

# CHAPTER 4

## *1193, Sherwood Forest, Nottinghamshire*

Snow fell softly and silently on the track ahead of them, floating down from a loaded grey sky above like cherry blossom. On either side of the forest trail tall thick evergreens sported fulsome white skirts that weighed their burdened branches down low.

Sir Geoffrey Rainault tugged at the cloak slipping down his shoulders, begrudging the body warmth that escaped with the movement. Between saddle-sore legs his mount – his favourite, Edith – plodded relentlessly and wearily: a beast that had carried him across too many countries to remember. Nine months across the sun-baked deserts of the Holy Land, across the spring meadows of endless principalities and dukedoms . . . and now at last home, England, north of London and en route to the remote wilderness of Scotland.

Geoffrey shifted in the saddle to glance over his shoulder at the others: three other knights, their retinue of squires, sergeants and the token priest travelling with them to attend their five daily prayer meetings. In all, just the eighteen of them now. When they'd set out on their errand, there'd been over sixty in their party. But illness, some battlefield wounds that had gone bad and one or two skirmishes on the way home had whittled their number down. Now, those left, still intent on seeing this

lie through, looked like men ready to lie down in the winter coldness and let sleep take them.

‘Sire! Look!’ shouted one of the squires, pointing up the forest track.

Geoffrey turned back in his saddle and squinted at the bright blanket of undisturbed snow ahead of them. He could make out the perfectly still form of a man swathed in a dark hooded cloak, standing in the middle of the rutted track.

Geoffrey’s sense of caution stirred him to rein in Edith and raise a gloved hand. He heard the column of bone-weary horses and men shuffle to a halt behind him.

‘We are about King’s business, make way!’

The hooded figure remained perfectly still. The forest was utterly silent, save for the cawing of a murder of crows circling high above in the winter sky, the rasping of the horses’ breath and the clink of a harness as one of the pack horses stirred uneasily.

‘Do ye hear?’

The figure seemed not to. Geoffrey switched tongues. ‘*Nous faisons les affaires de rois!*’

A breeze tugged at the hooded cape, but the man within remained perfectly still.

*This is not good.*

Geoffrey looked at the trees either side of the track: perfect ambush terrain. They’d been jumped before by bandits on the Continent in woods much like this. The mistake back then – a mistake that had cost them a good knight and two sergeants-at-arms – had been not to form up the moment the first of them had appeared. He raised his hand and balled it to a fist – the signal for the rest to dismount and make ready for a fight.

The forest echoed with the metallic clank of buckles and belts, the rasping of chainmail and the drawing of swords from scabbards.

‘Step aside now! Or . . . I will have one of my men fire upon ye,’ said Geoffrey, beckoning forward Bates, one of the sergeants in his retinue and reliable with a crossbow. Bates drew up beside him, ratcheting back the drawstring and slipping a bolt into place.

‘A warning shot is it, sir?’

Geoffrey pressed his lips tightly. The warning had already been given. Nonetheless, he decided if one more caution could save bloodshed on such a cold and Godless day it was a breath worth expending.

‘Step aside, or ye shall be fired upon!’

For a moment the man’s response was the same. Nothing. Then, slowly, he began to stride through the ankle-deep snow towards them.

Bates turned to him. ‘Sir?’

This foolish man was going to die, then. Perhaps that was what he wanted: a martyr’s death. Geoffrey had seen too much of that these last few years – men hungry to die on the battlefield for all the promises they’d been made about sins forgiven.

‘Take him down.’

Bates swiftly shouldered the crossbow, aimed and fired. The *twang* of the string echoed off the trees as the bolt flickered across the twenty yards between them. With a smack it embedded itself into something beneath the flowing dark robes. But the man’s stride remained unbroken.

‘Good God!’ Geoffrey whispered under his breath.

The hooded man, now no more than a dozen yards away, produced a broadsword from beneath his cape with an effortless sweep of his arm.

‘Prepare to fight!’ shouted Geoffrey over his shoulder at the others. ‘Sergeants, defend the cart!’

He was joined by the other three knights, all younger, some fitter than him, but all of them prepared to die to safeguard what

lay behind them, secure in a nondescript wooden box and nestling in the back of their baggage cart.

The squires, not fighting men but hired valets, drew back to gather the horses' reins, and watch over the column's possessions. Geoffrey regarded his three brethren, all seasoned fighters, veterans of King Richard's crusade. Despite this man shrugging off the impact of a bolt – still protruding from his chest – he was sure, between the four of them, that this was to be a short fight.

The hooded man broke into a sudden sprint as he closed the last yards between them, raising the five-foot length of his cumbersome blade as if it was no heavier than a clerk's quill.

Geoffrey and the youngest, William, hefted their blades aloft, two-handed as Geoffrey had taught, poised ready to swing down. The hooded man's final stride brought him within range of strike and William swept his blade down first, aiming it at the vulnerable 'L' between neck and shoulder. His sword *clanged* on something hard beneath the cape – armour for sure. His sword hummed with vibration as it bounced off the man and continued down into the snow. The hooded man's response was a blur of movement and the glint of the broadsword through air. Young William was a dead man before his legs had begun to buckle. His head toppled down beside him into the crisp white snow, eyes still blinking surprise.

Geoffrey swung his sword in a reckless roundhouse sweep, hoping if not to cleave the man in two then at least to knock him off his balance. His sweep ended with jarring suddenness and a metallic clang. He grunted a curse. The hooded man had to be wearing a complete suit of battle armour beneath that cape, and yet he moved with the agility of a man almost naked.

The response was a whip-snap blur and before Geoffrey had fully understood the result of the blow he was looking down at the blade being yanked firmly from his sternum. In a fog of

incomprehension he found himself lying in the snow, looking up at the grey sky, the flakes settling lightly on his cheeks and nose. His mind was still dealing with the ridiculous notion that, for him, the fight was already over. He – a man who'd fought Saracens all his life, killed hundreds of men – was now reduced by a single thrust to being a pathetic panting body staining virgin snow with his blood.

Far off he was aware of voices screaming. The sound of fear and anger and the metallic clang and rasp of metal on metal: an exchange of swordplay that seemed to come to an end horrifyingly quickly. The voices receded – the squires, perhaps even the sergeants, running for their lives.

Then finally silence. He was aware of the crows still circling above, and the soft crunch of snow underfoot as someone slowly approached him.

Daylight was blocked out by the hooded man leaning over him. Geoffrey thought he caught the glint of armour amid the shadows of his cowl.

*How can an armoured man move so quickly?*

Then his fading mind was aware of another person leaning over him.

'Where is it?' said the new man.

Geoffrey spat congealing blood out on to his cheek. 'We . . . we have . . . no . . . money.'

'I'm not after your money,' said the man. 'I've come for the relic. No matter, we'll find it ourselves.'

Geoffrey's grey eyes tried focusing on him. 'Y-you . . . *know* . . . of it?'

The man's voice softened, almost kindly now. 'Yes. I'm one of your brotherhood.' Geoffrey felt a hand under his cropped hair, lifting his head out of the snow. 'Here's something to ease the pain.'

The second man, a lean face framed by long hair and a beard, lifted a glass bottle to his lips. He tasted a strong mead.

'I'm truly sorry,' said the man. 'But we must have it.' He sighed.

'The . . . the relic . . . is to . . . be taken to Scotland. It must . . . it must be kept safe for —'

'For future generations,' the man completed his words. 'Yes, I know this. That's why we're here.' He smiled. 'We *are* that future generation and we've come for it.'

Geoffrey could feel death coming fast; warm and welcoming. And yet his mind felt compelled to know more. His mission had failed. *It* was to be taken from him and now he needed assurance.

'Ye . . . ye are . . . a . . .?'

'A *Templar*? Yes.'

Geoffrey's eyes were far off now . . . looking for hosts of angels to guide him to the Kingdom of Heaven.

'We've come from near the time that it all happens . . . and we *have* to know the truth. We've come to find out. It will be safe, brother . . . I promise you that. We will keep it safe.'

The words meant nothing to the knight now. His breathing, short and rapid puffs of tainted air, finally ceased with a soft gurgle.

The man gently eased the knight's head back down on to the snow and traced the sign of the cross along the red cruciform on the man's white tunic. Then he looked up at the hooded figure, kneeling in the snow beside him. He nodded towards the abandoned baggage cart. 'It'll be there somewhere. Find it.'

The hooded man silently stood up and strode towards the cart.

'*I'm sorry*,' the Templar whispered again to the dead knight, gently closing the lids of his eyes. '*But we simply have to know*.'