reached a point where his will could no longer control it and, bending his head, he retched violently, the spasms heaving through his narrow body until his knees buckled.

'For the love of God, send him back to your lodging,' Joscelin said, his expression filled with appalled pity. 'He is beyond his endurance. He could be descended from King Arthur himself and it would make no difference just now.'

Grimly, FitzWarin swept Brunin into his arms, his strength making nothing of the boy's weight. He felt beneath his fingers the dampness where Brunin had pissed himself and was filled with a deep and tender rage, not least because he was ashamed that his son had been frightened enough to lose control of his bladder. Did such a trait show a predisposition to cowardice? The thought was like a small pebble in his shoe. What if Brunin lacked the qualities he needed to guide his family's

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interests when the time came? It would not have mattered if he were one of the younger boys, but he was the heir. And because he was ashamed, FitzWarin was angry with himself too. He should be thanking God that Brunin was safe, not agitating over the child's lack of backbone. Torn both ways, he hugged his son before handing him abruptly into the custody of two of his knights.

'Guy, Johan, take him straight to my lodging and give him to the women. Tell them as little as you can get away with. I'll deal with it myself when I return.'

'Yes, my lord.' Guy hoisted Brunin across his shoulder like a deer.

Frowning heavily, FitzWarin watched them leave. Then, shrugging his shoulders as if to level and settle a heavy burden, he sent another man to call the searchers away from the river and turned back towards the fair.

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