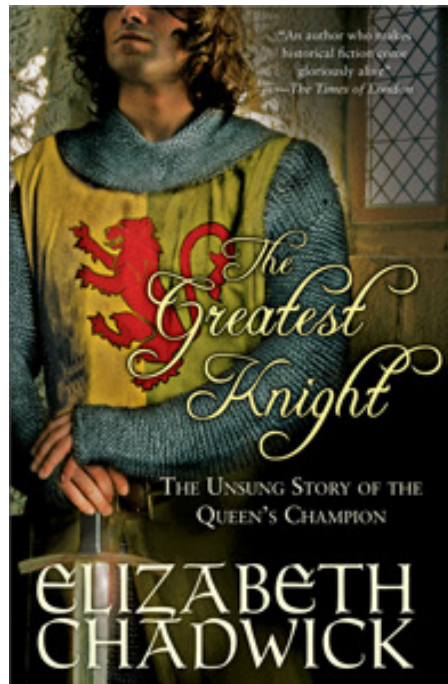


THE GREATEST KNIGHT

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EXTRACT

Chapter One

Drincourt, French Border, Summer 1167...

It was the dark hour before dawn; all the shutters in the great hall were closed against the evil vapours of the night and the fire was a quenched dragon's eye under the heavy iron night cover. The forms of slumbering knights and retainers lined the walls and the air sighed with the sound of their breathing and resonated on the occasional glottal snore.

At the far end of the hall in one of the less favoured places near the draughts and away from the residual gleam of the fire, a young man twitched in his sleep, a frown gathering between his smooth brows as the dream captured and immersed him in its vivid images, taking him from the breathing darkness of a vast Norman keep to a smaller, intimate chamber in his family's tiny Wiltshire castle at Hamstead.

He was four years old, wearing his best blue tunic, and he was being smothered in his mother's arms as she embraced him and exhorted him in a cracking voice to be a good boy.

'Remember that I love you, William.' She squeezed him so tightly that for a moment he couldn't

breathe, and then she released him and both of them gasped, he for air, she with tears. 'Kiss me and go with your father,' she said.

He set his lips to her soft cheek, and inhaled her scent, sweet like new mown hay. Suddenly he didn't want to go and his chin began to wobble in sympathy with hers.

'Stop weeping, woman, you're unsettling him.'

William felt his father's hand come down on his shoulder, hard, firm, turning him away from the sun-flooded chamber and the gathered domestic household, which included his three older brothers.

'Are you ready son?'

He looked up. Lead from a burning church roof had destroyed his father's right eye and melted a raw trail from temple to jaw, leaving him with the visage of an angel one side and the gargoyle mask of a devil on the other. Never having known him without the scars, William accepted them without demur.

'Yes, sir,' he said and was rewarded by a kindling gleam of approval from his father's one eye.

'Brave lad.'

They went down to the courtyard where the grooms were waiting with the horses. Setting his foot in the stirrup, John Marshal gained the saddle and leaned down to scoop William into the saddle.

'Remember that you are the son of the King's Marshal and the nephew of the Earl of Salisbury,' his father said as he nudged his stallion's flanks and he and his troop clattered out of the keep.

In his dream, William was intensely aware of his father's broad, battle-scarred hands on the reins and the bright embroidery decorating the wrists of the tunic. 'Will I be gone a long time?' his dream self asked in a high treble.

He felt his father shrug. 'That depends on how long King Stephen wants to keep you.'

'Why does he want to keep me?'

'Because I made him a promise to do something and he wants you beside him until I have kept that promise.' His father's voice was harsh, like the rasp of a sword blade across an oil stone. 'You are a hostage for my word of honour.'

'What sort of promise?'

Against his back, William felt his father's chest spasm and heard a grunt that was almost laughter. 'The sort of promise that only a fool would ask of a madman.'

It was a strange answer and the child William twisted round to crane up at his father's ruined face even as the grown William turned within the binding of his blanket, his frown deepening and his eyes moving rapidly beneath his closed lids. Through the mists of the dreamscape, his father's voice faded, to be replaced by those of a man and woman, arguing in a tent.

'The bastard's gone back on his word, bolstered the keep, stuffed it to the rafters with men and supplies, shored up the breaches,' said the man, his voice raw with contempt. 'He never intended to surrender.'

'What of the boy?' asked a woman's voice in an appalled whisper. 'Surely not...'

'Forfeit. The father says that he does not care, that he still has the anvils and hammer to make more and better sons than the one he loses...'

'He does not mean it...'

'He's John Marshal and he's a mad dog. Who knows what he would do. The king wants the boy.'

'But you're not going to...you can't!' The woman's voice rose in horror.

'No, I'm not. That's on the conscience of the King and the boy's father. The stew's burning, woman. Attend to your duties.'

William's four year old dream self was seized by the arm and dragged stumbling across a battle

camp. He could smell the fires, see the soldiers sharpening their weapons and a team of mercenaries assembling what he now knew was a stone throwing machine.

'Where are we going?' he asked.

'To see the King,' the man said. His face had been indistinct before but now the dream brought it sharply into focus, revealing hard, square bones and weathered brown features. His name was Henk and he was a Flemish mercenary in the pay of King Stephen.

'Am I going home?' William wanted to know.

Henk did not answer but turned sharply across the camp. A little further on, between the siege machine and an elaborate tent striped in blue and gold, a group of men were talking amongst themselves. Two guards stood forward, spears at the ready, then relaxed and waved Henk and William forward. Henk took two strides and then knelt, pulling William down beside him. 'My lord King,'

William flicked an upward glance, uncertain which of the men Henk was addressing, for none of them wore a crown or resembled his notion of what a king should look like. One lord was holding a fine spear though, with a silk banner rippling from the haft.

'So this is the boy whose only value to his father has been the buying of time,' said the man standing beside the spear-bearer. He had greying fair hair and a face that was lined and sad. 'Rise, child. What's your name?'

'William sir,' said his dream, image, standing up. 'Are you the King?'

The man blinked and looked taken aback. Then his eyes narrowed and his lips tightened. 'Indeed I am,' he said, 'although your father seems not to think so.' One of the other men in the group plucked at the King's shoulder and tugged him aside to mutter in his ear. The King listened and vigorously shook his head. 'No,' he said.

A breeze lifted the silk banner on the spear and it fluttered outwards, making the embroidered red lion at its centre seem to stretch and prowl. The sight diverted William. 'Can I hold the spear?' he asked eagerly.

The lord holding it frowned down at him. 'You're a trifle young to be a standard bearer hmmm?' he said, but there was a reluctant twinkle in his eye and after a moment he handed the haft to William. 'Careful now, it belongs to the King.'

William closed his hand around the stave which was warm from the grip of the man's hand. He wafted it and watched the lion snarl in the wind. 'I am going to have a banner with a red lion on it when I'm a knight,' he said.

The King had swung away from his advisor and was making denying motions with the palm of his hand.

'Sire, if you relent, you will court naught but John Marshal's contempt...' the courtier insisted.

'Christ on the Cross, I will court the torture of my soul if I hang an innocent for the crimes of his sire. Look at him...look!' The King jabbed a forefinger in William's direction. 'Not for all the gold in France will I see a little lad like that dance on a gibbet. His father, yes, but not him.'

Aware of being the centre of attention, William twirled the javelin end over end, oblivious of the danger in which he stood.

'Come.' The King beckoned to him. 'You will stay in my tent until I decide what is to be done with you.'

William skipped along happily at King Stephen's side and was only a little put out when he had to return the spear to its owner who turned out to be the Earl of Arundel. After all there was a magnificent striped tent to explore and the prospect of yet more weapons to look at and perhaps even touch if he was allowed – royal ones at that.

The tent was guarded by two knights in full mail and squires and attendants waited on the King's will. The flaps were hooked back to reveal a floor strewn with freshly scythed meadow and the strong, sweet smell of cut grass was intensified by the enclosure of the canvas. Even in his sleep, the grown William could taste the scent on the back of his palate. There was a large bed with covers of silk and fur, and embroidered bolsters. At the bedside stood an ornate coffer like the one in his parents' bedchamber at Hamstead. There was also room for a bench and a table on which stood a silver flagon and cups. The King's hauberk glittered on its stand of crossed ash poles, with the helmet secured at the top and his shields and sword propped against the foot. William eyed the accoutrements with longing.

The King smiled at him. 'Do you want to be a knight, William?'

His four-year-old dream self nodded vigorously, eyes glowing. At the notion.

'And loyal to your king?'

Again William nodded but this time because instinct told him it was the required response.

'I wonder.' The King sighed heavily. A snap of his fingers brought a squire forward to pour the blood-red wine from flagon to cup. 'Child,' he said. 'Child, look at me.'

William raised his head. The King's eyes were a faded blue-grey with yellowish whites and sparse lashes.

'I want you to remember this day,' King Stephen said slowly and deliberately. 'I want you to know that whatever your father has done to me, I am giving you the chance to grow up and redress the balance. Know this; a king values loyalty above all else.' He sipped from the cup and then gave it to William. 'Drink and promise you will remember.'

William obliged, although the taste of it stung the back of his throat.

'Promise me,' the King repeated as he took the cup back into his own possession.

'I promise,' William said and as the wine burned into his belly like a flame, the dream left him and he woke to the first sounds of movement as the impending dawn stirred the occupants of Drincourt's great hall. For a moment he lay blinking, acclimatising himself to his present surroundings. It was a long time since his dreams had peeled back the years and returned him to the summer he had spent as King Stephen's hostage during the battle for Newbury. He found it difficult to recall that part of his life with his waking memory; he had been very young, scarcely out of tail clouts, but now and again, without rhyme or reason, his dreams would serve him up a mirror-bright rendering of that time and he would find himself standing both inside and outside of himself. A bleach-haired little boy of four years old, and a young man just entering his twentieth year.

His father, despite all his manoeuvring, machinations and willingness to sacrifice his fourth born son,

had lost Newbury in the end, but if he had lost the battle, he had still rallied on the successful turn of the tide. Stephen's bloodline lay in the grave and Empress Matilda's son, Henry, the second of that name had been sitting firmly on the throne for thirteen years.

'And I am a knight,' William said softly, his lips curving with grim humour. The leap in status was recent. A few weeks ago he had still been a squire, polishing armour, running errands, learning his trade at the hands of Sir Guillaume de Tancarville, chamberlain of Normandy and distant cousin to William's mother. William's knighting had announced his arrival into manhood and advanced him a single rung upon a very slippery ladder. He knew that his position in the Tancarville household was precarious. There were only so many places in lord Guillaume's retinue for newly belted knights with ambitions far greater than their experience or proven capability.

William had considered seeking house room under his brother's rule at Hamstead, but that was a last resort, nor did he have sufficient funds to pay his passage home across the Narrow Sea. Besides, with the current strife between Normandy and France at white heat, there was plenty of opportunity to gain the necessary experience. Even now, somewhere along the border, a strong French army was preparing to slip into Normandy and wreak havoc. Since Drincourt protected the northern approaches to the city of Rouen, there was a current need for armed defenders.

As the dream images blurred at the edges, William slipped back into a light doze and the tension left his body. The flaxen hair of his infancy had steadily darkened through boyhood until now it was a warm hazel-brown, but fine summer weather still streaked it with gold. His beard was golden too when he let it grow, although usually he went clean shaven. Folk who had known his father said that William was the image of John Marshal in the days before the molten lead from the burning roof of Wherwell Abbey had ruined his comeliness, that their eyes had the same river mingling of blue and grey and green.

'God's bones, I warrant you could sleep through the trumpets of Doomsday, William. Get up you lazy wastrel!' The voice was accompanied by a sharp dig in William's ribs. With a grunt of pain, the young man opened his eyes on Gadefer de Lorys, one of the senior knights who was forever hectoring him.

'I'm awake.' Rubbing his side, William sat up. 'Isn't a man allowed to gather his thoughts before he rises?'

'Hah, you'd be gathering them until sunset if you were allowed. I've never known such a slugabed. If you weren't my lord's kin, you'd have been slung out on your arse long since!'

The best way to deal with Gadefer who was always grouchy in the mornings, was to agree with whatever he said and get out of his way. William was well aware of the resentment simmering among some of the other knights who viewed him as a threat to their own positions in the mesnie. His kinship to the chamberlain was as much a handicap as it was an advantage. 'You're right,' William replied with a self-deprecating smile. 'I'll thrown myself out forthwith and go and exercise my stallion.'

Gadefer stumped off, muttering under his breath. Concealing a grimace, William rolled up his pallet, neatly folded his blanket and wandered outside. The air held the dusty scent of midsummer, although the cool green nip of the dawn clung in the shadows of the walls, evaporating as the stones drank the rising sunlight. He glanced towards the stables, hesitated, then changed his mind and followed his rumbling stomach to the kitchens.

William's visits were a regular occurrence to the Drincourt cooks and soon he was leaning against a trestle devouring wheaten bread still hot from the oven and glistening with melted butter and sweet clover honey.

'Here, take these for later.' The cook's wife, handed him two hard boiled eggs and the rest of the loaf. 'I don't know where you put it all. By rights you should have a belly on you like a woman about to give birth.'

William grinned and slapped his hard, flat stomach. 'I work hard,' he said.

She raised a brow that said more than words, and shaking her head, turned back to the task of chopping vegetables. Still grinning William licked the last drips of buttery honey off the side of his hand. Going to the pail of goat's milk standing near the kitchen door, he filled the dipper, braced his arm on the lintel and looked out on the fine morning with pleasure.

He had taken no more than a couple of swallows when he heard shouting from the direction of the courtyard. Moments later the mail-clad earl of Essex and several knights and serjeants ran past the open door, heading for the stables. William dropped the dipper and strode into the ward. 'Hola!' he cried. 'What's happening?'

One of the knights slewed round, 'The French and Flemings have been sighted in the suburbs!' he panted, his face already flushed from sprinting in armour.

The words shot through William like a bolt of lightning. 'They've crossed the border?' he demanded and knew it immediately for a foolish question.

'Aye, over the Bresle and down through Eu. Now they're at our walls with Matthew of Boulogne at their head. We're going to have the devil of a task to hold them.' He gave William's shoulder a vigorous shove. 'Go on Marshal, get you to the hall and arm up. You've no time for stomach-filling now!'

William raced for the hall, and although his own body was but lightly clad, by the time he arrived his heart was thundering like a drum and he was wishing he hadn't eaten all that bread and honey for he felt sick. The squire who had been assigned to him, a gangly youth of thirteen summers named Eustace, was waiting to help him into his padded undertunic and mail. The Sire de Tancarville was already dressed in his and pacing the hall like a man with a burr in his breeches as he issued terse commands to the knights who were scrambling into their armour. In the corner of the room, the Count of Eu, a stunned expression on his face, was stooping over a bloodied messenger, his hand on the man's shoulder.

'Flemish mercenaries have ravaged the Count's lands on their way here,' Eustace told William as he pulled the sleeves of the padded tunic full down to William's wrists. 'His man escaped with his life but naught else. He arrived just after you went out.'

William compressed his lips. The urge to retch peaked and then receded. As he donned his mail, his heartbeat steadied, although his palms were slick with cold sweat and he had to wipe them on his linen surcoat. Now was the moment for which he had trained. Now he got to prove that he was good for more than just gluttony and slumber, and that his place in the household was by right of ability and not family favour.

By the time the Sire de Tancarville and his retinue joined the young earl of Essex at the town's west bridge, bands of Flemish mercenaries were already swarming into the suburbs and the unfortunate inhabitants were fleeing for their lives. The smell of cooking fires had been overlaid by the harsher stench of indiscriminate burning and in the Rue Chausee a host of Boulonnais knights were massing to make an assault on the West Gate and break into the town itself.

Eager, nervous, determined, William urged his stallion to the fore, jostling past several seasoned knights until he was level with de Tancarville himself. Until this moment William had not realised how much the jibes about him being a lazy wastrel had stung him.

De Tancarville cast him a warning glance and curbed his destrier as it lashed out at William's young chestnut. 'Lad, you are too hasty,' he said with amused irritation. 'Fall back and let the knights do their work.'

Flushed with chagrin, William swallowed the retort that he was a knight and reined back. Tight-lipped he allowed three of the most experienced warriors past to join their lord, but as a fourth tried to overtake him, William spurred forward again, determined to show his mettle.

Roaring his own name as a battle cry, de Tancarville pricked his stallion and led a charge over the bridge and down the Rue de Chausee to meet the cohort of Boulonnais knights advancing on the West Gate. William gripped his shield close to his body, levelled his lance and gave the chestnut its head. He fixed his gaze on the crimson device of a knight on a black stallion and held his line as his destrier carried him towards the moment of impact. Now that he had a point of focus, all fear was quenched by concentration. He noticed how his opponent carried his lance too high and saw that the red shield was tilted a fraction inwards. Steadying his own arm, he kept his eyes open until the last moment. His lance punched into the Boulogne knight's shield, pierced it and even though the shaft snapped off in William's hand, the blow was sufficient to send the other man reeling. Using the stump as a club, William knocked the knight from the saddle and the black destrier bolted, reins trailing. William drew his sword.

After the first shock of violent impact, the fighting broke up into individual combats. Nothing in his training had prepared William for the sheer clamour and ferocity of battle but he was undaunted and fed upon the experience avidly and with increasing confidence as he emerged victorious from several sharp tussles with more experienced men. He was both terrified and exhilarated; like a fish released from a calm stewpond into a fast-flowing river.