

Chapter Three

In the afternoon on the nineteenth of that month, the transport helicopter set down in a field between two mountains, and we unloaded the horses and baggage.

It had been a long, noisy flight; it seemed like hours since we had seen so much as the smoke from a lonesome cabin. I had no idea how many hundreds of miles of wilderness had passed below us.

I was very glad to be on the ground, glad to pull the earplugs out. The horses were restless and stomping and Maxine's little girl, Mimi, was whining; but as soon as the helicopter with its crew of stonefaced young soldiers was gone, and the throbbing of the rotors faded away in the distance, the silence of those mountains descended around us like a healing benediction.

Everyone was affected by the silence. When you live around cities, you grow accustomed to thinking of the world as a crowded place where mankind and his works can hardly find room. But in that wild vastness, our little group of eight people seemed like a few grains of dust.

The horses were settling down. The little girl was quiet now, holding her mother's hand. Everyone was listening to the sound of the wind as it swayed the grasses, and the occasional bird, but mostly we were listening to the echoing of the silence.

"Begin," said Albert. To my surprise, everyone started

walking off in different directions. I didn't know what to do, so I just stood there with Albert.

"What's going on?" I asked him, but he tapped his lips for silence.

They were gathering wood. The women brought back twigs and sticks. The men dragged back dead boughs and broke them up. Pretty soon there was a neat pile big enough for a good size bonfire. They seemed to know when they had enough, but Émile looked to Albert for confirmation.

Albert nodded. There was a feeling of expectation, a sense of ritual. Something was going to happen, something pleasant. Whatever it was, they were looking forward to it. Even Rudy Strapp, who revealed little of what he was thinking or feeling, seemed caught up in the general anticipation.

Émile prepared the fire while everyone watched, and when it was crackling away, Albert nodded again. The women collected some of the luggage, and disappeared into a nearby grove of trees. The men started to undress, throwing their clothes into a common pile. Émile was unpacking clothes from the other bags and handing them around. He handed me a folded stack and I shook them out. I had worn clothes like these before, but only on the stage: tights and a tunic, boots and a cloak, a leather belt with a wallet and dagger, a hat with a feather, even a codpiece.

I started to pull on the tights, but Émile wagged a finger at me, pointing to my white cotton briefs. Onto the discard pile they went. Then I pulled on the tights and tied the codpiece on top. I'd never worn one before. It was made of molded leather and rather stiff, though roomy inside. It would offer a fair bit of protection from a blow or a kick.

Albert's clothes were very nice indeed, with gold thread in the tunic and fur on the collar of his cloak. After we were all dressed, we fed the fire and waited for the women in silence.

Finally they came back from the grove, wearing their new garments and dumping the old ones in the pile with ours. They were all wearing medieval riding costumes, with pantaloons tucked into soft boots and long jackets under their cloaks. The servants all wore the same colors, some kind of livery perhaps to identify them with Albert. Rudy and I were dressed similarly, with the right sides of our tunics padded with leather.

Whoever had designed all these clothes had done a good job. We were a very authentic-looking group. The men's tights were hand-loomed; the daggers had come from an armorer's forge, not a factory. Everything, even our hand-stitched leather baggage, had the unmistakable texture of handicraft. Everything, that is, except the pile of modern clothing that lay near the bonfire.

Albert picked up something from the pile, a blouse of Jenna's, and dropped it on the fire. It was made of a very light fabric and the fire consumed it in seconds. Then Jenna chose Émile's cashmere sweater and soon that was ashes. We all took turns as the pile grew smaller and smaller. It gave me a very odd feeling, as though we ourselves were getting smaller and smaller, and as if the Earth, the globe on which we were standing, was getting bigger and bigger.

The last article was a checkered scarf. Albert picked it up with two fingers and looked around the circle of faces. Everyone seemed to be holding their breath, and I remember wanting to take the scarf away from Albert and hide it somewhere safe. I didn't want to see it burn.

Albert said softly, "Goodbye," and the scarf fluttered down into the flames. When it was gone, when the last shred had changed into unrecognizable ash, I started to feel very queer. The sunshine seemed unnaturally bright, and the colors around me were very stark. I looked around at the others, but they were all focused on Albert, who seemed unusually radiant. They all seemed so happy and relaxed, but I felt very

agitated. I wanted to run, to get away. But from what, and to where?

Jenna said, "He's looking a little pale, Sire."

"Yes, I noticed," said Albert. "Well, that can happen, as all of us know." He spread his hands in a paternal gesture and looked around the group. There was a ripple of laughter. "Listen, Jack," Albert said, "we all know how you're feeling. You're a thousand miles and a thousand years from everything you've been accustomed to all your life. It's all gone. We just burned it all."

I was feeling very queasy. I looked into his face. Was he crazy? Were they all crazy? No, it was the same kindly face, the same riveting blue eyes. I felt like crying. What was wrong with me? I looked into the faces of the others, and the warmth and sympathy I saw there reassured me. Why was I acting like such a baby?

"Let's have something to eat, Émile. That's the best medicine."

"Yes, Sire."

"Now, Jack, you might be feeling quite disoriented for a few days or so, or you might snap out of this in five minutes. We just went back in time. We did! It doesn't require magic, or a time machine. It's very simple and we just did it. If you feel strange for a while, that's normal. All you can do now is breathe deeply, and let go. Just let go, Jack. Let go of all those useless things we never needed for our health and happiness and comfort and safety. Let go of the whole silly pointless poisonous modern era." With a wave of his hand, he dismissed it all. "And when you do let go, you'll be in for a very pleasant surprise, believe me!"

Émile set down two big baskets full of bread and meat and wines and cheeses and fruit. Then he passed around some

square wooden plates and brass goblets, and we all fell to.

“Thanks, Albert,” I said. “Sorry I . . .” But I had to stop because Jenna and H el ene were both clucking their tongues at me.

“Very bad manners to call his majesty by his first name, Jack,” said  myle. “You must say my king or my liege or sire or your majesty. Any of those titles will do.”

H el ene patted my shoulder. “You’ll catch on. You can call all of us by our first names just like before, except for her ladyship,” she said, indicating Jenna, who nodded and smiled. “You must call her my lady or your ladyship until her coronation. After that it’s your majesty or my queen.”

Down one side of my body I thought it was the most insane thing I’d ever heard. I was supposed to call Albert *your majesty*? I was supposed to call Jenna, the bare-assed horsewoman, *my queen*? Down the other side I just wanted to get it right. I wanted to know how to behave. I didn’t want to sound stupid or foolish. In between the one side and the other there was a very uncomfortable place of confusion, reminiscent of the way I felt after my theater was burned; I wanted that feeling to go away. I wanted both feet on the ground again, and I didn’t much care which side of a thousand years of history they came down on. So I gave them my best courtly bow and said, “Thank you, my friends. A thousand pardons, my liege.”

Jenna laughed. “Well done, Jack. You’re a natural.”

“Thank you, my lady,” I replied in grave tones of deepest respect, meanwhile thinking about how her ladyship looked in the buff. “Your servant, as always.”

“Look,” said Albert. “We have company.”

A child stood staring at us from the edge of the clearing; when we turned to look, he ran off into the woods.

“Boy!” Albert cried. “Come here, boy!”

The little face peeped out from behind a tree.

“Come out now. Don’t be frightened.”

The boy came out of the woods, walked slowly towards us, and stopped at a very respectful distance. He must have been seven or eight years old, barefoot, and wore only a crude pair of shorts belted with a twist of rope. His eyes were very wide as he stared at us, and at Albert in particular.

“That’s a good boy,” said Albert. “Now, your name is Warren, is it not?”

“Aaron, your majesty,” said the boy, his eyes even wider now.

“Of course,” said Albert. “I meant to say Aaron. Your father is Walter the smith.”

“Yes, your majesty.”

“I know your father, Aaron. He’s a good man. Now tell me what you want to be when you grow up.”

The boy seemed puzzled at the question. “A smith, your majesty, just like my dad.”

“Of course you do. Are you helping your father in his forge?”

“Oh yes, your majesty, almost every day.”

“That’s a good boy. Now what do you have in your hand?”

“A sling, your majesty,” he said, holding out a supple strip of leather that was widest in the middle and tapered at the ends.

“Thank you,” said Albert, “but I meant in the other hand.”

The boy’s hand came slowly from behind his back. “Partridge, your majesty,” he said, holding up the bird. The head lolled back and forth.

“Did you kill the bird with your sling?”

“Yes, your majesty.”

“Hit it right in the head, did you?”

“No, your majesty. I broke its wing. Then I wrung its neck.”

“Are you allowed to hunt birds?”

Again the boy seemed puzzled. “Yes, your majesty.”

“Then why did you hide it behind you?”

“Um . . . I . . .”

“Did you think we would take it away from you?”

“Oh no, your majesty, for you have so much!” He was looking at the food we had spread out on our picnic blanket.

“That’s a clever boy. Of course we won’t. Here’s some bread and cheese for you. Now I want you to remember something, my boy. Never hide anything from your king. Do you think you can remember that?”

“Yes, your majesty.” I could see that he wanted to start eating the bread and cheese right away, but he hesitated, eyeing Albert.

“Very good, my boy. Now run along and tell your father that the king sends his best wishes.” And run he did, eating as he ran.

“That boy,” Albert said to me, “was born here. He has never been out of the kingdom, or seen anything except what there is here.”

I didn’t know what to say. How amazing it was! That barefoot boy had been hunting birds with a sling. Now he would tell people he had seen the king, and that the king had given him bread and cheese. For some reason that amazed and delighted me, and made me forget all about being anxious and disoriented.

After we finished eating, we put saddles on the horses, very beautifully made saddles of an ancient design with a high

pommel and cantel.

“Where did these saddles come from, Sire?” It felt odd giving Albert that title, but he was the king, wasn’t he?

What made a man a king? He had to have a kingdom and some subjects. Was that all there was to it? No, he had to have the power and the authority of a king. Did Albert really have a dungeon to soften people up when they forgot who the boss was? He would have to have something like that. If the alternative to obeying the law wasn’t sufficiently unpleasant, people would just do as they pleased.

If he did throw people into his dungeon, it was a cinch he didn’t do the throwing himself. So he had to have guards, knights, or an army, something to back him up. Well, I would get the chance to see it all, and in the meantime it certainly couldn’t do me any harm to give him his title.

“These saddles were made right here in the kingdom by the leather craftsman who works with my armorer. He also designed your tunic.”

I took another look at my tunic. It was warm and strong; slightly heavy because of the leather, but comfortable all the same. “Why is the padding all on one side?”

“It’s to protect your sword arm and the right side of your body.”

Now that he had told me, I wondered why I hadn’t thought of it myself. When I used to fence, I wore a canvas jacket that did exactly the same thing. I had been asking myself about the nature of power and authority in Albert’s kingdom. Was my sword arm, as he called it, supposed to be part of that power? Okay, the padding protected the right side of my body, but from what, and from whom?

Albert nodded to Émile, and Émile undid the straps on one of the bags and took out a sword in a scabbard with a belt and a harness to sling it. I could see immediately by

the distinctive hilt that it was a rapier, and that surprised me because the rapier had not made its appearance in history until the Renaissance. Émile approached me and in his usual graceful way held out the harness so I could slip an arm into it. It was the same way he might have helped a guest with his coat. I put my arm through the leather strap and fastened the belt around my waist. I had always enjoyed wearing swords on the stage because it had made me feel more complete, and I had that same feeling now. I felt more substantial, more masculine, my feet planted more firmly on the earth.

Now Émile brought Rudy a sword and helped him slip it on. He wore it well, which is to say that he let the sword wear him. A sword is such a powerful symbol that it can never be completely manipulated or controlled. One has to have a partnership with a sword, a mutual respect. You wear it, and it wears you. This is also one of the secrets of fine fencing.

Then Émile brought Albert a sword in an ornate scabbard, and after Albert had buckled up the belt, he drew the sword. It was also a rapier, a heavy and broad-bladed early version, to be sure, but a rapier all the same.

It is said that an Italian swordsmith named Agrippa was the first to create a sword designed to make a small hole through the body. The popular broadsword that came before it, eons old, was a chopping and cutting weapon, and well suited to its work, but people had become very clever at sewing up and healing the wounds it made. A deep gash might take some time to heal, be sore and troublesome, and even crippling. But a little hole through the middle of the body, with internal bleeding and a guaranteed infection, was almost always fatal.

“Kneel, Jack Darcey,” said Albert in fine, round tones. I saw what was coming, and I had no objection. Down on one knee I went. I felt the sword touch me on both shoulders and on the top of my head.

“Rise, Sir Jack, knight and protector of the realm.”

I rose to my feet. To say that I was amazed does not quite cover it. There are things one dreams of becoming, but never expects to be.

I felt a soft hand on my shoulder and turned. Jenna went up on her toes to kiss me on the cheek, a little too near the mouth; but when I glanced over at Albert, he was putting up his sword, blissfully unaware that he had a snake in his parlor.

“Congratulations, Sir Jack,” she said, and her eyes were full of sweet promises. I noticed Rudy Strapp watching me, and the way he was standing gave me a flash of intuition.

“Not Sir Rudy, by any chance?”

“Even so,” he said, and bowed very slightly in a courteous way.

I nodded appreciatively. “What am I supposed to call you?”

“You can call me Rudy when we’re alone because we’re equals. But in front of the common people, we always use our titles.”

“I see.”

“Why are you smiling?”

“I just became a knight. Didn’t that make you smile?”

What I had really been smiling about was Rudy’s remark about the common people. Rudy, unless I missed my guess, was a commoner born in the kingdom of Detroit, or maybe Cleveland. Well, that had been in the past, or the future, depending on how you looked at it. We had all slipped through a doorway in time, and now our reality was different. It would be wise, I thought to myself, to keep these little ironic notions to myself, to follow along and see what there was to see. I had no great nostalgia for the civilization I had left behind. Nor

had my prospects there been very good. If fortune or fate was willing to deal me a whole new hand of cards, then I would play them and see what turned up.

Now we mounted up and rode on our way: one king, his lady, two knights, and a livery of servants. There was no track or trail by which we rode, but our direction was easterly by the sun toward a pass between the mountains.

Soon we had more company: all boys at first, hunters like Aaron, wearing homespun clothes and carrying slings and sticks. Word of our arrival had spread quickly. Then there were girls in woolen dresses down to the ground, who pointed shyly and whispered to each other as they walked along beside us.

By the time we topped the rise between the mountains, we had two dozen children in our procession. It surprised me that they didn't shout or even talk, though they seemed excited and happy for the novelty and whispered together quite a lot. One little boy cried out, "Ho, King Albert!" in his excitement, and got himself a rap on the head from one of the older boys. Very polite they were, these commoner boys and girls.

As we crested the pass, an old woman in a shapeless robe and cowl was waiting for us with a little bouquet of flowers which she held up for Jenna. "Good day, my lady," she said. "Good day, your majesty." There was no telling how old she was, but she seemed solid on her feet and her voice was deep and husky.

"Good day, old mother," said Albert, leaning down to take up the flowers. He passed them to Jenna, who smiled and looked pleased. "And how is your health?"

"Good, your majesty, though I'm about as old as a person can get."

"And how does my kingdom?"

"Good enough, your majesty, now that you're home."

Albert looked thoughtfully at the old woman, then dismounted and took her aside. They spoke quietly and earnestly, though I couldn't hear what they were saying.

It was late in the afternoon; the sun was sinking behind me and the valley before me was slipping into the shadow of the mountain. It was a large valley, long and wide, with two rivers I could see in the last rays of the sun. Here and there, so tiny I could easily have missed them, were wisps of smoke above the trees. And as the daylight faded away, here and there I could see specks of light.

It was then that I truly believed in Albert's kingdom. Costumes and swords hadn't convinced me. Even that flock of children hadn't really done it. Wisps of smoke and specks of light had brought me to the truth of it: hundreds of miles from anywhere, tucked away between northern mountains, there really was a kingdom where Albert was king.

Jenna rode up beside me, and we sat there wrapped in our cloaks, knee to knee, gazing down into the valley where the tiny lights flickered. Sometimes there were none at all, and the valley looked dark and dead. Sometimes as many as three or four little specks could be seen at once, and then the valley seemed alive with people.

"How many live here?" I asked her.

"I don't have any idea. Albert could tell you roughly how many holdings there are. With all the little babies, there must be several thousand at least."

"Does anybody count them from time to time?"

"What for? There's a tithe to be collected, but tithing is done by the holding, not by the head. I suppose I shall have to know more about this when I am queen."

That made me look at her more closely, for she said it so sadly. After a few moments she turned to me. "Oh, Jack," she whispered, "I hope it won't be too boring! Albert is always

very busy when he's here, and now that we're staying forever . . . Promise me I can count on you for some diversion now and then."

"Of course you can count on me, Jenna." I didn't know what else to say. I felt like I could see her nude body right through her riding habit, cloak and all. But I couldn't be sure what she was asking, or what I was promising either. I had never had an affair with a queen in a medieval kingdom before. And yet I wanted her. I yearned for her.

"I think we're ready to go," said Jenna, reaching under my cloak to give my hand a squeeze. Albert was mounting up. I could not see his face in the lingering twilight. The old woman was nowhere to be seen. Only two or three children still remained. I was wondering how the eight of us, including Maxine's little daughter, were going to ride down the other side of the pass in the dark, when I heard distant hoofbeats and saw lights approaching from below.

Five mounted men, two with torches, were coming up the draw. Even from a distance they had the look of soldiers, sitting on their horses very straight, and riding in a rhythm that connected them all as a unit. As they drew near, I saw that they were wearing leather armor with iron trim. They had very light saddles that resembled leather cushions with stirrups. Four of them wore long daggers and carried iron-trimmed staffs. The fifth man wore a rapier, and was every inch an officer. His hair and beard were dark and curly, and he had alert eyes that looked black in the torchlight. He must have been around forty, and was in excellent shape, wiry, close-knit, centered.

"Hail, King Albert!" he cried as they all reined in. Each of them thumped his chest with his fist in a robust salute. They all looked happy to see Albert.

"Hail, Sir Leo, well met," said Albert. "How did you know we were here?"

“Good news travels swiftly, my liege. The hare told the deer and the deer told the bird. Is this the fencing master?”

“Leo, this is Sir Jack, the last but not the least. Jack, this is Sir Leo, marshal of the garrison.”

“Well met, Sir Jack,” said Leo, smiling and extending his hand. When I reached out he grasped me by the forearm, so I gripped his in return, and that was the way we shook our greeting. It seemed quite natural and I rather liked it. He had a slight eastern European accent and I liked that too. In fact, I took an instant liking to him and I hoped we would be friends.

“Well met, Sir Leo,” I replied. “Were you expecting me?”

“I’ve been looking forward to meeting you. The king says you have a way with a sword.”

“I’m a bit out of practice.”

“No matter,” he said, indicating the valley below with a wave of his hand. “Here we have plenty of time to practice.”

“It’s late, Leo, and this girl is shivering,” said Albert, pointing to Mimi. Leo quickly organized the march, and soon we were riding down into the valley by the flickering glare of the torches.

It had been a long day and a long journey. It had begun with our loading of the bags and horses into a huge iron bird that growled like thunder as it flew. That had been at least a thousand years ago, or maybe it was a thousand years in the future. I didn’t care anymore. My brain had gone to sleep. By the time we reached our shelter for the night, I hardly glanced at it though I saw there was a fire inside. Someone put a bowl of soup in my hands, but I could barely eat for yawning.

“Put him to bed, Leo,” said Albert. “He’s as sleepy as this girl.”

Gentle laughter rose from the crowd, but I didn't mind. Candlelight led me to warm blankets on a pallet bed, and I could barely tuck them up around me before I was fast asleep.