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THE KING'S MESSENGER

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This book is dedicated to my readers.

Whether you've just joined me on this road,
or have been walking with me for a while, you
bring me joy and help to make my days a grand
adventure, and I'm grateful for your company.

I hold this for a generall Maxime good,
True honor comes from virtue as from blood.

—Sir David Moray, “*Epitaph on the death
of his deare cousin, M. David Murray*”

THE PLAYERS

(* *fictional*)

LAURENCE WESTAWAY, writing master and scrivener*

PHOEBE WESTAWAY, his daughter*

ANDREW LOGAN, King's Messenger*

ANDREW'S MOTHER AND SISTERS*

OWEN GILROY* } Andrew's friends, grooms in
ROGER PETERS* } the service of Queen Anna

VALENTINE FOX, a courtier*

HECTOR REID, a stable lad*

Robert Carr, **VISCOUNT ROCHESTER** (later Earl of Somerset), favourite
of King James

Henry Howard, **1ST EARL OF NORTHAMPTON**

KING JAMES VI of Scotland and I of England, son of Mary, Queen of Scots

ANNA OF DENMARK, Queen of Britain, wife of King James

HENRY, PRINCE OF WALES, eldest son of King James

SIR WILLIAM MORAY of Abercairney, childhood companion of King
James, now in service to Queen Anna

SIR DAVID MORAY of Gorthie, brother to Sir William Moray and
formerly Gentleman of the Robes to Prince Henry

PATRICK GRAEME, 4th Laird of Inchbrakie and cousin to the Morays

ESTHER INGLIS, scrivener and writer in miniature

PHOEBE



Great St. Bartholomew's, London
22 April (St. George's Eve), 1613

THE STARS WERE HIDDEN AT my birth. There was no moon. A tempest rising in the west sent clouds that settled like a veil of black across the night sky, and my father feared this total darkness was a sign of trouble.

The doctor of astrology he summoned reassured him that my future would be fortunate. My stars, although unseen, would serve me well.

Through all that followed after, and with all we lost, my father held those words so closely to his heart they might have been a rope tossed out upon the water to a drowning man. "Whatever happens in your life," he'd often tell me, "you'll be guided by the planets and their motions. They will lead you to your destiny."

I let him keep his fancies.

But this morning as I stormed across the grass still wet with dew, I felt convinced that any planets guiding me were misaligned. They'd started this day poorly, and since there was truth in the old saying that an ill beginning led to an ill end, I knew my morning would do nothing but get worse.

The front door of our house, though heavy, gave way to my forceful push.

"He is the most infuriating man."

I spoke those words to no one but myself as I was entering the

kitchen, yet my father and his elder sister—my Aunt Agnes—heard me notwithstanding and immediately knew which man I meant.

My father, fitting on his doublet, asked, “What has he done to sour thy mood this morning, with the sun so newly up?”

The truth was, Andrew Logan had to do no more than stand within my sight to sour my mood. He’d been our neighbor ten years, since the death of Queen Elizabeth had passed her crown to Scotland’s King James, binding both the courts in one and bringing Logan’s family south to London in his service. And in all that time I could not think of once my path had crossed with Logan’s when he hadn’t left me irritated. Nor when I’d been granted the last word.

It was that final point, in truth, that had me most annoyed this morning, because having put the distance of the courtyard between myself and Logan now, my mind could rapidly frame several sharp replies to his last comment, any one of which would have done better than the gaping silence in which I’d watched the big Scotsman’s back retreating from my view.

I had been unprepared. I did not often see him at the conduit—most days one of his sisters fetched the water—and hearing the old gardener who came there every morning fawn and laugh and praise him for his drunken misdeeds of the night before had made my temper flare.

I freed my shoulders from the hard yoke with a force that made the pails thump to the floor and told my father all the details, as I’d gleaned them from the gardener’s talk, of Logan’s violence. Then I said, “I merely asked him if, by daylight, he did not feel shame for his attack upon a better man.”

My father’s eyebrows lifted. “And what did young Logan say to that?”

“That he would feel no shame for having done what needed doing, and if I stood in defense of Valentine I had his pity.” His contempt, he might have said, for it showed plainly in his eyes while he was speaking, and for one weak moment I had been confused enough to want to ask him why, but then he’d wheeled away abruptly

and eventually I'd turned my own back, too, and we had neither of us wasted any further breath in argument.

Aunt Agnes disliked conflict. She brushed the subject away with a move of her hand, as she might wave aside rising smoke from the fire at the hearth where she sat with the linens and hose she was patiently mending. "'Tis but words," she reminded me. "Valentine Fox can defend himself."

"I know he can," I said, and trusted my voice sounded confident.

Privately, I was less sure. I'd seen Valentine give a display of his swordsmanship, and with his height and lean form he would make an impressive opponent, but Andrew Logan was built like a great, brainless ox, and in a fight with fists—as it apparently had been last night—the odds fell in his favor.

It was plain he had my father's favor also. "Perhaps Valentine provoked him."

I thought it hardly likely. "Pray, when has Andrew Logan needed provocation to begin a fight?"

"When it would make an enemy of someone who could see him lose his place at court, that's when," my father said. "It is a rare honor to be a King's Messenger, one that no man would lose lightly, and only a very great insult indeed could have made him take such a risk."

I raised one shoulder in a half shrug. "I'm sure Valentine told him no more than the truth."

In his place, I'd have thought of a great many things to tell Logan—that he was a bully, for one, and uncultured, and—

"You think too harshly of the lad," Aunt Agnes said in her mild tone that held the firmer edge designed to shape my manners into something more polite.

I said nothing, though I might have pointed out that Andrew Logan was a lad no longer. The sullen sixteen-year-old who had come here from Scotland was a grown man now with two more years beneath his belt than my own twenty-four, and at the conduit he had fair towered above me, or so it had seemed. I'd been forced

to look up, all the daggers of my own gaze being deflected by his stubborn chin.

Plainly my aunt and father had not faced that side of Logan yet, else I would have more of their sympathy.

My father, for his part, was fully focused now on dressing in a way I had not seen him do in some days, and that fact diverted me from my small inconveniences and minor squabbles.

As he fitted on his hat, the one with the fine feather and the polished gilded clip shaped like a rose, I said, “You are called to the palace.”

“I am.”

“Then the king has returned?”

“He has.”

My aunt said, “But the Princess Elizabeth has not yet sailed for the continent. You would think her own father might wish to stay by her till her ship leaves, so she’s given a proper farewell.”

With one glance, *my* father reminded his sister the king was not someone to criticize.

Returning his attention to the angle of his hat brim, he asked, “What would he gain by standing on the shore and weeping while the ship sails off? It would not make their parting any easier. The king owes no one any such display of his emotions, for it is in truth a private pain, to lose the ones we love.”

Aunt Agnes had no argument to offer, knowing well my father knew that pain himself, and deeply. As did I.

The king had also suffered loss. Of his seven children, only three survived their infancy, and one of those had fallen just this past winter—handsome Prince Henry, the Prince of Wales, pride of our nation—struck down by an illness so sudden the gossips still crouched in their corners and whispered strange theories.

So yes, the king might be forgiven for turning his face from another loss.

Except, “The princess has not died,” I told them. “She has only married.”

My aunt said idly she saw little difference between death and marriage. "I've observed some women wish for death the longer they are married." She was teasing, but it drew another sidelong look of warning from my father.

"Agnes," he rebuked her. "Do not fill my daughter's head with nonsense. She will marry a fine man of a good family, who will give her healthy children and—"

"—a life of ease at court." I spoke those words with him in unison, an easy thing to do when I had heard them said so frequently. I did not share my father's faith in almanacs and stars, nor in the doctor of astrology who'd cast a figure of the hour of my birth and made that bold prediction.

But I hoped.

For, after all, there *was* a man to whom I'd given my affection, and he was a fine man of good family, who had risen now so high at court that he could give his wife a life of ease there, if he chose to marry.

As though he had read my thoughts, my father asked, "Have you seen Valentine this morning?"

"No, I've had no reason to."

My aunt piped in, "Besides, 'tis barely six o'clock, he will be sleeping, surely."

"Not this morning," said my father. "He has business at court also, and he promised I may ride there with him in his coach. Phoebe, would you go across and tell him, please, that I am nearly ready?"

I suspected that my father, in reply to my remark that I'd no reason to see Valentine, was trying now to give me one. I smiled. "Of course."

I might have wished my hair was not arranged so plainly, nor that I had laced my stays so loosely underneath my long-sleeved bodice in a style two seasons out of fashion. But I could at least draw comfort from the knowledge that my fray with Logan would have brought some color to my cheeks.

"You're very pretty when you're angry," Valentine had teased me once.

To his credit, *he* rarely made me angry.

We'd grown up together, here in St. Bartholomew's, within this close community that sat outside the city walls of London, on what once had been the grounds of an old monastery. Nearly fifty years before my birth, when Great King Henry broke with Rome and founded our own Protestant religion here in England, he declared an end to nunneries and monasteries, claimed those buildings for the crown, and gave or sold them into private hands. Thus St. Bartholomew's had been transformed.

The church itself remained—its bells still tolled the quarters of our waking hours—but the buildings that the monks had used were fashioned into mansions, and new houses had been built within the walls of the great inner courtyard that we called the Close, with yet more houses built upon the field where every August's end the fair of St. Bartholomew brought people thronging, as they had time out of mind, to sell their wares and see the spectacle.

It was a fine address to have. When we'd first come to live here I had scarce believed our fortune. Even then, though I'd been small, the Close had seemed a sanctuary, beautiful and privileged, where several of our neighbors, like my father, worked at court, while others had no need to work at all by virtue of their birth and status.

Valentine's father was such a man. His family owned estates in Wiltshire but he rarely saw them, having argued with his brothers as a younger man and hardened as he aged so he continued unforgiving. That always made me sad, for could I have had my brothers back again I'd not have wasted any moments left to us in arguing, so glad would I have been to have their company.

But Valentine's father never changed his course, once set. There was an order to his life, and to his days. I knew at this hour he would be outdoors patrolling in his gardens, as a military leader might inspect the boundaries of his headquarters.

His mansion was well situated for this purpose, being in what had been designed to be the frater—or great dining hall—for the use of the long-departed monks. A long building of grand proportions, it

shielded the church behind it and butted up at right angles to the equally impressive former dormitory, which had also been converted to a mansion of great beauty that formed the far angle at this north end of the Close.

To the other side of the Foxes' mansion, and a stone's throw to the south of it, as though aware it ought to keep itself below its betters and not seek to share their level, lay our own house, less impressive. Yet the bricks still had a solid look and all the shutters had been newly painted and the window glass was catching the new rays of rising sunlight, and as always when I stepped into the Close, I felt a sense of pride.

"Up early," Valentine's father said as I came across the green to greet him, which I judged the closest he had come in weeks to giving me a compliment.

I often marveled he could be so like his son to look at, and yet so completely unlike him in character.

He said, "You'll be wanting my son, I expect." Then, with great disapproval, "He's been in a fight."

I didn't reveal that I'd already heard. Valentine's father disliked gossip as much as Aunt Agnes. Still, I couldn't help but defend Valentine. "Then he must have been greatly provoked."

If I hadn't known better, I might have thought Valentine's father eyed me with something approaching amusement before he collected himself and corrected me. "Gentlemen are not provoked by their lessers."

He glanced past my shoulder, along the green length of the Close, and although I did not turn to follow his gaze I knew where he was looking.

The Logans' house lay, like our own, on the long western edge of Bartholomew's Close, only more to the south, near the conduit. I made a point of not giving it notice.

"My son's with his friends, in the stables," said Valentine's father. "Tis not the kindest of company for a young lady, but stop up your ears and you ought to survive."

And *that*, I thought, was humor, or his rare attempt at it. I smiled and said, “Yes, sir.”

The stables were reached by a passageway hugging the mansion. Built broad enough to take a coach, it opened to the square enclosure of what, in the monastery’s time, had been the cloisters. Here the walls and spire of the church loomed high and cast their shadows as though frowning down upon the fate that had befallen the once prayerful, silent walks and archways, turned to use as horses’ stalls.

No doubt the church was frowning harder still this morning, I thought, with the language Valentine’s close friends were using freely with each other.

There were three of them today. Their numbers changed from time to time, but from the day I had first met him, Valentine had always drawn a following.

It was no more than natural. He looked like every gallant knight I’d seen in tapestries and paintings—tall and sure of step, his golden hair a little wayward with its waves, his beard somehow managing, even when he trimmed it to a close and tidy point, to remain distinctly roguish.

And his eyes—those eyes that made me feel I was the only person in his view—were like the eyes of every hero who, when moved to action, had called men to come along with him, and found a sudden army at his back.

Except this morning, underneath one of those eyes there was faint bruising.

“Phoebe!” Valentine had noticed my arrival. “You look very pretty this morning.” His eyebrows rose as I came close. “And very irritated.”

“Not at you,” I promised. “I do think of Andrew Logan.”

“Why does he deserve your thoughts?”

“Because of this.” I raised my hand to lightly touch the bruise beneath his left eye. “Does it hurt?”

“I feel it not at all, when you do that.” He smiled, then asked, “What makes you think that it is Logan’s work?”

“Because I heard him talking at the conduit this morning to the gardener, who was praising him for last night’s fighting.”

“Then you know what happened?”

“Only that you were attacked by Logan and his companions, and that your friends bravely took your part.”

Looking at his friends now, it appeared they’d paid a price for that decision. One, much bruised, was leaning heavily against the coach while waiting for the groom to finish harnessing the horses, while another held a bandaged arm close-cradled to his chest, and the third was already within the coach, where shadows only half concealed his lounging and defeated pose and bandaged hands.

Turning my attention back to Valentine, I said, “I’m sorry you were made to fight. Could it not be avoided?”

“Not by me. Did not the gardener touch on how the fight began, when he was talking at the conduit?”

“The gardener took Logan’s part, and seemed glad you’d been challenged.”

“Oh? What did the gardener say, exactly?”

All the words were clear and stinging in my mind, and easy to recall. “He said that Logan had just done the Close a service, because you’d long needed to be taken down a peg.” I frowned. “Why did it start? The fight, I mean.”

“’Tis not for gentle ears to hear the insult that began it.” Over the years, Valentine had often regaled me with tales of the ungentlemanly brawls he’d witnessed Logan fight in. That this latest one was too heinous for Valentine to describe told me much. He smiled slightly. “But I’ve not been taken down, as you can see. I am yet standing.” Glancing from me to his friends, he added, “And I’m late to court.”

That nudged my memory. “I am sent to tell you that my father’s nearly ready.” Then, because his face remained uncomprehending, I said, “You did say that he could ride to court this morning in your coach.”

“I did.” His turn to frown.

He knew as well as I did that my father's health had faltered these past months. It was not common knowledge, but I'd shared with Valentine how I had seen my father several times appear to lose his breath while walking, and once stumble in the road, and once drop in a near faint after a long day of business, which he blamed upon a want of sleep.

I could feel my temper rising for the second time this morning. "You promised him." I let the sharper edges of my tone show through. "A promise is a promise."

"So it is. But thanks to Logan, we've no room, the coach is full. My friends are injured and must ride within. They are the sons of noblemen," he told me.

"But my father does not merit your attention." I did not try to hide the sarcasm that edged my tone.

"I've angered you."

"You are not often selfish. Nor did the favor of noblemen's sons used to make you forget your word."

"Phoebe." His eyes asked for my understanding. "They are also friends of my lord Rochester, my patron. I would lose my place at court were I to leave them unattended. And if I lose my place at court, what future could there be for us?" He bent to kiss my cheek but I was turning from him, so the touch was brief. He told me, "Give your father my regrets. He'll understand."

He did, of course. My father was an understanding man.

He stood with me outside our door and watched the coach departing, having heard it pass. It traveled down the Close, past Logan's house, and out the gate into the labyrinth of lanes and streets that lay beyond.

"Ah, well," my father told me, "I've no doubt your uncle at St. Paul's will have room in his coach for me. I have time left to catch him, and 'tis not so far to walk."

Too far, still, for my comfort.

Pushing down my disappointment in what Valentine had done, I said, "I'll come with you." And when my father looked at me as though I were proposing to run off to the New World, I added,

“Only to St. Paul’s. It has been too long since I’ve seen my uncle.”

“And how will you get safely home?”

“He has so many servants, one of them can be my escort.”

He agreed to this, to my relief, but only after he took from his pocket the crisp copy of his almanac. My aunt considered almanacs a needless waste of pennies, but my father bought a new one every year, to guide his actions. At the stationer’s, he’d carefully survey the different almanacs, each named for their compiler. His favorites were those of one Mr. Parker, whose predictions for the year were drawn more closely from astrology and who, beside the listing for each month, with all its days of feasts and festivals and forecasts of the weather, left a blank page for the user’s daily notes and jottings. Mr. Parker’s almanac provided tables of the tides, the time each day of sunrise, and the aspects of the moon. But to my father, the most useful feature of the little book was that it warned him in advance which dates would bring him luck, and which he should approach with caution.

“No,” my father said, “there is no ‘D’ for danger marked beside this day, so we may safely walk abroad.”

I made no reply at first, because I’d been distracted by a black and white bird settling on the tiles of the roof directly opposite. A magpie.

My Aunt Agnes, had she been here, would have thrown a stone to chase it off, and then she’d have recited prayers to counteract its evil.

As I met the bird’s unblinking eyes, I understood that impulse. But it was only a bird, and to imagine it as more than that—to think it truly might be an ill omen—would be like thinking Mr. Parker’s almanac was accurate.

My father nudged me. “Phoebe? Did you hear me? Mr. Parker says today will bring us no misfortune.”

“Good.” I smiled, and linked my arm with his, as much to steady him as from affection.

But as we walked on, I couldn’t help but feel the black eyes of that lurking magpie watching us, as steady as a stone.

ANDREW



The Strand, London, the same day

BE GRATEFUL YE WERE BORN a man,” my younger sister Margaret said to me.

She was the dreaming sort, and not inclined to notice things that did not touch on her directly, and admittedly I had arranged my hat to hide the worst part of the bruising round my eye from last night’s brawl, but I could not keep from smiling at her comment, which was all at once divided from the truth of life as I had lived it, and yet still exactly what I needed most to hear this morning to restore my humor. Looking down at her, I asked, “And why is that?”

I had to put my arm out as I spoke to draw her back a moment while a cart horse lumbered by, its great hooves landing in the very place her smaller feet had lately been. My own horse, Brutus, tossed his head against the reins held in my other hand, indignant he was being led instead of ridden, but since he had cast a shoe a short while back, I had no choice but to endure his silent wrath and lead him, for to bear the weight of both of us would have done his hoof damage.

With a lethal glare at me he fell in step as we walked on.

Margaret hadn’t noticed, as her whole attention was still focused on explaining why I was so fortunate to be a man. “Because,” she said, “if ye did have a mind to marry, ye could do it as ye pleased, while I can’t seek a match myself till Jeannie weds, and she and Roger have been waiting so long for the queen’s approval that I fear it never will be given, and I’ll die a maid.”

I was about to reassure her that she had no need to worry—that the queen, in her own time, would give her blessing to our sister's marriage—but it struck me she seemed over-interested, and glancing down more piercingly, I asked, "Who is it ye would haste to marry?"

Frowning, she reproved me, "Andrew Logan, I am not one of your criminals, ye needn't turn Inquisitor. There is no man. And even if there was a man—which there is not—it would not be your business."

Meaning that there definitely was a man, then.

Her deep sigh confirmed it. "But 'tis an outdated rule that the younger must wait till the elder is wed. I'll be eighteen soon, Andrew. And Jeannie," she added, her tone pitched to sound like a warning, "is twenty-two."

"Ancient," I said. Four years younger than me, and I felt every day of my age as my shoulder protested the sharp movement I made to hold back my sister a second time out of the way of disaster. "If ye don't mind how ye go, ye'll have no need to worry over weddings."

I might as well have told a skylark not to sing.

Margaret was a lively lass, and as we came through together into the stable yard of the queen's palace of Somerset House she was still oblivious to everything around us, and still brightly talking.

My height and size rarely allowed me to pass through a place without notice—less still when I was with Brutus, for he was giant himself—and I was fair impossible to overlook when wearing my full livery as I was now. This scarlet doublet, slashed with blue and trimmed with gold, and with the king's own coat of arms emblazoned on my chest, its quartered shield combining all four nations of our kingdom underneath his golden crown, at either side supported by the lion and the unicorn, marked me as a King's Messenger in service of the crown. I wore it proudly.

But even if Brutus and I had been as stealthy as shadows, there was no hope of moving discreetly when I had my sister beside me. Her laughter and chatter rang out in that cobbled, enclosed space

so musically that all the heads of the horses came over the posts as if they, too, would listen.

The scents of this stable stirred bittersweet memories. I'd worked here, afore I'd been raised to the Messengers' ranks. I'd spent long, happy hours here, and each time I came through the stable doors part of me wanted to turn time's hands backward, and then stop the clock altogether.

My friend Owen Gilroy, who sat on a bench near the stable door bent to his work on a saddle, glanced over and nodded at me, and then flashed a smile full of charm. "Good morrow, Margaret."

She blushed and returned him the greeting, and rising on tiptoe she kissed me and thanked me and wished me a good day and scurried along to her work in the kitchens and left me with no chance to make a reply.

But as I turned back to Owen, I mimicked his gallant voice. "Good morrow, Margaret"? What is that, exactly?"

He stood and grinned. "Nothing you need be concerned about."

I had my next question framed in my mind but it faded to nothing as the scene I was looking at started to waver and blur. As I focused on Owen, he no longer seemed to stand here in the stables, but in a strange church, at the side of a baptismal font, with the light coming in from a window behind. At his right side stood Margaret, her hair in a style I could not recall seeing her wearing, her eyes bright with pride. In her arms she was holding a bairn, newly born. "We'll be naming him Donald," she told me. Our father's name.

And then as swiftly as they had appeared, Margaret and the bairn vanished again, leaving Owen alone and the stables as they'd always been.

He'd stopped what he was doing with the saddle and was watching me. "What?"

I ignored him, not from rudeness, but because it was the simplest way to manage things. I'd learned this lesson young, when I had realized that not everybody had this gift—or curse—of Second Sight that gave unbidden glimpses of the things that were to come.

My mother, a Macdougall from the Western Isles, had warned me I should hide it well, for while the Sight was commonplace among her people, elsewhere it was nothing but a danger to possess, viewed as the Devil's work and witchcraft.

But Owen persisted. "Are you feeling well?"

I knew the change was slight when I was Seeing—a loss of focus in my gaze, a blankness of expression brief enough to make most think I was distracted, nothing more. But that distraction had been great enough, this time, for me to miss the entrance of the man who was now standing close beside me.

Roger Peters was a fixture in these stables, being one of the queen's favorite grooms. His father had been one of the African servants Her Majesty brought with her from Denmark to Edinburgh, where I'd met Roger as a lad. Then, he'd seemed quiet. Now a man of my own age, he had a quick laugh and a quicker wit, and since I'd come to London he and Owen had become my closest friends. With Roger waiting for the queen's consent to wed my sister Jeannie, it appeared both men were destined to become my brothers, also.

But this morning, Roger's first thought was for Brutus. "He has cast a shoe."

"Aye, I noticed as we came across Fleet Bridge."

"You did not ride him after that, I hope?"

"Ye take me for a fool?"

The white of Roger's grin flashed suddenly against his darker skin as he tipped up my hat brim. "I had best reserve my judgment till you tell me who did give you those?"

He'd seen my bruises.

I hedged and did not answer him directly. "I was in the Star last night, and helped a lad who needed helping, that is all. He was young, and in his cups, and rashly found himself outnumbered in a fight. I took his part to make the odds more even."

Owen, from his corner, said, "A noble cause, I'll grant you." But he knew me far too well, and with his keen eyes on my face he asked, "Who was on the other side?"

I shrugged. "Three men whose names I could not tell ye."

Owen waited. "And?"

He would not leave it alone, I knew, so I relented. "And Valentine Fox."

They both made the same noise, turned away from me briefly, and Roger said, "You *are* a fool! Did you strike him?"

I shook my head. "The lad did. That's how it began. Had I not been there, he might have been killed."

"Better his death than yours," Roger told me. "You might try remembering Valentine Fox is the favorite of Viscount Rochester, and Rochester is *the* favorite of King James, and a ruthless man like Rochester who has the king's ear only needs to whisper it was you, and not the lad, who did strike Valentine, and who will dare to call him liar? You could find yourself arrested for assault. And who would guard your mother and your sisters then?"

He seemed about to carry on but, thinking better of it, took the reins from my hand with the promise, "I will have him shod for you when you return from Whitehall." He eyed me very soberly, and added, "If you *do* return."



When I went out to the street again and started toward Whitehall, people moved aside respectfully, their gazes touching briefly on the leather bag I carried at my belt as though wondering if it held royal letters or a warrant of arrest.

Had I been in a mood to indulge their curiosity, I could have told them it was empty, and that it would likely remain so if Valentine's powerful patron decided to punish me for what I'd done last night at the Star Tavern.

Not that I would have done anything differently. There'd been no question which course was the right one. The lad had been out of his depth. He'd been drinking too long and too heavily, searching for courage, and when he staggered across the Star's floor I'd known no good would come of it, even afore he had

flung out his fierce accusation—his sister defiled and abandoned by Valentine.

Valentine, arching his eyebrows, had smoothly replied, "I apologize." Then, taking out his purse, he'd tossed two coins upon the table. "There, that is the going rate, I do believe, for whores."

Of course, the lad had swung for him, as any brother would. He'd struck a lucky, glancing blow that gave me one small moment's satisfaction. But then Valentine had touched the place beneath his eye, and turning to his friends had told them, "Make him pay for that."

I'd seen the lad's fear. There were three of them against him. And I could not stand aside.

No, I did not regret the action I had taken, but I did not wish to lose my scarlet doublet for it. Not every man could work as a King's Messenger. My father strove for years to be promoted to their ranks, and called in every favor possible, afore his death, to smooth my path so I might take his place. Losing that position as the price for crossing Valentine would sting badly enough, but not till Roger's lecture had I reckoned there could be a price to pay yet more severe.

And Valentine was vengeful. These past years living in the Close had taught me that much, and his nature showed itself to me so plainly that I marveled anybody could be blind to it.

I thought of Phoebe Westaway, this morning at the conduit, the water from the wellhead spilling over in her bucket as she stared at me with bold contempt.

She had not always looked at me that way. When first I'd come to St. Bartholomew's, she'd merely been dismissive. Kept her distance. She had stumbled on the walk one morning when she'd passed our house and I had offered her my hand and she'd ignored it as though I had been invisible.

Thus it continued, although I'd done nothing to give her offense. She avoided me, crossing the Close if she saw me approaching, her haughtiness freezing out all my attempts to be kind. So I stopped being kind.

And her disregard turned to dislike.

That she wished she were Valentine's lass had been plain from the start. I could see how she looked at him. See how she followed him. See how he led her along in the dance. Had she been more agreeable, I could have warned her and spared her the heartache and grief that would come in the end from her taking that road, but I reasoned the two of them likely were well suited to one another and kept my thoughts private.

This morning, though, when she stood close afore me at the conduit, her upturned face so angry and accusing, I could no more hold my silence.

I felt no regret for having done *that*, either—having spoken truth. And there was satisfaction to be had, however small, in having won the last word in our argument. In fact, when I replayed our brief exchange now in my mind, I gained still further satisfaction from the realization Phoebe's words, designed to wound me, had in fact provided me a perfect line to add to the apology that I could give the king if I were summoned—the apology that I was counting on to save not only my position, but my freedom.

"I'm ashamed," I said, beneath my breath, "that I attacked a better man."

No, I could not deliver that convincingly.

"I do regret..." There, that was more believable. "I do regret that I attacked a better man." I carried on from there, and had run through the whole apology three times when I caught sight of Charing Cross and took the turning into King Street, where the wide approach to Whitehall began.

Whitehall was unique, not a centralized palace with everything under one roof, but a sprawling community unto itself—different buildings and halls and a chapel, and galleries three stories tall that connected one part to another—with views across St. James's Park or the lush privy gardens and, always, the Thames that ran majestically aside the longest gallery, from where the king's pier commanded the river.

When we'd first arrived in London, when I'd been a lad of sixteen

years, my favorite part of Whitehall had been the long tiltyard that lay behind the wall I was now passing. There'd been something of the taste of legend in that tiltyard—boyhood tales of knights and quests and bold adventure, things that had been lost to progress in our modern world, and that had lived again in my imagination when I'd watched Prince Henry, younger than myself, run at the ring on horseback with his lance, like any knight of old might do, afore the cheering crowd.

But now the prince was dead, and all the cheering had died with him, and the tiltyard was a quiet space of dust and empty dreams, and I could no more bear to look at it.

Instead I aimed my eyes ahead to Holbein's Gate, the grand, four-turreted gatehouse guarding the inner precincts of the court. Elaborately built of brick, its leaded windows turned to mirrors in the morning sun, its height and form minded me of the great Netherbow I had walked under so often in Edinburgh, and raised the memory of home.

Today, its tall central archway was already busy with coaches all waiting their turn to pass through to deposit their passengers. Word traveled fast that the king had returned, and he never did stay long at Whitehall. Those seeking his favor would have to move quickly.

I kept myself clear of their path and instead used the court gate that lay at the corner of the new Banqueting House. Here, too, it was crowded. Along the broad walk leading down to the king's lodgings, men stood singly or huddled in close conversations.

Near the doorway to the guard chamber, a larger group stood clustered round a man whose clothing, of the latest fashion and in brightly colored silk, was likely more expensive than the rent I yearly paid to lease our house. There were a few at court who dressed like that, but chief among them was the Viscount Rochester, who seemed to own more doublets in more fabrics than the queen had gowns. As I drew closer, I saw his features, deliberately charming, until he saw me—then they took on a measure of canniness.

Valentine, close by his side, had the look of a sleek cat observing its prey.

But I did not break stride.

At my shoulder, a black shadow fell into step with me. The blood rose swiftly pounding in my ears afore a calm voice said, “You’re late,” and, turning, I saw that the man was not a guard come to arrest me, but my lord Northampton.

He wore black like a uniform, day after day. I’d not seen him in anything else. I’d been told that he’d done the same as a young man when he’d first come to court, back in the time of Queen Elizabeth. Some said it was because he was a sober man and a scholar; others thought it more likely he wore perpetual mourning since his family, the Howards, though not lacking power, had weathered so many misfortunes.

His father and brother had both been beheaded. That my lord Northampton had survived his life at court and reached the age of seventy-odd with his head still firmly on his shoulders was a testament to the wisdom of the mind within that head—or at least, to its ability to guess the moves of his opponents on the board, and keep one play ahead of them.

He said, “You are nearly an hour past your usual time.”

“Forgive me, my lord. It could not be avoided. My horse cast a shoe, and—”

“No matter. I only hope he’s as forgiving. He does not like being kept waiting.”

I dreaded asking, “Who does not, my lord?”

“The king, of course. Now come, he asked for you expressly. You’d do well,” he said, “to ready an apology.”

I did not need to steal an upward glance at sky and sunlight as we neared the looming guard chamber to know that I might not see either for some space of time. Nor did I need to waste a glance at Valentine as we swept by to feel his gaze of triumph.

I stood tall, and strode with ease, for I’d not have him thinking I felt worried.

Yet my worries found me, all the same.



We Messengers were often made to wait. I'd learned to seem unbothered by it, even when, as now, the waiting tested all my nerves. The trick of it lay in distraction, though here in this small room that course appeared limited.

It was the first time I had been within one of the king's closets, and while it was furnished with fine things, it held not the grandeur of the formal chambers. Instead it was cozy, if such could be said of a room in a palace. A private retreat for a king who was rarely allowed time alone.

On a table set next to the window were papers and pens and ink laid out for writing, with books stacked haphazardly everywhere. A Turkish carpet silenced footsteps, and the paneled walls were hung with tapestries of bright design.

I counted the books: fifty-seven. The diamond-shaped panes in the tall window: ninety-four. And when the king had not yet come, I turned to the tapestries. These were of Biblical scenes, richly done, but the one that held my eye showed Jacob, asleep in a pastoral wilderness, while behind him, his dreams revealed angels descending and climbing the ladder to heaven, and God Himself at its top, pronouncing His prophecy of Jacob's future.

Northampton, who had taken up a place beside the writing table while we waited, remarked, "How must it feel when God does favor you so greatly that he gives you such a perfect sleep as he gave Jacob?"

"No perfect sleep, my lord, but one disturbed by dreams and visions."

Though he was behind me, I could hear the dry amusement in Northampton's voice. "I take it, then, you would not wish for such a gift yourself?"

Another man's voice asked, "What gift is that?"

I had not heard the room's door open. Neither had Northampton, evidently, but when I turned from the tapestry to face the king and

bow my knee, Northampton, too, was kneeling. When he rose, I stayed where I was, head bent.

“Stand, Logan,” said the king. “Ye are too tall to hold that pose so long.”

The king was tall himself, with deep-set eyes that at first glance seemed languid but concealed a sharp intelligence. They took note of the bruising on my face but when I’d straightened, he said only, “Now, what is this gift ye would not wish to have?”

Northampton spared me the need to reply by telling the king what we’d been speaking of, and so the king, with interest, made a study of the tapestry of Jacob’s ladder.

“Jacob was most fortunate to have his dream and know it came from God,” the king said, “for prophecies come often from a darker place. In Scotland, my mother’s death was spoken of before it happened by those men whose power of Sight showed them a bloody head dancing in the air. When I learned this, I sought out of certain books a way to attain this knowledge, for it is tempting to imagine that men might foretell what horse shall win at match-running, what side shall win in battle, and what way and at what age a man shall die. But all my studies led me to the sure belief such prophecies in our time are the Devil’s doing, and cannot be trusted.”

I kept silent. I knew well the king’s views on witchcraft. I’d witnessed the trials and torture and burnings of poor wretches who were accused of it, knowing that could have been me.

The king’s gaze was still upon the tapestry. “This always pleased me for another reason. I’m surprised ye do not see it, Logan.” When I looked at him, he smiled, and I began to relax. “The angels on the ladder,” he explained. “They mind me God relies upon His Messengers. And so do I.”

He was the sort of man who liked to walk while he was thinking, although the confines of this room prevented him from pacing more than several steps together. He crossed to the writing table. “Your father served me very loyally. How long now since he died?”

I said, “Five years, Your Majesty.”

“I trust your mother and your sisters are all well?”

It honored me that he would ask. “They’re very well, Your Majesty.”

The king strolled back to me. “Your elder sister is betrothed, I understand, to my wife’s groom—the African. Ye do approve?”

I might have pointed out that Roger had been born in Edinburgh, and so was Scottish, just as I was, but one should not contradict the king, and so I simply said, “With all my heart, Your Majesty.”

“Then we must see what we can do to speed their marriage,” said the king. “I have a mission for ye.” He appeared about to carry on, but stopped as one who, wanting entrance to a room, finds one door barred and seeks another. Moving to the window, he said, “Ye’ll have heard the rumors, I don’t doubt, about Prince Henry’s death.”

I knew not how to answer that. Of course I’d heard the talk. One could not work at Whitehall and not hear it, but I took the neutral path. “Forgive me. There’s aye gossip in the palace, but I pay it little heed.”

Northampton seemed approving of my answer.

The king said, “People whisper that my son’s death was unnatural. That he was poisoned. This upsets the queen. *She* pays them heed, and she would see the matter properly investigated.”

I assured him, “I stand ready at your service.”

“And I am grateful for it.” He paused again, returning to the subject of my mission by a sideways route. “There is one man who was much closer to my son than any other.”

I knew what name he’d say afore he spoke it. Everyone had seen that one man sitting as the lone attendant in the prince’s funeral chariot beside the black-draped effigy, and looking as though it were his own son who had been lost.

“Sir David Moray,” said the king, “will hold the answers we do need, if any man has knowledge of the truth.”

Northampton said, “I wrote to him requesting his cooperation, but his only answer was to travel into France. I fear that shows a guilty conscience.”

“Aye.” The king looked grim, and turned to me. “I need ye to arrest him and return him here to London where he can be well examined on the things he knows.”

I frowned. “Am I to go to France?”

Northampton told me that there was no need. “Sir David’s currently in Paris but is soon to be returning to his family’s home at Abercairney. We have men in place who’ll give us timely notice before he sets out for Scotland. In the meantime, you should haste you north to Edinburgh, to wait for our instruction.”

This would be the farthest distance I’d been made to travel for my work, and mentally I tallied up how many days I’d need to travel north and then return, more slowly, with a prisoner. My mother and my sisters would need somebody to guard them in my absence, and—

The king had more to say. “When ye have Moray in your custody, I wish for ye to keep a written record of whatever he might tell ye of my son. In case some accident befalls him, we at least will have that testimony.”

I felt I’d stepped from solid and familiar ground to something more uncertain. “I can promise ye, Your Majesty, if he is in my charge, I’ll see he does not come to harm.”

“Nevertheless.” The king’s smile, this time, was but slight. “My lord Northampton will be sure to give you all the paper and supplies ye need. Here, take one of my pens.”

The king liked giving gifts. He chose a pen from those laid on his desk, and I accepted it and thanked him.

He said, “Your hands, at least, escaped unharmed from your adventures last night at the tavern.”

My heart dropped. I had been too quick to think I’d been relieved. I cleared my throat. “Your Majesty, I do regret—”

“’Tis nothing.” My apology was waved aside. The king gave me his hand and once again I knelt and bowed my head. “I pray you, Logan, do me justice in your service and report, and I’ll not fail to see ye—and your sisters—well rewarded.”

That was all. He left us there alone, Northampton and myself.

Northampton met my eyes and said, "I'd imagine that went rather better than you'd feared." And then, more practically, "You should be on the road as soon as possible tomorrow morning. Once we have discussed your warrant, you may go make your arrangements. For the writing, I will hire you a scrivener, to travel with you."

Now there would be three of us—myself, Sir David Moray, and a scrivener, all traveling together. It would make the journey slower, but I did not raise an argument.

I had a different thought, now that my heart had settled back into its normal pace. "Why did he ask for me?"

Northampton's eyebrows lifted. "What?"

"The king. You said he asked for me expressly. Why?"

"I cannot claim to know the king's mind," said Northampton. "But I should imagine he desired a Scottish Messenger to carry out this mission, since your travel takes you into Scotland."

"But I'm not the only Scottish Messenger."

"Well, then, I have no certain answer for you." His tone did not change at all as he went on, "Why did you choose to leave your horse at the queen's stables, and not bring it to one of our farriers here?"

Carefully, I schooled my face. Even though I knew Northampton, having lived so long at court, had eyes and ears at work for him in many places, it still caught me off my guard to hear him casually let slip that he'd been watching *me*. I shrugged. "My horse is most particular whom he allows to hold his feet. He trusts the queen's groom."

"Ah." Northampton nodded. "Then perhaps you'll understand me when I tell you that the king, too, is particular in whom he puts his trust." He leveled his keen gaze upon me. "You'll also understand, I'm sure, that nothing must be said of this to anyone?"

"Of course." I was surprised he'd ask. He knew, as I did, that my oaths and duty bound me to keep all the details of my service secret, even from my closest friends and family. "Ye have my word."

"Not anyone," he stressed again. "This court is like a hive of

bees that swarms about the slightest scent of gossip, and it would be most unfortunate if any mention of your mission were to reach the queen.”

I frowned. “Forgive me, but I thought the king was doing this to ease the queen’s misgivings.”

“He is,” Northampton said.

I must have still been frowning, for he added the reminder, “What does pass between the king and queen is not your business, Logan. Keep your focus. Mind your orders. And remember,” he said gravely, “every wall has ears.”



“I do not like it,” Roger said. He’d come to stand with me while I ran a questing hand down Brutus’s near foreleg, testing that his tendons remained sound after this morning’s misadventure. If we were to make a journey of this length, I would not see him injured.

Roger asked, “Why now? And to a distant place?”

I glanced at him. “I did not say that it was somewhere distant.” I’d not told him anything at all about where I was sent, or why.

“It is somewhere far enough away that you’ve asked us to watch your family while you’re gone,” he pointed out.

“And will ye do it?”

“Yes, of course. The queen will any day now start her progress towards Bath, and I will keep watch over Jeannie while we travel with her.”

Owen, who’d been sitting by in his good-natured way, said, “And I’ll happily bed down within your house to see that Margaret and your mother are protected.”

It did cross my mind to tell him he should have a care where he did make his bed within my house, my sister being young and inexperienced, but I bit hard to hold my tongue for I would not insult him so. The vision I had seen of him and Margaret told me that, whatever passed between them, he would treat her honorably.

Straightening, I thanked them both.

“But still, it strikes me wrong,” said Roger. “Somewhere far. The road, alone. Who will be there at your right hand, to offer you protection?”

“Brutus,” I replied. My horse, on hearing his name, turned his head within the stall to look at me with an expectant eye, and reaching up I scratched the place behind his ear, beneath his mane, known only to himself and me. “He is a brave companion.”

Owen thought him fierce enough. “He nearly bit me, earlier this afternoon. ’Twas fortunate that Roger talked him out of it.”

Roger commented, “I would I could do likewise with his master.”

Impatience surged and made me turn. “What would ye have me do? Refuse the king? Did not ye warn me just this morn my fight with Valentine might put me in the Tower, and now ye wish to put me in the grave? One does not,” I finished, very sure, “refuse the king.”

I had not raised my voice. When I was angered, to be honest, I more often did the opposite, and spoke more low and levelly. But Roger had stepped back a pace, as though acknowledging he’d come too near the line.

We did not need apologies between us. We stood on equal ground, for I had lost my temper with a friend, and although he had prodded me I knew he was but worried for my welfare. Our exchange of looks acknowledged this, and Owen played the peacemaker by telling us a joke so bawdy that our laughter masked the noise of anyone approaching, so the voice behind us caught us unprepared.

A man’s voice, dry. “I thought tomorrow was the holiday. Or has Saint George’s Day begun already, before sundown, so ye’ve laid your work aside?”

Sir William Moray, Laird of Abercairney, was a man of middle age, near fifty, like the king. He’d been the king’s companion from the time when they’d been lads together, and had served him closely since, though now his work was in Queen Anna’s household. Formerly in Scotland he had been her Master of the Horse, until the ever-changing fortunes of the court had seen him shuffled to a new place of high favor.

He commanded great respect, and did it easily, with a decided swagger that suggested his had been a life of action.

His few words had been enough to dislodge Owen from his seat and spur him to recall a sudden need to be elsewhere, while Roger touched his hat and nodded and then melted with efficiency into some shadowed corner. I'd have done the same—this was the brother of the man the king was sending me to apprehend, and being near him while I had this knowledge was uncomfortable—but I had Brutus to saddle.

Head down, I kept on with that, while Sir William approached. "Your horse is most handsome," he said.

"I do thank ye, but don't let him hear ye. He's vain as it is."

Brutus twitched an ear, rolling his eye back at me in what could only be described as an indulgent look, as if he knew I didn't truly mean it. He *was* vain, but he had every right to be. He was a bonny beast.

Sir William remarked there were few breeds could equal the courser of Naples, and there we agreed.

All the finest features of the courser showed in Brutus, from his size and strength and clean proportions to his telltale regal head that curved its hawk-like line from eyes to nostrils. Brutus was a dapple grey, his mane and tail the shade of smoke.

Sir William said, "This cannot be the same horse that the king did give ye... what, four years ago?"

"Five years. And aye, the very same." And then, because I knew my words would likely be transmitted to the king, I said, "It was a generous gift."

"Indeed. Although I did not think the king was being generous to ye at the time, not in exchange for what you'd done."

Once again I bent my head and concentrated on the saddle's girth. "'Twas nothing."

"Most young Messengers, surprised by thieves as ye were and in danger of their lives, might well have done what the thieves ordered, given up what they were carrying, to save their skin."

“What I carry, as a Messenger, is not my own to give.” I did not tell him that I had not been surprised. I’d seen the brigands in a vision on the night afore that ride, I knew they would be lying there in wait for me, and it had taken all my courage to start down that road. But I had learned in life that what I saw could never be avoided. Fortunate or foul, it was my destiny. What saved me was that I had been forewarned, that I was on my guard, and knew from which direction they’d attack.

Sir William said, “Ye need not be so falsely modest. All of London knows your bravery, lad, and would do even had the thief ye left alive not cursed ye from the gallows so that everyone could hear. Such deeds do cry to be revealed. ’Tis why they’re well rewarded.” He was close enough now that I saw the gold glint of his earring as he tipped his head to study Brutus. “And ’tis why I thought the king should give ye something better than a stubborn, reckless three-year-old that wouldn’t heed any fool trying to ride him. This horse was difficult then.”

“Merely headstrong,” I defended him, and Brutus angled back his ears again to catch my voice as I tightened his girth to the next hole, giving him time to adjust to the pressure. I did not say what I suspected—that he had been ill-used as a colt by someone who did not appreciate his nature—but we understood each other well, and he confirmed this now by turning his head round to take my cape’s edge in his mouth and tug, a show of his affection.

“I can see he chose his master,” said Sir William. “But obedience can also have its dangers.”

Cautiously, I drew the girth one notch tighter.

He said, “I know ye have your orders, and I would not interfere. But ye should not be sent north blind. I will speak plainly.”

It were better if he did not speak at all, since I could not discuss the matter. But his rank made it impossible for me to say as much.

“Ye have a reputation, Logan, as a man of honor. So ye need to know that what they mean to do to David, to my brother, is dishonorable.” Anger raised a roughness in his voice. He paused, and

smoothed it like a wrinkle in fine fabric, and went on, "I do not hold the king responsible. He grieves the prince, the rumors rise of poisoning, he wants to put an end to them. But of those rumors, none accuse my brother. None. And those the rumors name would seek a whipping boy to stand and take their punishment."

I glanced at him in silence. He had steady eyes.

He said, "He has done nothing wrong. Ye must obey your orders, this I know, but hold that in your mind. You'll bring my brother here to London and they'll force him to stand trial for the prince's murder, and they'll judge him as they please, but he is innocent. How well will honor serve ye then?" The pause was longer this time, and it did not clear the roughness. "David grieves the prince as well. He should be given space to do so."

There was nothing I could say to that, if I could have said anything.

He cleared his throat. Lifting a hand, he gave Brutus a firm pat on the rump. "Such a magnificent animal."

Brutus forgave him the touch for the sake of the compliment.

Sir William observed, "He's been newly shod?"

"Aye."

"Well, that's good for a long journey. Have a care, Logan," was his final piece of advice, lightly given, as he turned away from me. "Keep a watch out for my kinsmen. They're thick on the ground where you're going."