



**THE DRAGONS OF
ARCHENFIELD**

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Prologue

He was coming down the hill when they struck. The ambush was so sudden and so unexpected that it threw him into a complete panic. Warnod had been riding along in the fading light of a warm evening with a reflective smile on his face and a feeling of deep satisfaction coursing through his whole body. The visit to Hereford had been a delight in every respect. As his horse picked its way along a track through the woodland, Warnod sat back in the saddle and savoured each detail of his outing. It had been worth all the effort. He would cheerfully have ridden ten times as far for a taste of such happiness.

The first arrow jerked him out of his reverie. It came whistling murderously from the gloom and shot across his path before thudding into the trunk of a sycamore. A second arrow was much closer, passing within a foot of his shoulder before spending its fury deep in the undergrowth. Warnod did not wait for a third missile. His heels kicked hard and the horse was soon plunging down the hill in a mad gallop. Heart pounding and mind ablaze, Warnod ignored the bushes that lashed out at his legs and the branches that scratched angrily at his face. Hoofbeats drummed behind him in a terrifying rhythm. Fond thoughts of Hereford were wiped savagely away. Survival was paramount.

Warnod was less than a mile from home, but it seemed an impossible distance away. He might never even reach it. The thunder of pursuit was getting louder and louder. They were gaining on him. Not daring to look over his shoulder, he strained his ears to work out how many horses were behind him. Six? Eight? A dozen? Far too many riders for him to fight off. Warnod had only a dagger at his waist and that was more for ornament than protection. He had no chance against a gang of armed robbers.

Riding hell for leather, he took his mount through a grove of alders with reckless unconcern and came out into open country. He was a more visible target now. The chasing pack fanned out across the field as they closed in on their quarry. Warnod swung his horse towards the deepest shadows in search of cover. He cursed his luck and berated himself for being caught so hopelessly off guard. His instinct for danger had been blunted by

the visit to Hereford. On the journey home, he had felt supremely safe and with good reason.

Archenfield was no longer the turbulent frontier zone that it had once been. It was a more peaceable community. Lying in the south of the county, cradled by the Wye and its serpentine tributary, the River Monnow, it was an area with rich soil and lush pastures. By force of arms and strength of purpose, the Normans had imposed a stability on the district. Archenfield was a portion of Wales that now belonged irretrievably to England. An air of resignation had descended on the indigenous Welsh population. They had come to terms with Saxon settlers and with Norman overlords. Violent attacks from across the border were things of the past – or so Warnod had believed until that moment.

Was he the victim of a Welsh raiding party? Or were these men fellow Saxons with a grudge against him? Warnod had no time to speculate. The riders had spread out in an arc behind him now, and seemed to be about to encircle him. Finally and miraculously, his house came into view. The low clump of buildings beside the trickling stream offered the only hope for him. His old mare was no match for the horsemen at his back. If he tried to ride on to the village beyond, he would be caught before he got close enough to raise the alarm. Warnod's home was his promise of salvation.

He kicked a final spurt out of his animal and urged it on with harsh commands. Warnod was trembling with fear now. His head was aching, his mouth was dry, his hands were clammy, and his face was lathered with

sweat. The last hundred yards were a protracted agony for him. The hounds of hell were on his tail. Somehow, he forced himself through the ordeal to reach the beckoning safety of his home. Reining in his horse, he leapt from the saddle and ran to the door of the house. He pushed it open, dived inside, slammed the door shut behind him, then dropped the stout wooden bar into place. They would need a small battering ram to get at him now.

Panting hard, Warnod yelled out in the darkness.

‘Elfig! Hywel! Close the shutters!’

But his servants were nowhere to be found. His voice echoed through the empty house with rising desperation.

‘Elfig! Hywel! Where *are* you!’

Warnod stumbled quickly through the murky interior of the building and saw that the narrow windows had already been shuttered. They could not fire their arrows at him through the apertures. The house was secure. He could take some comfort at last. Relief flooded through him, but it was cruelly short-lived. Loud banging on the door made him start with fright. He had not escaped their clutches after all. They were going to smash their way in to get at him.

Groping his way through the gloom, he felt along a wall until his hands closed gratefully on the hilt of his sword. The weapon instilled some courage in him. They would not take him without a fight. Now in his thirties, Warnod was still strong and fit. He would defend himself with honour. Ridiculously outnumbered, he would at least make sure that he killed some of his adversaries before he

was himself cut down. He would die with a bloody sword in his hand like a true Saxon thegn.

The house was a long, low structure divided into bays. Its walls were solid oak, its roof thatched, and its floor was sunk into the earth. The door was reinforced with extra timbers, but it could not indefinitely withstand such an unremitting assault. Sooner or later, they would batter a way into his home. Taking a stance at the door, Warnod held his sword ready and waited for the first sound of splintering wood.

It never came. Instead, the hammering ceased altogether and an eerie silence followed. Had they given up and retired from the scene? Were they looking for another mode of entry? He ran to a window and peered through the tiny crack. Nobody was in sight. He moved to a window on the other side of the house and applied his eye to a split in the wooden shutter. There was still no sign of life. Warnod's spirits rose. Had he escaped his enemies? Was he being spared? Could he dare to relax?

The answer was immediate. A new and appalling sound broke through the silence and shattered any foolish hopes he may have had. It was the helpless cry of an animal in great pain and it grew in volume and intensity until it was quite deafening. Unable to get at their human prey, they were slaughtering the cow in the byre. Warnod was outraged. His first instinct was to rush to the aid of the creature, but that was clearly what they were tempting him to do. He would be casting aside his own chance of survival in a forlorn attempt to save an already doomed cow.

A last pitiable groan of protest was followed by a ragged cheer from the crude butchers. Hooves and feet approached the house. Warnod went back to a window and peered through the crack again. Five figures came into view, but it was too dark to identify them. Four were on horseback, the fifth on foot. It was this last man who attracted Warnod's attention. Selecting a spot some thirty yards or so from the house, he knelt down and – using his sword like a spade – began to dig away the turf. Warnod was utterly mystified.

Another man joined the others from the direction of the byre, lugging a heavy wooden pail and spilling some of its contents along the way. Warnod was even more confused. A hole in the ground and a bucket of water? What strange game were his tormentors playing? One of the horsemen looked up at the house and gave a signal to unseen accomplices. A hideous crackle soon went up as they set fire to the thatch.

Warnod shuddered with horror. They were going to burn him alive!

He rushed to the door and flung the bar aside. Better to die fighting against overwhelming odds than to be eaten up in the flames. But he had no choice in the matter. When he wrenched at the door, it would not open. He realised in a flash what had happened. The men had not been trying to hammer a way into the house. They had been boarding up its one exit so that he would be trapped inside.

Hacking wildly at the door with his sword, he felt the first wave of heat hitting him like a body blow. It made him stagger back. He looked around for another means

of escape and dived at a window, flinging back the shutter in the hope of being able to squeeze through the narrow gap. But the window frame had also been boarded up from outside. His home had been deliberately turned into his coffin.

The thatch was a raging inferno now and he had to dodge the sparks that showered down all over the floor. The walls of the house were also alight so that he was surrounded by a hissing rectangle of flame. Smoke attacked his eyes and lungs. Scorching heat buffeted him to and fro. The sword fell from his hand as he lumbered around in the brilliant light. Jeers of delight came from the watching men. They had set a cunning trap and he had fallen into it.

Warnod saw that now. They had not meant to ambush him at all. He had been allowed to escape so that they could drive him back to a house already prepared for him. To serve their malign pleasure, he would be burned to a cinder. The heat was now overpowering and the smoke all but blinded him. Lurching across to the window, he summoned up all his remaining energy to shout his defiance at them, but the words died in his throat. What he saw through the greedy flames robbed him of all power of speech.

Everything was lit up by the repulsive glow of the fire. The man who had dug at the turf stepped back to admire his handiwork. He had cut a shape in the ground, inches deep and some two yards in length. The profile was crude but instantly recognisable. The man with the pail poured its contents onto the bare earth and Warnod saw that it

was not water at all. By the glare of the blaze, he watched the thick scarlet liquid that plopped from the bucket stain the ground, which had been exposed by the digging. It was the blood of the slaughtered cow.

All resistance now left him. His tunic, his shoes, even his hair caught fire. The pain was indescribable. Overcome by smoke and roasted by the surging heat, he collapsed in a heap on the floor, taking with him the memory of what he had seen carved in the ground and enriched with fresh blood.

It was the emblem of Wales.

Y Ddraig Goch.

The Red Dragon.

Chapter One

Herefordshire gave them a wet welcome. For the last few hours of their journey, a steady drizzle fell on the little cavalcade and severely dampened their spirits. A stiff breeze added to their discomfort, hurling the rain into their faces, plucking at their bodies, and unsettling the horses. Progress was slow and tedious over the muddy ground. Their chosen route offered no protection from the elements.

Ralph Delchard was glistening all over with moisture.

‘A curse on this rain!’

‘It will soon ease off,’ said Gervase Bret.

‘Not before it has soaked us to the skin.’

‘Take heart, Ralph. Another mile and we are there.’ Gervase raised a finger to point. ‘Look ahead of you. The castle is within sight. We shall have food, shelter, and a warm fire there.’

‘If we are not drowned before we reach the place!’ Ralph was in a petulant mood. ‘This is madness, Gervase. Why on earth did we bother to come to Hereford? It will take us the best part of a week to get there and back, yet our duties will be discharged in a couple of days at most. What, in God’s name, are we *doing* in this rain-sodden county?’

‘Obeying orders.’

‘Ha!’

Gervase smiled. ‘We are on the king’s business.’

‘The business of a conqueror is conquest. I should be leading my knights in battle against the Welsh, not dragging them through this quagmire to wave a few mouldy documents under someone’s nose.’

‘Those documents are important,’ argued Gervase. ‘They help to bring silver into the royal coffers. War is costly. You cannot raise an army without money.’

Ralph was scornful. ‘Peace unnerves me. I am a soldier born and bred. Put a sword in my hand and I come alive.’

‘Even in *this* weather?’

The drizzle seemed to thicken and the breeze blew it even harder into their faces. Ralph Delchard pulled his cloak more tightly around him. He was a big, boisterous, well-built man with a vigour that had not been sapped by middle years. His face was raw-boned but handsome, with an authority in the eyes and the upward tilt of the chin. Having borne arms at the Battle of Hastings, he

was a Norman lord with the pride of a victor still burning deep inside him.

At the same time, he was capable of laughing at himself.

‘No, Gervase!’ he said with a chuckle. ‘I am no rain warrior. Give me dry weather on the battlefield. Sunshine shows off my armour to the best advantage and puts me in the right frame of mind to kill. It is a wonderful feeling.’

‘I will take your word for it, Ralph.’

‘Have you never wanted to meet a man in armed combat? To test your strength and skill against a worthy adversary?’

‘Never.’

‘Come, Gervase. You dissemble.’

‘Never, I swear it.’

‘Even you must have a spark of aggression somewhere.’

‘If I do, I seek to contain it.’

‘Supposing you were pushed to the limit?’

‘Words are the best weapons to resolve a quarrel.’

‘And if Alys were in danger?’ asked Ralph, teasing his young companion. ‘If some brutish Viking were molesting your beloved, would you stand calmly by and try to talk him out of it? Alys would not thank you for that.’

‘It is not a fair question.’

‘Every man can be roused to kill. Even you.’

‘At least I would take no pleasure in it.’

Gervase Bret was uncharacteristically sharp with his friend. As a rule, he took Ralph’s good-natured mockery in his stride, but it had caught him on a raw spot this time. Betrothed to Alys, he was constantly being sent away from her, and the absences were increasingly difficult to

bear. Gervase was a slender man of medium height with the studious air of a Chancery clerk. An astute lawyer, he had a boyish innocence that made him look much younger than his twenty-five years and a mature intellect that made him seem decades older. He and Ralph made an effective team and he did all he could to avoid friction between them.

His apology came hard upon the irritable rejoinder.

‘I take that back, Ralph. I spoke harshly and hastily.’

‘There was a grain of truth in what you charged.’

‘Mention of Alys provoked me.’

Ralph grinned. ‘Alys would provoke any man. She is very beautiful and you are very fortunate. I worship the lady. If the truth be told, I called up her fair name out of envy.’

‘Envy? Of whom?’

‘You and Alys. No matter how hard the rain or how cold the wind, thoughts of her will keep you dry and warm. And while *you* trudge through the mud of this godforsaken place, Alys waits in Winchester and dreams of nothing but her wonderful Gervase.’ Ralph shrugged. ‘Love is truly a blessing. Lose it and you feel excommunicated from life.’

Gervase was surprised to hear such serious comment from his friend. Ralph Delchard was normally such a jovial and extrovert character. It was true that he became soulful after too much wine, and had even been known to break into maudlin song, but he rarely talked about the problems in his private life. His wife had died years before trying to bring their only child into the world and the boy

soon joined his mother in the grave. A contented man had been cut completely adrift. Interest had waned, purpose wilted. Ralph usually hid those painful memories behind a whirl of action.

‘Have you never thought to marry again?’ asked Gervase.
‘Nobody could replace Elinor.’

‘Many ladies would like the opportunity to try.’

‘Then that is what they may do!’ said Ralph with a chortle. ‘Let them come, one and all. Save for battle, there is no greater pleasure than wenching. I can tell you now that I look to find a comely lady or two in Hereford to take the sting out of this interminable journey. What else are women for?’

Gervase bit back a reply and took a deep breath. ‘I will not rise to the bait this time.’

‘Then I’ll not dangle it before you.’ He leant across to Gervase and lowered his voice. ‘Many have taken Elinor’s place in my bed; none will ever oust her from my heart.’

‘So it is with me and Alys.’

Ralph nodded. He became suddenly brisk and barked out a command, slapping the rump of Gervase’s horse with the palm of his gauntlet and spurring his destrier into a canter that brought loud protest from the two riders directly behind him. Canon Hubert and Brother Simon were spattered in even more mud as a fresh volley was thrown up by the flashing hooves. Hubert was a round, fat, self-satisfied prelate with an endless supply of red-cheeked, righteous indignation. Seated on a donkey that was all but invisible beneath his bulk, he ordered Ralph to slow down, then blustered impotently when his

own mount quickened its pace to catch up the others. Brother Simon was a Benedictine monk buried deep in his black cowl, a laconic and emaciated man who had chosen the skinniest horse in Christendom to match his ascetic tastes. Clinging to the pommel of his saddle as his horse lunged forward, Simon bounced along precariously and prayed for all he was worth.

They were twelve in number. Eight men-at-arms from Ralph's own retinue rode in pairs behind the holy men and towed the sumpter horses after them. An escort was vital on such a long journey. Like their lord, the knights wore helm, hauberk, and sword, and rode upon trained warhorses. Four of them carried a lance and four had bows slung across their backs. Necessary escorts on the long trail from Winchester, they would be able to lend force and status to the work of the commissioners.

Ralph Delchard, Gervase Bret, Canon Hubert, and even the unsoldierly Brother Simon knew the value of a military presence while they were about their business. The men themselves hoped for some action and adventure in Hereford. It had been a tame, uneventful ride so far and they had exhausted all their crude jokes about the adipose canon and the spectral monk. With their destination rising up before them, they goaded their horses into a steady canter.

As they approached the city from the south-east, Gervase also felt a glow of anticipatory pleasure. Their work would not be too onerous, but it promised to be full of interest. He glanced across at Ralph and called out above the jingle of harness and the thud of hooves.

‘Who will greet us this time?’ he asked. ‘What creatures await us here?’

‘Creatures?’

‘Yes, Ralph. We met with wolves in Savernake Forest and ravens in the Blackwater Estuary. What does Hereford hold?’

‘The most dangerous animals of all, Gervase.’

‘Dangerous?’

‘More savage than wolves, more sinister than ravens.’

‘What are they?’

‘The worst foe that any man can encounter.’

‘Wild bears?’

‘No, Gervase,’ shouted his friend. ‘Churchmen!’

As they walked side by side into the choir, the noise was ear-splitting. Carpenters, woodcarvers, stonemasons, and smiths seemed to be everywhere, filling the cathedral with the most unholy sounds and adding unbearably to the din by raising their coarse voices above it. The visitor was profoundly shocked. He watched a block of stone being winched up to the top of a pillar by a giant of a man who was whistling at his trade as if completely unaware that he was on hallowed ground. God’s work was being done by mindless heathens.

Idwal turned an accusatory glare on his companion.

‘This is sacrilege!’ he exclaimed.

‘No,’ said the other calmly. ‘Burning the cathedral to the ground was sacrilege. That, I have to remind you, was the work of your compatriots from across the border. Rebuilding is an act of faith. Bishop Robert has

decreed that the work be advanced as swiftly as possible.’

‘By this crew of noisy infidels?’

‘They are skilled craftsmen, Archdeacon.’

‘But wherein lies their skill?’ demanded the irate Welshman. ‘In taking the Lord’s name in vain? In turning His house into a fishmarket? Listen to that appalling sound!’

The dean was imperturbable. ‘Building is a noisy occupation,’ he said easily. ‘No man can carve solid oak or chisel rough stone in silence. And the fellows must talk to each other or how else can they know what is needed and when?’ He put a hand on the other’s shoulder and eased him towards the transept. ‘Let us step outside and leave these good men in peace.’

‘Peace!’

‘The rain may have stopped by now.’

Dean Theobald was a tall, slim, dignified man of fifty in canonical robes. He moved with a stately tread and towered over the little Welshman beside him. Conducting his visitor back out into the fresh air, he took him far enough away from the building work for the clamour to subside to a distant hum. Idwal was clearly going to be a troublesome guest.

‘How is Llandaff?’ Theobald asked politely.

‘Quiet!’

‘Your cathedral church was not razed to the ground.’

‘Indeed not,’ said Idwal, ‘but it has suffered many other humiliations. I see it as my mission in life to right some of the terrible wrongs that have been inflicted upon us.’

‘Wrongs?’

‘I mention but one. All else follows from this.’ He flung back his tattered lambskin cloak and drew himself up to his full height. ‘A Bishop of Llandaff should not have to kneel to an Archbishop of Canterbury.’

‘Lanfranc is a great man.’

‘The good archbishop may be three parts saint and one part human being, but that does not entitle him to hold sway over the Welsh nation. Llandaff had a church when Canterbury was still overrun by miserable pagans. The bright light of Christianity shone upon Wales centuries before its rays deigned to touch Kent.’

‘An interesting argument,’ said the dean tactfully.

‘You will hear it in full before I leave Hereford.’

Theobald groaned inwardly. ‘I feared that I might.’

Idwal was the Archdeacon of Llandaff Cathedral in South Wales. A small, wiry, animated man in his late thirties, he had a manic glint in his eye and a combative nature. His piety and intelligence were not in doubt, but they were allied to a fierce patriotism. There was a flamboyance about his language and gesture that seemed incongruous in someone so shabbily dressed. His shoes were almost worn through, his hat was shapeless, and his cloak looked as if it had been dragged through every patch of mud on the long road from Glamorgan.

Dean Theobald had a reputation for being able to get on amicable terms with almost anyone, but he sensed that he might have met his match in Idwal. There was something about the voluble Welshman that made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up in alarm. Welcoming the archdeacon

would be nowhere near as pleasant as bidding him farewell.

‘How long will you be with us?’ he asked.

‘As long as it takes,’ said Idwal.

‘A couple of days? A week?’

‘We shall see.’

‘There surely cannot be much to detain you here,’ said Theobald, probing for enlightenment. ‘If your bishop has sent you on a tour of your native country, you will not wish to spend much time on the wrong side of the border.’

‘Christianity knows no frontiers.’

‘That is certainly true.’

‘Besides, I could not come so close to your cathedral without paying Bishop Robert the compliment of a visit. Part of my work is to forge closer links with other dioceses. Since we regard whole areas of Herefordshire as essentially Welsh in spirit and inclination, this was an obvious port of call.’

‘It pleases us to offer you hospitality.’

‘The priests in Archenfield spoke well of your work.’

‘That is reassuring.’

‘Hardly,’ said Idwal with a wicked cackle. ‘All it means is that you do not interfere with their ministry. The churches in Archenfield are part of the diocese of Llandaff. They look to a more ancient and distinguished see for their spiritual guidance. You understand now why I feel I have a bounden duty to pay my respects to you. The Welsh have left large footprints all over this beautiful county.’

Theobald sighed. ‘Not only footprints, alas!’

‘Why do you say that?’

‘A man was murdered in Archenfield last evening. Close to the village of Llanwarne.’

‘Llanwarne!’ gasped Idwal. ‘But I spent an hour at the little church there yesterday afternoon.’

‘Had you stayed until evening, you might have witnessed the tragedy. From a distance, that is. The victim was burned to death in his own home. The flames could be seen for miles.’

‘Dear Lord above!’ Compassion brought tears into the wild eyes. ‘Poor man!’ he said with quavering voice. ‘What a dreadful way to die! May his soul rest in peace! Burned alive! I break out into a fever whenever I read the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego going into the fiery furnace – and they came out unharmed. But this unfortunate creature! The suffering he must have endured! My heart goes out to him. Tell me who he was that I may include him in my prayers.’

‘A Saxon thegn. Of no real consequence.’

‘He deserves our sympathy as much as any man,’ said Idwal. ‘Death makes us equal partners of one nation. To perish in the flames is like going to hell. Let us hope the ordeal took this noble Saxon to heaven.’ He remembered the earlier remark and blinked in astonishment. ‘But what has a murder in Llanwarne got to do with Welsh footprints?’

‘Something was carved in the turf outside the house.’

‘What was it?’

‘The signature of the killers.’

‘In what form?’

‘A red dragon.’

For the first and perhaps the only time in his life, Idwal was rendered speechless. Theobald savoured the phenomenon.

By the time they clattered into the city through St Owen's Gate, the travellers had slowed to a gentle trot. The drizzle had faded away, the wind had dropped, and the sky was visibly clearing. They were able to relax and take the measure of the place. Compared to Winchester, from which they had set out on their assignment, Hereford was small and compact. Less than a thousand people lived in a city that had a curiously cosmopolitan flavour. Apart from native Saxons and newcomers of Norman stock, it housed Welshmen, Bretons, Flemings, even a Dane or two. Frenchmanne Street lay to the north of the city as did Jews Street. The bustling market was truly a meeting place of nations. Haggling was done in many tongues.

Ralph Delchard had been duly impressed with the fortifications. It was now thirty years since the Saxon ramparts had been stormed and pulled down by Welsh raiders. The ferocity of the attack had left castle and cathedral in ruins and the whole city in a state of shock. Norman expertise had been brought to bear upon the defences. The earthwork that encircled Hereford had been raised higher and made stronger, while the ditch that fronted it had been deepened. Pierced by six gates, the city walls had also been reinforced.

A large motte and bailey castle was raised on the site of its hapless predecessor. Perched on the River Wye so that it could act as a moat on the southern side, the castle was protected on its other flanks by Norman thoroughness. As he

led the others into the courtyard, Ralph threw an admiring glance at the high, solid walls all around them, and at the massive stone building set up on the mound ahead of them and screened by an additional wall. A few guards patrolled the ramparts. Other soldiers practised their swordplay. The clang of steel showed that the armourer was busy in his workshop. Ralph felt at home.

‘Welcome to Hereford, sirs!’

‘Thank you,’ said Ralph.

‘I am Corbin the Reeve.’

The figure who greeted them beside the stables was a fleshy man in his forties with a smile that seemed more of a mask than an indication of genuine pleasure at their arrival. Seated astride a chestnut stallion with handsome trappings, Corbin wore a tunic and mantle of the finest cloth and cut. His hat was trimmed with sable. Gold rings congregated on both flabby hands. The reeve was evidently a man who liked to display his wealth.

Ralph performed the introductions, then dismounted as an ostler came to take his horse. Gervase and the men-at-arms followed suit. Canon Hubert and Brother Simon remained in the saddle. While the others lodged at the castle, they would be offered accommodation at the cathedral. Corbin also stayed mounted so that he could look down at his visitors from a slightly exalted position. His manner was lordly.

‘I trust that your business can be despatched with all due celerity,’ he said. ‘You catch us at a difficult time and we would not be diverted from our duties any longer than is necessary.’

‘Our work takes precedence over all else,’ said Ralph.

‘That is a matter of opinion, my lord.’

‘It is a matter of fact,’ added Hubert coldly. ‘We have not ridden all this way for the benefit of our health or for the uncertain joy of making your acquaintance. A royal warrant sends us here. We will not leave until we have obeyed its commands to the letter.’

‘May I know what those commands are?’ asked Corbin.

‘Of course,’ said Ralph. ‘When we choose to tell you.’

‘Nothing will be achieved without my assistance,’ warned the reeve. ‘I am here to offer help, but I cannot do that if you preserve this mystery about your needs and intentions.’

Ralph bristled at his tone. ‘Our immediate needs should be obvious to the naked eye,’ he said. ‘We have ridden long and hard through unkind weather. Rest and refreshment would not come amiss. Show my men where they are to be housed and provide someone to escort Canon Hubert and Brother Simon to the cathedral. They are not horsemen and the journey has been an act of martyrdom for them.’

‘Indeed it has,’ agreed Hubert.

‘Suffering ennobles the soul,’ murmured Simon.

‘Only in certain circumstances.’

‘If you say so, Canon Hubert.’

The reeve looked at the four of them with mild disdain.

‘This is a mean embassy,’ he observed. ‘When the first commissioners visited Hereford, they included Bishop Remigius of Lincoln, with a clerk and two monks in attendance, and three barons of high standing supported

by a troop of men-at-arms. They were shown all that there is to be shown about the disposition and ownership of land in this county. What is the purpose of this second visit and why does it carry less weight?’

‘Your horse will carry less weight if you bandy more words with me,’ said Ralph irritably. ‘Find a servant to guide my colleagues to the cathedral and see my men bestowed in their lodgings. Do you not recognise an order when you hear one?’

Corbin glowered down at him for a second before manufacturing a smile of appeasement. He clicked his fingers and waved his hands. When the soldiers were taken care of and the two ecclesiastics were led away by a servant, Ralph and Gervase were themselves taken to the living quarters in the main building. The apartment which they shared was small but serviceable, and it offered them a fine view of the Wye through its arched window. The beds were soft and other small touches of comfort recommended themselves to the weary travellers.

When they had changed out of their wet clothing, they went down to the hall to find Corbin the Reeve waiting for them. Food and drink had been set out at the end of the long oak table and a fire was crackling nearby. Their host waved them to the bench and hovered in the background as they slaked their thirst, Ralph choosing wine, but Gervase preferring the local ale. Corbin had already helped himself to a cup of wine and he drained it before taking up the conversation again. His tone was now noticeably more conciliatory.

‘I would be friends with the king’s officers,’ he said.

‘Then master the laws of friendship,’ suggested Ralph through a mouthful of chicken. ‘Or avoid my sight.’

‘How may I be of service?’

‘Do you really wish to know?’

‘Let me tell you,’ said Gervase quickly, heading off the obscenity that he knew was about to tumble from Ralph’s lips. ‘We will be in session at the shire hall early in the morning. Four witnesses must be summoned before us.’

‘Do you think you could manage that?’ mocked Ralph.

‘Tell me their names and they will be there.’

‘The first is well known to you, I think,’ said Gervase.

‘Who is he?’

‘Ilbert the Sheriff.’

‘Why do you need to question him?’

‘That is a matter between us and the sheriff himself,’ said Ralph, pouring more wine from the jug. ‘Your job is simply to bring him to the shire hall at the appointed time.’

‘Then it will not be tomorrow.’

‘It *must* be tomorrow,’ insisted Ralph.

‘The sheriff is indisposed. Who is your next witness?’

‘A man called Warnod,’ said Gervase. ‘He holds land in Archenfield and is at the heart of our enquiries.’

‘Then your journey has been wasted.’

Ralph stiffened. ‘Is this Warnod indisposed as well?’

‘Completely.’

‘Then I will have to send some of my men to bring him before us by force. *Nobody* has the right to ignore our summons. Neither earl, nor bishop, nor reeve.’ He turned to glare at Corbin. ‘We will start with this indisposed sheriff of yours. Ask – nay, tell in round terms – this Ilbert to present

himself at the shire hall at nine o'clock in the morning.'

'That will not be possible, my lord.'

'*Make* it possible!'

'The sheriff is too busy hunting.'

'Hunting!' Ralph's face turned puce. 'Ilbert dares to chase game when he is called by royal commissioners? Give us no more of this nonsense! The king's business will brook no delay.' He banged the table with an angry fist. 'We will see the sheriff when the bell for Terce is rung and this Warnod at noon. Arrange it. Do you hear me? About it now, man! Arrange it!'

'Only God could do that.'

Ralph was on his feet. 'Do you still obstruct us?'

'Let him speak,' said Gervase, easing his friend back down onto the bench. 'There has to be a good reason why the first two men we seek are not available.'

'An excellent reason,' said Corbin.

'Yes!' sneered Ralph. 'Ilbert must go hunting!'

'It is his duty, my lord. But his quarry is not deer.'

'Then what is he after?'

'Murderers,' said Corbin. 'The men who killed Warnod.'

There was a long silence as Ralph and Gervase absorbed this startling piece of information. The reeve gave a brief hearsay account of what had happened in Archenfield on the previous evening. It altered matters considerably. The Saxon thegn who was such a pivotal character in their inquiry had been summarily removed from the scene on the very eve of their arrival. The timing of his death could surely not be a coincidence. He was being silenced before he could speak to the commissioners.

The reeve was enjoying their discomfort. Two of the four people they sought would not be able to present themselves at the shire court on the morrow. Corbin relished his role as the bearer of bad news, believing that he had already drastically shortened their stay in Hereford. Suppressing a smirk, he leant forward with his palms spread wide.

‘Whom else do you wish to examine?’

‘Richard Orbec,’ said Gervase.

‘And do not dare to tell us that *he* is indisposed,’ growled Ralph. ‘Do not find an excuse for him.’

‘No, no,’ said Corbin. ‘Richard Orbec will be there.’

‘Call him at the appointed time,’ decided Ralph.

‘Call them both at the same time,’ said Gervase.

The reeve raised an eyebrow. ‘Both?’

‘Richard Orbec and Maurice Damville.’

‘*Together?*’

‘That is what we require.’

‘Richard Orbec and Maurice Damville . . . *together?*’

Corbin spluttered with amusement. ‘That is not practical. It is not wise. It is not safe.’

‘Why not?’ yelled Ralph.

‘The sheriff will have another murder on his hands.’

‘Indeed, he will!’ he said, leaping to his feet again. ‘And you will be the victim if you do not stop sniggering in our faces and obstructing the course of law. God’s tits, man! We call four witnesses and you cannot produce one of them.’

‘You may have Richard Orbec alone,’ said the reeve.

‘What about Maurice Damville?’

‘He, too, may be questioned on his own.’

Gervase was puzzled. ‘Why not both men together?’

‘Because they are sworn enemies,’ explained Corbin. ‘I would not put them in the same town, let alone in the same room. They despise each other with a deep and lasting hatred. Richard Orbec and Maurice Damville never meet, but they are at each other’s throats. And it will take more than your eight men-at-arms to break them asunder.’ A smirk played around his thick lips. ‘Do you still wish me to invite them to the shire hall at the same time?’