

# TO DEFY A KING

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## Excerpt 1

Meeting Mahelt Marshal:

*Caversham, Berkshire, January 1204*

'It's not fair!' Nine year old Mahelt Marshal scowled at her older brothers who were immersed in a boy's game involving a pretend raid on an enemy castle. 'I want to be a knight.'

'Well you can't be,' Will answered with the superiority that came from being male, almost fourteen and heir to the Earldom of Pembroke.

'Why not?' She made a grab for his pony's reins and he snatched them out of her reach.

'Because you're a girl,' Will rolled his eyes, intimating that she was stupid. 'Girls don't go on chevauchée!' He smirked a little. 'Girls stay at home and do sewing and mind the babies. Only men go to war.'

Mahelt was having none of it. 'Women have to defend the castle when their lords are away,' she pointed out. 'Mama always governs the estates when Papa goes to war - and you have to do as she says.' She jutted her chin triumphantly and looked at Richard, who was twelve and could sometimes be persuaded to take her part. Just now, a broad grin was spread across his freckled face, but other than that he wasn't leaping to her defence.

Will was ready with his retort. 'But she has to do what our lord father says when he returns, and she doesn't put on mail and ride off to fight. Papa doesn't send her out with a lance in her hand while he stays at home, does he?'

Mahelt chewed her lip. 'I can pretend. It's all pretend anyway. You're not a man.'

Richard's grin brightened further, and Will flushed. 'But I will become one,' he said. 'You never will. Go away.'

Mahelt stamped her foot. 'I'll tell!'

'Will, let her defend the castle,' Richard said, ever the peace-maker between his argumentative siblings. 'She might have to do it one day when she's married.'

Will scowled but capitulated with a deep sigh. 'All right, but she's not a knight, and she's not riding Equus.'

Richard shrugged agreement.

'And she can be the French. We're the English.'

'That's not fair!' Mahelt squawked.

'Don't play then,' Will said indifferently.

Mahelt narrowed her eyes. She wanted to ride Will's new pony because it was nearly the size of a horse and had big brown spots on its silver-pale rump. She wanted to take him over jumps like Will did and see how fast she could make him go. Will had called him Equus, which he said was the Latin name the scribes wrote in their notes meaning 'warhorse.' Richard's docile grey wasn't the same challenge, and she had almost outgrown her own dumpy little chestnut, which was currently stabled up with a leg strain.

With a heavy sigh and bad grace Mahelt stumped off to defend the 'castle' which for the purposes of the game was the kennel keeper's storage hut. The collars and leashes were stowed here together with old blankets, hunting horns, wooden bowls, various tools and baskets, and a shelf holding earthenware pots of salve for treating wounds sustained in the hunt. Mahelt reached to one of the pots, removed the lid of plaited straw, then recoiled from a vile stench of rancid goose grease.

'Ready?' She heard Richard shout.

Her left arm crooked around the pot, Mahelt emerged from the shed and watched her brothers fret their ponies. Both boys carried makeshift lances fashioned from ash staves and gripped their practice shields at the ready. Uttering a yell, Will dug in his heels. As Equus pounded towards her, Richard following on his grey, Mahelt stood her ground, well aware they expected her to lose her courage and dash back inside the shed. She scooped up a handful of grease, feeling it cold and squidgy-soft between her fingers, and lobbed it at the oncoming horse. Will ducked and presented his shield, which took the first impact, but Mahelt released a second handful hard on the first, and it struck him over the shield rim, splattering his cloak and the side of his neck. Another scoop hit Richard's grey and, as the pony shied, Richard had to haul on the reins, and in doing so, left his guard open for a fourth handful to hit his face.

'Hah! You're both dead!' Mahelt leaped gleefully up and down. 'I win, I win!'

Will was off his horse like lightning. Mahelt shrieked and tried to run inside the shed and slam the door, but he was too fast and caught her arm. She spun round and struck his chest with her salve-covered hand, further smearing him in rancid grease. She kicked his shins and he raised his hand to slap her.

'It's dishonourable to strike a lady!' Mahelt cried. 'Papa wouldn't do it. I'll tell him!'

Will lowered his hand and gave her a disgusted shove instead. 'Do that and I'll show him what you did to my cloak! I pity whoever gets you to wife. You're a hoyden, not a lady.'

Mahelt looked down her nose, determined not to show remorse or let him browbeat her with words. It was always a contest between them as to who had the last one.

'Will, let her be,' Richard said, his own voice filled with exasperation. 'Come away. There are better places to practice. We'd get more hurled at us in a real battle than handfuls of old grease.'

With a final glare, Will flung away from her and remounted. Watching her brothers ride off towards one of the far paddocks, Mahelt was filled with equal measures of triumph and regret. She had won the battle but lost the war because they had gone off without her and after this they wouldn't be forgiving her in a hurry.

## Excerpt 2

Meeting Hugh Bigod:

*Settrington, Yorkshire, February 1204*

Hugh Bigod dismounted to examine the wolf he had just killed and wiped his spear in the tawny winter grass. Silver-grey fur ruffled in the wind. The fangs were bared in a bloody snarl, the amber eyes fixed in death. It was a young female and would have bred pups this year, but her swollen belly was not the result of fecundity, but of having gorged on the heavily pregnant ewe, she and her mate had brought down the previous day. Wolves were an endemic problem at lambing time, slinking round the sheepfolds, grey as twilight, waiting their moment. The shepherds and their dogs kept close watch, but they could not be everywhere at once and even brought in close to the homestead, there were still casualties among the flocks. At least with the kill of this female and her mate, Hugh knew he had prevented the formation of a new pack on his demesne.

Pellets of sleety snow drove slantwise into his face and caught in the fur collar of his cloak. Although his fingers were encased in mittens, his hands were numb. It was a frozen, hungry time of year for everyone, the dregs of winter hanging on even though the mornings were beginning earlier and the light was slower to leave the sky at night.

'I can have a wolfskin rug for beside my bed now,' said his brother Ralph, a gleam in his dark grey eyes.

Hugh quirked a smile at the fourteen year old who was the fire-eater of their family. If there was a brawl, Ralph was frequently at the centre. If there was excitement to be had, the same. Yet he was a good lad with a solid core of truth about him and he had kept his head and done as he was bidden during the hunt. 'With a sheepskin the other side for balance,' he replied, 'and to remind you why we hunt wolves in the first place.'

'I don't know why you want a wolf pelt anywhere near you, they stink.' said William, who, at sixteen was the closest of the brothers in age to Hugh.

'Not if they're properly tanned and aired.' Ralph refused to be set down. 'We don't share beds as we did when were babies, so why should you object?'

William looked superior. 'I wasn't objecting. I was just saying they stink. The only good place for a wolf is a midden pit.'

Hugh was accustomed to the verbal wrangling between his brothers and paid it small heed beyond minor exasperation. It meant nothing. They squabbled cheerfully among themselves – sometimes even came to blows, but the rancour never lasted and they were always united against a common foe.

Ralph was determined to have the skins, and swung the bloodied corpses across the pack pony's saddle. The beast flinched at its burden, nostrils flaring, but Ralph settled it with soothing words and fed it a crust of bread from the pouch at his belt.

Hugh remounted his courser. Her winter coat was as thick and plush as a fresh fall of snow. He had named her Arrow because of her speed and the way she could fly into a straight gallop from a standing start. She could outrun any wolf. He lifted his gaze to the clouds rolling across the sky like low grey smoke. The wind was as vicious as the bite of a wild animal. It was a day when any sane man would stay by his hearth and only stir outside of his door to empty his bowels – or deal with wolves.

He had been lord of Settrington for five years – ever since his father had granted him ten knights' fees of his own following King John's coronation. He had been seventeen then - old enough for responsibility under supervision. He had cut his teeth on these Yorkshire estates, preparing for the day when he would inherit vast tracts of fertile land and coastal villages in East Anglia and Normandy, including their castle at Framlingham with its thirteen great towers. His father was still hale and fit, but one day, Hugh would be Earl of Norfolk, and his knights' fees would amount to a hundred and eighty.

He paused by the shepherd's hut to give the herders the good news about the wolves, then rode down to the manor. As the afternoon settled towards dusk, the horses churned their way through the icy mud of the track, bitter air clouding from their nostrils and steaming from their hides. Lantern light gleamed through the cracks in the shutters of the manor house and grooms were waiting to greet the hunting party and take the horses.

'Sire, your lord father is here,' the head groom informed Hugh as he dismounted.