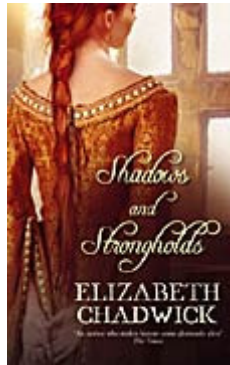


SHADOWS AND STRONGHOLDS

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INTRODUCTION

This stand alone novel is a prequel to LORDS OF THE WHITE CASTLE. You don't have to read one without reading the other, but I hope you will! Based on the Medieval 'Romance of Fouke FitzWaryn' It is the tale of Fulke FitzWarin's parents Fulke le Brun and Hawise de Dinan, and of the political and emotional forces that shaped their lives. Here's the beginning. Enjoy!

EXTRACT

Chapter One

St Peter's Fair , Shrewsbury August 1148

On the day that Brunet FitzWarin encountered the men who were to change and shape his life, he was nine years old and wandering the booths of St Peter's Fair without guardian or chaperone.

Mark, his father's serjeant who should have been keeping an eye on him, had allowed his attention to be diverted by the twin lures of a brimming pitcher and an alewife's buxom daughter at one of the refreshment stalls. Growing bored of the adult dalliance, Brunet had meandered off to explore the booths on his own. He was a lanky child with an olive complexion and eyes of so deep a brown that they were almost black, hence his nickname, his true appellation being Fulke, the same as his father. His five brothers were fair and light-eyed like their parents. Brunet it was said by the charitable was a throwback to his grandfather, a Lorraine mercenary of doubtful origins. Those less generous, muttered that he was a changeling child, a cuckoo laid in the nest by the faery folk of the Welsh hills.

He passed a cookstall where oatcakes were being smartly turned on the griddle and sold to passers by. A woman had bought several and was portioning them out amongst her swarming offspring. She reprimanded one child with exasperation, but a moment later ruffled his hair. Her eye caught Brunet's wistful gaze and with a generous smile, she tore a side from a remaining oatcake and offered it to him. Brunet shook his head and moved quickly away. It was not the oatcake that had caused him to look wistful.

'Jugs and pitchers!' a trader shouted in his ear 'Pottles and pots! Finest wares of Stamford and Nottingham!' The man waved aloft a green-glazed jug with the design of a smiling face carved in the spout. To one side, his assistant was bartering over the price of a cooking jar with a thrifty housewife, her complexion scarlet in the heat of the day. Brunet paused to watch the haggling and then sauntered on.

For three days every summer traders came to Shrewsbury and arrayed their wares in the shadow of the great Benedictine abbey of St Peter and Paul. Even the unrest of the civil war between the supporters of King Stephen and the Empress Matilda could not dampen people's enthusiasm for

bargains and rarities. Brunet's father said that if anything, the unrest made the fair even more popular because men could meet allies and discuss common ground whilst seen to be engaged in legitimate pursuits.

That's where his father was now, talking to old friends and that was why Brunet had been put in Mark's charge. They were supposed to meet him at the horse market when the abbey bell rang the hour of sext. Brunet was to have a new pony since he was rapidly outgrowing the small Welsh bay that had served him since he was six years old. Spider legs his grandmother had called him last week as if his sudden spurt of growth was a sin.

The language of trade assaulted his ears from all quarters. The Latin and French of wealthier stall holders were familiar to him. Here and there, a Welsh voice soared above a babbling undercurrent of English. He spoke a smattering of the two latter tongues - but never in his grandmother's hearing unless he deliberately wanted to annoy her.

The cloth stalls were heaving with women who eyed and fingered, discussed, longed-for and occasionally bought. Brunet's mother had a dress of gold-shot red silk just like one of the bolts draped over a booth counter. Brunet had seen it in her clothing coffer, but she rarely wore it. She had told him once with blank eyes that it was her wedding gown.

Beyond the cloth booths and the stalls of the haberdashers', Brunet paused at a trader's cart to fondle a litter of brindle hound pups. The man also had a pair of tiny little dogs with long, silky fur and colourful ribbons tied around their necks. When one of them yapped, the sound hurt Brunet's ears. Two noble women stopped to coo and exclaim. The trader smiled at them and glared at Brunet, who took the hint and moved on. He tried to imagine his father entertaining one of those little dogs in his household and grinned at the image. FitzWarin was strictly a hound man, the larger the better.

Brunet decided to make his way to the horse market. Perhaps if he looked at what was available, he could steer his father in the direction of the mount he wanted. He rather fancied a white or jet black pony this time - something different that would stand out from a common bay or brown. Of course unusual colours cost more and just because a pony looked fine, didn't mean that it was. It would have to be checked for soundness and conformation, and if the price was not right, his father would not buy, no matter how good it was.

To reach the horse fair, Brunet had to cut down the thoroughfare where the weapon smiths had set out their stalls. The sight of the shining sword blades, the axes, bows, daggers, shields, hauberks helms and sundry accoutrements of the warrior's craft seized both sight and imagination. Here was a knife in a tooled leather sheathe just like the one Mark wore at his hip, here a sword with a grip of red braid and an inscription scrolled in Latin down the raised fuller. Brunet's mouth watered. Sometimes he would draw his father's sword from its scabbard and pretend that he was the great warrior Roland, defending the pass at Roncevalles against the Infidel. His grandmother had caught him once and thrashed him for leaving sticky fingerprints on the polished iron. He had been more circumspect since - And mindful of her words, he always cleaned the sword on his tunic before putting it away.

Several knights and their squires arrived at the booth where Brunet was eyeing up the weaponry. A noble with crisp black hair, greying at the temples and a neat beard hugging his jawline, asked to look at one of the swords. His eyes were a milky greenish-blue and his mouth was overcrowded with teeth. Brunet watched him set his hand to the grip and draw the blade that the craftsman handed to him.

'Good balance,' nodded the noble. 'Grip's a little short. I don't want to lose my finger ends in battle' He swiped the sword through the air, testing the feel, following through with a deft backswing and showed the weapon to the other knights for an opinion.

'That can be changed if you like the blade my lord,' said the trader. 'Or there's this one.' He handed over another blade, this one scabbarded in tactile, rose-coloured leather.

Captivated, Brunet moved closer and was immediately nudged aside by one of the squires attending the knights. 'Out of the way, brat,' he sneered. 'Go and find your nursemaid.'

Brunet flushed. The youth was tall and fair-haired and wore a tunic of blood-red wool. He had a knife at his belt not much smaller than Mark's and one hand hovered close to the hilt as if he was thinking of drawing it. Brunet felt queasy with anger and fear.

'He's lost his tongue,' grinned another youth in blue. 'Unless he's Welsh and doesn't understand us. He looks Welsh doesn't he?'

Brunet lifted his chin. Every muscle was stiff with the effort of holding his ground. 'I'm not W-Welsh,' he said.

The noble ceased examining his second sword and glanced around. 'Ernalt, Gerald, leave the boy alone. Let him look if he desires.' His tone was tolerant. 'What's your name, boy?'

Brunet reached deep for his manners. 'Brunet, sir,' he said. 'Brunet F-FitzWarin...'

The smile in the man's striking eyes narrowed and he looked thoughtful. 'Of Whittington?'

'Yes, sir.'

'And what might you be doing strolling the booths on your own?'

'Waiting for my father,' Brunet said.

The noble raised his head and gazed around as if expecting to see Brunet's father among the crowd. 'Then perhaps you would do better not to wait in my vicinity,' he said, and his voice had lost all warmth, like a shadow cancelling sunlight. 'If your father is as careless with his lands as he is with his son, he may well end up losing both.' Turning his back on Brunet with a deliberate air of dismissal, he handed the sword to the craftsman and set about discussing terms.

Brunet was bewildered. He could not understand the sudden change, but knew enough to realise that his presence was not welcome and that it must have something to do with his father. He started to walk away, and received a hefty shove in the small of his back. Stumbling, he turned to face the blond squire and his companion.

'Know what happens to a cub when it wanders too far from the den?' the blond one said and drew his knife.

Brunet swallowed. The queasy feeling spread throughout his body. 'You think he's afraid?' asked the second squire, a predatory glint in his eyes. He gave Brunet another shove.

'Of course he is.'

'I'm n-not!' Brunet contradicted. Something strange was happening to his bladder - as if the blade that the blond squire had presented was sawing through his ability to control it.

The blond youth thumbed the tip of the weapon and then ran his finger lightly along the edge. 'You should be, whelp,' he said. 'Perhaps I'll cut off your little tail and send you home to your pack with a stump eh?' He sliced the blade under Brunet's nose and the air whickered.

Brunet couldn't help himself; he flinched. He knew it wasn't manly but he didn't feel manly at the moment. He wished he was back at the guesthouse with his mother and brothers and even his grandmother. He wished he was still with Mark.

The squire in blue grabbed Brunet's arm. 'Shall I hold him down?'

'If you like.'

Terror shot through Brunet like a molten wire. Drawing back his foot he kicked his captor in the shin and twisting, bit the hand that was gripping his elbow. The youth yelled and let go. Brunet took to his heels. Twisting among the booths he was as swift and pliable as an eel between rocks, but his pursuers were fast too and there were two of them. Brunet darted towards the stall where he had left Mark supping ale and cozening the girl, but to his horror, the young serjeant was no longer there.

The girl looked over the counter at the wild-eyed, panting boy. 'He's gone looking for you.' Her tone indicated that she was not best pleased at having her flirtation curtailed. 'You're in trouble you are.'

He didn't need to be told. 'Please...'he croaked, but it was too late. The blond squire grabbed him one side, his companion the other. When the girl raised her brows in question, the blond one winked at her. 'Young rascal,' he said. Reassured she turned away, leaving Brunet to his fate.

He fought them with every shred of strength in his narrow body, but he was no match for their adolescent brawn. Their fingers bruised his flesh as they dragged him across the fairground. A hard hand cupped his mouth to stifle his voice, and when he tried again to bite, he felt the cold burn of the knife at the back of his neck. A sudden, shameful heat flooded his braies and stained his hose.

'God's bones, the weakling's pissed himself!' the squire in blue laughed.

The blond one snorted. 'What do you expect of blood like his? The wonder is it's red, not yellow.' He showed Brunet his smeared fingers then dragged them down the boy's cheek.

'If you cut out his liver, I'll warrant you half a mark that it would be the colour of buttercups.'

'Half a mark? Done.'

'Boys!' The voice was peremptory and stern. Through a stinging blur of tears Brunet saw the dark shape of a Benedictine monk cross their path, arms folded high on his chest and expression stern. 'What are you doing?'

'None of your business,' the blond squire sneered.

The monk raised one thin silver eyebrow. 'I can make it so in very short order,' he said coldly. 'Let him go and be on your way.'

The stand off was short. Bravado the squires possessed in bucket loads, but they were youths not grown men. Faced by the charisma and authority of the Church, they grudgingly capitulated and pushing Brunet to his knees, swaggered off. At a distance, the blond one turned.

'Your liver's mine piss-hose!' he shouted. 'And I'll come back for it!'

Brunet stared at the dusty grass inches from his eyes. A dark drop of blood plopped and ran down the stems to soak into the soil. He could hear his breath sawing in his chest and breaking over his larynx in hoarse sobs. He wondered if he was dying and wished that he was already dead.

'How now child.' The monk stooped and raised Brunet to his feet. 'What had you done to them to make them set on you?'

'Nothing,' Brunet gulped in a quavering voice and sleeved his eyes. He felt sick and his legs would barely hold him up.

'I see.' The monk's tone was neutral. He gently tilted Brunet's head to one side so that he could see the wound on his neck. 'No more than a nick,' he said, 'but it could have been nasty indeed.' He clucked his tongue and spoke more to himself than Brunet. 'Every year the fair brings us revenue and petty troubles, the more so since men quarrel over who rules the kingdom.' He drew Brunet gently towards the Abbey precincts. 'Come child, let us find some salve for that scratch and a place

for you to sit a moment.' His gaze was shrewd. 'If you are not a foundling, which I judge not by the cut of your tunic, someone will be looking for you.'

Fulke FitzWarin, lord of the castles of Whittington, Burwardsley and Alberbury, and more than a dozen manors in the counties of Shropshire, Staffordshire and Devon, took a drink of wine, rolled it experimentally round his mouth, and swallowed. He handed the cup to his companion. 'What do you think?'

Joscelin de Dinan sniffed the brew and under the anxious eyes of the hovering vintner set the rim to his lips. 'Not bad,' he said, wiping his lips. He smiled, and the creases at his eye corners deepened. 'Certainly I wouldn't be insulted if you served it to me.'

FitzWarin grunted, looking amused. 'Useful to know I don't have to broach my best wine to satisfy you then.' He raised his forefinger to the vintner. 'I'll take thirty barrels. You can haggle the price with my steward.' He set the cup under the spigot of the sample barrel and refilled it. Around them the crowds ebbed and flowed in rapid tidal surges. The vintner's booths were always busy and it was best to visit them early while there was plenty of choice.

It was good to be out in the sun-soaked morning with no more pressing business than the pleasure of talking to old friends, restocking the wine supplies and the later prospect of exploring the horse market and weapon booths.

'Your steward?' Joscelin raised his brows. Not your mother?'

FitzWarin laughed wryly and pushed his heavy brown hair off his forehead. His eyes were a piercing light blue. 'Oh, doubtless she'll have her say but for the nonce her mind is fixed on buying cloth and thread for sewing. Sometimes there are just more pies than she has fingers.' His mother's reputation was legendary among the baronial community of the Welsh Marches. It was said by many, sometimes to his face, that Melette Peverel was a match for any dragon that happened out of Wales.

She was five years past three score but had more stamina than FitzWarin's wife who was less than half her age.

The men sampled wine from a couple of other batches. Joscelin wanted some Rhenish and FitzWarin bought a firkin of Welsh honey mead.

'There is something I have been wanting to ask you,' FitzWarin said as they sauntered companionably away from the wine booths. His feet were steady, his balance good, but he could feel his tongue wanting to run away with him. Joscelin's light, freckled complexion was flushed at the cheekbones, making his smoke-grey eyes gleam like polished flints.

Joscelin slid him a sidelong glance. 'As long as it is not about my daughters,' he said only half in jest. With two stepdaughters, two girls of his own blood and no son, Joscelin de Dinan was constantly being approached by men who desired a future stake in the strategic castle and prosperous town of Ludlow.

'No,' FitzWarin shook his head. 'It is about my son...my eldest,' he qualified, for he had six. 'It is past time that he began his training. The lad's in his ninth summer now. I was wondering if you...'

Joscelin raised his brows. It was more usual for a man to keep his heir at his side and foster the sons of other men as his companions. Normally it was the younger sons who went to other households in the hope that they would find a niche through marriage or as household knights. 'You are not keeping him at Whittington then?'

They paused to let a string of pack ponies through, bells jingling on their harness, wicker panniers piled with belts of gilded leather.

FitzWarin sighed and gave the tell-tale hair-push. 'No,' he said. 'If it was Ralph, or Richard, or Warin, I would not hesitate to do so, but Brunet needs to spread his wings. I can think of no better place for him to receive his training than at Ludlow...if you will have him.'

Joscelin looked thoughtful and sought for the meaning in FitzWarin's words. He had no doubt that Ralph, Richard and Warin would prove engaging lads, easy to train into manhood. But a boy who needed to 'spread his wings' suggested one who was going to be more of a challenge. 'It is no small responsibility to raise your friend's heir,' he said.

'You have done so with others and admirably.'

'But they have been younger sons. If I have made mistakes, they have not been crucial to the future of a barony.'

'I trust you.'

'And you don't trust yourself?'

FitzWarin glowered. 'I was sent away for training because I was a younger son, but it was the making of me...and provident too, since my older brother died and left me to inherit. You never know the future of the boys you take as squires.'

Joscelin conceded the point with a gesture.

'Brunet is like me at his age.' FitzWarin tightened his lips. 'He will flourish better in a different household, and I would like it to be yours.'

'Have you discussed the matter with your wife?'

'Eve will do as I say, and I doubt that my mother will have objections,' FitzWarin said curtly.

Joscelin thought of his own comfortable domestic situation and knew that despite Eve FitzWarin's ethereal beauty, he would not change places with his friend for one minute of one day.

'I'm buying Brunet a new pony,' FitzWarin added. 'Mark's taking the lad around the fair just now, but we're meeting at the horse market at the sext bell. If you want, you can see him.'

'So that I can look in his mouth too as if he were a young colt for sale?' Joscelin said.

The sarcasm was lost on FitzWarin 'Well yes, if you put it like that...After all, you wouldn't buy a horse unseen.' He raised one hand to his lips and chewed on his thumbnail. It was an absent gesture, but it was revealing to Joscelin.

The latter was spared from making an answer as a tall young man came hastening towards them from the thicket of cookstall booths. His mouth was grim and a worried frown pleated his brow. He was wearing the quilted tunic of a man at arms and his left hand rested on the hilt of a long hunting knife.

'Mark?' FitzWarin's expression sharpened. 'Where's Brunet?'

The young man bowed his head in deference and chagrin. 'I do not know, my lord.'

'You do not know?' FitzWarin's look could have cut steel.

The serjeant licked his lips. 'We became separated by the crowds, my lord.' I was on my way to the horse market to see if he was there. He knew it was our meeting place and I thought...'

'How in God's sweet name did you become separated?' FitzWarin's tone was peremptory and boded no good for his serjeant.

'I...One minute he was there, the next he was gone.'

'He was where?' Joscelyn asked. 'Where precisely did you lose him. At which booth?'

The serjeant blenched. 'Over by the cookstalls, my lord.'

FitzWarin drew himself up. 'I suppose you were drinking and filling your belly when you should have been watching the boy.'

'I only looked away for a moment, I swear it.'

FitzWarin's lip curled. 'I wonder at the honour of your word,' he growled and then made a terse gesture with his clenched fist. 'I don't have the time for this now, I'll deal with you later. For now, we had better find my son.'

Joscelyn cleared his throat. 'Doubtless your serjeant is right and the lad will make for the horse market. I suppose he has the sense?'

FitzWarin glowered at Mark. 'Yes,' he muttered. 'He has the sense if he chooses to use it...more than this blockhead here.'

The men began making their way among the booths. FitzWarin sent Mark to fetch other members of his retinue and set them to searching. 'But don't alert the women,' he commanded. 'The Last thing I need is panic in the henhouse.'

FitzWarin and Joscelyn went straight to the horse fair, but although there were plenty of small boys standing at bridles and helping the grooms, there was no sign of the one they sought. Hand gripped in his father's, a youngster walked past the men, chattering brightly. The pair paused side by side to inspect a well-fed dappled pony. FitzWarin looked at the child's earnest, upturned face and clamped his jaw. 'If anything has happened to Brunet,' he said, 'I will have my serjeant's guts for horse-bindings.'

Joscelyn's initial instinct was to mutter the platitude that the boy would turn up unharmed, but then it wasn't his son who was missing. Doubtless, if one of his daughters were lost in this vast tide of humanity, he would feel less sanguine. Prudently he said nothing and applied himself to the hunt.

Mark and the other soldiers searched along the banks of the Severn where the traders' barges bobbed at their moorings, but there was no sign of Brunet and no one had seen him. The river, although it looked innocent, was treacherous and deep and would quickly swallow a child if he fell in. Mill race, brook and pond were investigated too, but without result. FitzWarin had walked the circuit of the fair with Joscelyn to no avail and his agitation had increased from simmer to boil when a young monk approached them.

'My lords, I hear you are searching for a lost child?'

'Praise God, you have found him?' FitzWarin's eyes lit up.

'Yes, my lord. Brother Anselm has him at the porter's lodge.' The monk pointed behind him, indicating a low stone building near the Foregate.

FitzWarin set off at a rapid walk, holding his hand to his scabbard to keep it still. Joscelyn strode beside him. 'If he went to the monks for help, that too shows sense,' he said.

FitzWarin grunted. 'Sense would have been staying with my serjeant,' he said. 'I'll have both their hides in recompense.'

On a bench outside the porter's lodge sat a thickset monk of middle years, comforting a weebegone child. Tear trails streaked the boy's smooth olive skin and his dark eyes were heavy and red-rimmed. There was what looked like bloody fingerprints on one cheek and a sticky salve had been

smearred over a cut on the back and side of his neck. Under his split front tunic, there was a dark stain on his hose.

FitzWarin slewed to an abrupt halt and his eyes widened. 'God's sweet bones, Brunet?'

The monk removed his arm from around the boy's shoulders and rose to his feet. If he was disturbed by the use of blasphemy in God's precincts, he kept it to himself. 'The boy is yours my lord?'

'He's my son,' FitzWarin snapped. 'What has happened to him?' Striding to the bench he stooped to Brunet and turned his jaw to the light. 'Who did this?'

His son's expression was blank. FitzWarin knew the look of old. Whatever pain Brunet had suffered had been drawn within where he would feed upon it in silence, and it would feed on him.

'Some older youths were making sport with him and it was becoming unpleasant,' the monk said. 'I intervened and brought him to the lodge. When I heard from one of my brethren that there was a search going on, I sent Brother Simon to direct it here.' He gestured. 'He's badly shaken but no lasting harm seems to have been done.'

FitzWarin turned to Brunet. 'Would you know the youths again?' he demanded and compressed his lips as he saw terror fill his son's eyes. 'Would you?' He heard his voice rising, but could do nothing to prevent it.

'Yes, sir.' Brunet's throat rippled again and again.

FitzWarin jerked him to his feet. 'Then let us go and find them,' he said. 'And let us see what they have to say when they taste my sword.'

'My lord, violence only begets more violence,' the monk intervened. 'Surely we have all seen enough in this lifetime not to seek out more.'

'Save your homilies for church,' FitzWarin snarled. 'I've swallowed enough of them in the past to last me a lifetime too!' Rudely turning his back on the monk, he looked down at his son who was quivering in his clutch. 'What did they look like?'

Brunet stammered out a description, his olive complexion paling until he was the colour of ashes.

'It might be best to leave him behind,' Joscelyn said neutrally. 'Look at him. He is in no state to be walking around the fair.'

'I can see the state he is in,' FitzWarin snapped. 'And when I find those who did this, they will pay. Come on boy, you've the blood of kings in your veins. Show your worth.'

Brunet had been tightening his lips and swallowing convulsively while the men were in discussion, but his body reached a point where his will could no longer control it and bending his head, he retched violently, the spasms heaving through his narrow body until his knees buckled.

'For the love of God, send him back to your lodging,' Joscelyn said, his expression filled with pity. 'He is beyond his endurance. He could be descended from King Arthur himself and it wouldn't make any difference just now.'

Grimly, FitzWarin swept Brunet into his arms, his strength making nothing of the boy's lightness. He felt beneath his fingers the dampness where Brunet had pissed himself and was filled with a deep and tender rage, not least because he was ashamed that his son had been frightened enough to lose control of his bladder. Did such a trait show a predisposition to cowardice? The thought was like a small pebble in his shoe. What if Brunet lacked the qualities he needed to guide his family's interests when the time came? It would not have mattered if he was one of the younger boys, but he was the heir. And because he was ashamed, FitzWarin was angry with himself too. He should be thanking

God that Brunet was safe, not agitating over the child's lack of backbone. Torn both ways, he squeezed his son before handing him abruptly into the custody of two of his knights.

'Guy, Johan, take him straight to my lodging and give him to the women. Tell them as little as you can get away with. I'll deal with it myself when I return.'

'Yes, my lord.' Guy hoisted Brunet across his shoulder as if carrying a young deer.

Frowning heavily, FitzWarin watched them leave. Then, shrugging his shoulders as if to level and settle a heavy burden, he sent another man to call the searchers back from the river and turned back towards the fair.