

The Time of Singing

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Chapter 1

Framlingham Castle, Suffolk, October, 1173

Roger woke and shot upright on a gulp of breath. His heart was slamming against his rib-cage and although the parted bed curtains showed him a chamber sun-splashed with morning light, his inner vision blazed with vivid images of men locked in combat. He could hear the iron whine of blade upon blade and the dull thud of a mace striking a shield. He could feel the bite of his sword entering flesh and see blood, streaming in scarlet ribbons, glossy as silk.

‘Ah God.’ He shuddered and bowed his head, his hair flopping over his brow in sweaty strands the colour of tide-washed sand. After a moment, he collected himself, threw off the bed coverings with his right hand, and went to the window. Clenching his bandaged left fist, he welcomed the stinging pain like a penitent finding comfort in the scourge. The wound was not deep enough to cause serious damage but he was going to have a permanent scar inscribed across the base of three fingers. The soldier who had given it to him was dead, but Roger took no pleasure in the knowledge. It had been kill or be killed. Too many of his own men had fallen yesterday. His father said he was useless, but it was a habitual opinion and Roger no longer felt its impact beyond a dull bruise. What did abrade him were the unnecessary deaths of good soldiers. The opposition had been too numerous and his resources insufficient to the task. He looked at his taut fist. There would be a lake of blood before his father’s ambition was done.

To judge from the strength of the daylight he had missed Mass. His stepmother would delight in berating him for his tardiness and then comment to his father that his heir wasn’t fit to inherit a dunghheap, let alone the Earldom of Norfolk when the time came. And then she would look pointedly at her own eldest son, the obnoxious Huon, as if he were the answer to everyone’s prayers rather than the petulant adolescent brat he actually was.

Framlingham’s bailey was packed with the tents and shelters of the mercenaries belonging to Robert Beaumont, Earl of Leicester – an assorted rabble he had plucked from field and town, ditch, gutter, weaving shed and dockside on his way from Flanders to England. Few of them were attending Mass to judge by the numbers infesting the inner and outer wards. Locusts, Roger thought with revulsion.

By joining the rebellion against King Henry and giving lodging and support to the Earl of Leicester, his father had encouraged a plague to descend on them, in more ways than one. The plot was to overthrow the King and replace him with his eighteen year old son – a vain boy who could be turned this way and that by men skilled in manipulation and the machinations of power. Roger's father had no love for the King, who had clamped down hard on his ambition to rule all of East Anglia. Henry had confiscated their castle at Walton and built a strong royal fortress at Orford to neutralise their grip on that part of the coastline. To add insult to injury, fines for earlier insurgency had gone to assist the building of Orford.

Turning from the window, Roger sluiced his face one-handed in the ewer at the bedside. Since the tips of his fingers and his thumb were free on his bandaged side, he managed to dress himself without summoning a servant. From the moment he had been capable of tying his braies in small childhood, a fierce sense of self-reliance had driven him to perform all such tasks for himself.

On opening the coffer holding his cloaks, his eyes narrowed as he noticed immediately that his best one with the silver braid was missing and he could well guess where it was. While donning his everyday mantle of plain green twill, his gaze lit on the weapon chest standing against the wall. Last night his scabbarded sword and belt had been propped against it, waiting to be checked and cleaned before storage, but now they were gone. Roger's annoyance turned to outright anger. His sword had been a gift to him from his Uncle Aubrey, Earl of Oxford, at the time of his knighting. This time the thieving little turd had gone too far.

Jaw clamped, Roger strode from the chamber and headed purposefully to the chapel adjoining the hall where Mass had just finished and people were filing out to attend their duties. Roger concealed himself behind a pillar as his father walked past deep in conversation with Robert Earl of Leicester. They were an incongruous pair, Leicester being tall and slender with a natural grace and good-humour, and his father speaking in guttural tones, his rolling pugilistic gait reminiscent of a sailor heading from ship to ale-house. His paunch strained at the seams of his red tunic and his hair hung in oiled straggles, the colour of wet ashes.

Roger's stepmother Gundreda followed, walking with Petronilla, Countess of Leicester. The women nodded graciously to each other, smiling with their lips but not their eyes. There was little love lost between them, even if they were allies, for neither woman possessed the social skills upon which to build a friendship and Gundreda was resentful of Petronilla's superior airs.

As they moved on, Roger's seeking gaze struck upon the flash of a lapis blue garment and a twinkle of silver braid, as his half-brother Huon swaggered out of the chapel, one narrow adolescent hand clasping the buckskin grip of a very fine sword. A little behind him traipsed Huon's younger sibling Will, fulfilling his usual role of pasty shadow.

Roger reached, seized, and swung his half-brother around slamming him against the pillar. 'Have you nothing of your own that you must resort to thievery of everything that is mine?' Roger hissed. 'Time and again I have told you to stay out of my coffers and leave my things alone.' Taking a choke hold on the youth's throat with his good hand, he used his other to unhitch the sword belt with a rapid jerk of latch and buckle.

Huon's down-smudged upper lip curled with contempt, although his eyes darted fearfully. Roger noted both emotions and increased the pressure. 'I suppose you wanted to parade before my lord of Leicester, and show off a sword you're too young to wear.'

'I wear it better than you!' the youth wheezed with bravado. 'You're a spineless coward. Our father says so.'

Roger released his grip, but only to hook his foot behind Huon's ankles and bring him down. Straddling him, he dragged the purloined cloak over his half-brother's head. 'If there's a next time, you'll wear this on your bier,' he panted, 'and my sword will be through your heart!'

'Huon, where are y... ' Gundreda Countess of Norfolk had turned back to find her lagging son and now stared at the scene with consternation and fury. 'What do you think you're doing!' she shouted at Roger. 'Get off him; leave him alone!' She forced Roger aside with a hard push, the full weight of her body behind it.

Choking and retching, Huon clutched his throat. 'He tried to kill me...and in God's own house... He did, Will, didn't he?'

'Yes,' Will croaked as if his own throat had been squeezed. He refused to look anyone in the eye.

'If I had intended to kill you, you would be dead now!' Roger snarled. He encompassed his stepmother and his half brothers in a burning glare before flinging from the chapel, his cloak over his arm and his scabbarded sword clutched in his good fist. Her invective followed him but he ignored it for he had become inured to that particular bludgeon long ago.

‘I didn’t have enough soldiers,’ Roger said to his father. His sword hung at his hip now, its weight both a burden and a support. A man shouldn’t have to wear a weapon to bolster his confidence; he should be at ease within his own skin, but Roger always felt off balance in the presence of his sire. The Earl had called a council of war in his chamber; Robert of Leicester and all the senior knights were present to observe whatever humiliation Hugh Bigod chose to mete out to his eldest son on the scathing edge of his tongue.

‘There is always an excuse, isn’t there?’ Hugh growled. ‘I could give you an entire army and it still wouldn’t be enough. I daren’t put weight on you because you’re not strong enough to bear it.’

Roger made a throwing gesture and felt the wound on his hand smart like a wasp sting. ‘You don’t give me the tools to do what you ask of me. You don’t trust me, you don’t give me credit for what’s due, you don’t....’

‘Credit!’ Norfolk bared a palisade of teeth yellowed by more than seventy years in the gum. ‘I’ll give you credit boy. For losing experienced men we couldn’t afford to lose, and letting good ransom money slip through your inept fingers. You’ve cost us at least a hundred marks which is more than your hide’s worth. How much more credit do you want?’

Roger swallowed, feeling sick. He sometimes thought that his own death would be the only coin to satisfy his father. Whatever he did, it would never be right. Yesterday they had seized and destroyed the castle of Haughley, taking pledges of ransom from the knights and turning over the rest of the garrison to the butchery of Leicester’s Flemings. Roger’s task had been to secure the postern, but his father had given him insufficient men for the assignment and some of the defenders had managed to break free, killing several of Roger’s soldiers in the process.

‘The young men of today aren’t as hard a breed as we had to be, Hugh,’ said Robert of Leicester who had been watching the exchange between father and son with shrewd speculation. ‘Let it rest. At least he didn’t run. I am sure we can still find a position for him that will be useful to us.’

‘Aye, following the dung cart,’ Hugh sneered. He pointed to a bench. ‘Hold your tongue, boy, sit and listen and see if you can keep more than fleece between your ears.’

At five and twenty, Roger had left boyhood behind long ago - on a warm summer afternoon, aged seven, locked in the solar, watching distraught from the window as his mother departed her annulled marriage to his father and rode away to a new life with another husband. Within the week, Gundreda had

replaced her at Framlingham and nine months later had produced Huon. His father had never once called him “boy” in affection; it was always an insult or a put-down. As a child, he hadn’t understood, but maturity had brought knowledge. It was about power; it was about keeping the young stag down...and it was about punishment. His mother had escaped, but he hadn’t and he was her proxy. Everyone said he was like her in his way of seeing the world, and in his father’s lexicon, such a trait was unforgivable.

Eyes downcast, Roger stepped over the bench, sat down and folded his arms. The fingertips of his right hand sought reassurance in the feel of the solid iron disc of his sword pommel.

Leicester said, ‘Haughley is no longer an obstacle, but the keep at Walton still stands and so does Eye.’

Hugh grunted. ‘Eye’s damaged and the garrison won’t venture beyond it. The same goes for Walton. We should strike into the Midlands while Henry is fighting in Normandy and the Justiciar is occupied chasing the Scots. Once Leicester’s yours, we can push north-west and join Chester.’

Roger bit the inside of his cheek at the not so subtle hint in his father’s words that Leicester should move his army to his own lands. The Flemings were denuding Norfolk’s supplies at a terrifying rate and had already started to strip the hinterland with their foraging parties.

. ‘Quite so,’ Leicester said. A hard smile curved his lips. ‘I wouldn’t want to outstay my welcome, but I’ll need provisions.’

Roger saw his father’s gaze narrow. ‘I have no more to give. ‘My barns are down to the last sheaves and the hay ricks are sweepings. I’ll have to buy in more for the winter at God knows what price.’

‘Then let our enemies provide it. The abbey at Edmundsbury is well stocked, so I hear and the abbot is no friend.’

Hugh rubbed his jaw, considering, his fingers rasping on his stubble. He threw a sneering glance at Roger. ‘Pig sticking,’ he said with a humourless grin. ‘Do you think you can at least manage that?’

Roger returned his father’s stare. ‘You want me to run off pigs and burn villages?’

‘For a start. If you prove capable, I might think about promoting you, but foraging is all you are worth at the moment. You have my leave to go.’

Roger jerked to his feet, his chest hot with anger. How easy it would be to draw his sword and use it. To rage like a wild bull. Easy and pointless. ‘Edmundsbury,’ he said stiffly.

His father raised one eyebrow. ‘Not superstitious about the Church are you?’

Since the last king’s son and heir had died after raiding the lands of the Abbey of Saint Edmund, Roger might have answered with veracity that he was, but knowing his father expected such a response, he didn’t rise to the bait. ‘No, sire, but we are vassals of the Abbey for three knights’ fees and I have always honoured the Church.’

‘And do you not honour your father also?’ Hugh leaned a little forward and clenched his fists. A seal ring gleamed on his bleached knuckles. ‘I will have your obedience – boy. My other sons do not shirk their filial duty and question my authority.’

Roger gritted his teeth, performed a perfunctory bow to his father and the Earl of Leicester, and strode from the room, his control hanging by a thread. Reaching the safety of his chamber, he threw himself down on the weapons chest and covered his face with his hands. It was too much. He wasn’t just at the edge of a precipice, he was over it and scrabbling to hold on by his fingertips while above him his father, prepared to stamp on his precarious hold and send him into the void.

EXTRACT 2: IDA

Windsor Castle, September 1176

Ida de Tosney studied the wall hanging in the chamber, admiring the way the embroiderer had combined two shades of blue thread and mingled it with green to depict the river where the hunting party in the picture had paused to water their horses. She imagined how she would work such a scene, perhaps adding a line of silver to the water and a fish or two. She loved planning embroideries and although she had but recently turned fifteen years old, she was an accomplished needlewoman.

Her rose-coloured gown was embellished with vine leaf coils of delicate green thread at the sleeves and neckline. Small clusters of garnet grapes adorned the scrollwork, and the outline borders were worked with seed pearls. The belt, double-looped at her waist, was of her own weaving, and it too was decorated with pearls, for she was an heiress and these were her court robes, especially made for her presentation to the king who's ward she was. She was beset with anxiety at the thought of being presented to him and had been over the moment a hundred times in her mind, envisaging her curtsy, the rise and the step back. She hoped that if he spoke to her, she would be able to make an appropriate answer.

Her maid Goda twined gold ribbons through Ida's thick brown braid, whilst Bertrice tweezed Ida's eyebrows until they were shapely arches and Ida tried not to flinch.

'You have to look your best for the King,' Bertrice said bossily. 'If he likes you, he'll deal well with your wardship and find you a good husband.' She patted a moist, lavender-scented cloth against Ida's brows to remove any redness, and then smoothed the area with a gentle fingertip.

'Perhaps you'll even find a husband today, among the courtiers,' Goda abetted her colleague. 'It wouldn't do to look ungroomed, would it now young mistress?'

Ida blushed and made herself stand still while the women completed her toilet. She knew they were anxious she should please the King, because it reflected on their care of her. She wanted to please the King too, for her own sake as well as theirs, and as they said, some of the men looking on, might be in search of a wife. Although still innocent of the world, Ida had begun to notice the assessment in men's glances - the way their eyes lingered on her lips and her bosom. Such attention created a warm glow in her solar plexus even while it scared her. Something told her that here was power and here was danger, and both were frightening new territory.

An usher arrived to take Ida to the great hall where, together with other wards and supplicants she was to be presented to the King before dinner. Goda gave a few final tweaks to Ida's gown and draped a midnight-blue cloak at her shoulders, fastening it with two round gold clasps. 'Good fortune, mistress,' she whispered.

Ida gave her women an apprehensive smile and taking a deep breath, followed the usher from the room.

In the great hall she was bidden to wait with a group of others, all clad in finery, and glowing from recent ablutions. Ida, being the youngest, apart from an adolescent youth who was a royal ward like herself, had a place near the end. The smell of rosewater, tense sweat and new woollen cloth filled Ida's lungs each time she drew breath. She clasped her hands in front of her so she would not be tempted to fidget as some of the others were doing, and kept her eyes modestly lowered, although now and again she peeped from beneath her lids to see what was happening around her.

Trestle tables had been set up for the main formal meal of the day. On the dais, the board was covered by a cloth of embroidered white napery and the dishes, cellars and cups standing upon it were of silver gilt, some of them inlaid with gemstones. Two pantlers were busy carving oblongs of bread into flat trenchers for holding meats in sauce, and other servants were bringing jugs of wine from the buttery to a side table. Despite feeling anxious, Ida still managed to be hungry. She hoped her stomach wouldn't rumble when she had to curtsy before the king.

When Henry finally arrived, he breezed into the room as if blown by his fanfare and the group scarcely had time to curtsy and kneel. His auburn hair was cropped close to his head in a practical manner, unadorned by oils or crimping and his clothing was commonplace in comparison to those of his supplicants and guests. If Ida hadn't been forewarned about his preference for practicality, she would have mistaken him for an attendant, and his marshal, bearing a golden rod of office and wearing a sumptuous scarlet tunic, for the king.

Glancing upwards through her lashes, she watched Henry arrive at the presentation line and begin moving along it, pausing for a brief word to each person. His voice had a harsh edge, as if he had been inhaling smoke, but he spoke well and pleasantly and had a way of putting people at their ease. Although he had bounced into the hall, she thought he was limping a little now and wondered if his shoes were pinching him. She noticed a scratch on the back of his right hand that looked as if he'd had a tussle with a dog or a hawk. Numerous rings adorned his fingers and she had seen him take a couple off and present them to

others in the line as gifts. She supposed he must have a coffer full of them for such events. Certainly, he wasn't wearing the rings to show off the beauty of his hands which were rough-skinned, as if he'd been engaged in manual labour all day.

His glance flickered to her as he spoke to the youth standing at her side. Ida, looking up at that same moment, was briefly snared in a stare as bright as sunlit glass. Hastily she dropped her gaze, certain he would think her rude and mannerless.

'Ida de Tosney,' said the Marshal. Ida curtsied again, keeping her focus on the minute stitches in the hem of her dress. Then she felt a forefinger beneath her chin, tilting it up.

'A most graceful curtsy,' Henry said, 'but I would have you stand straight and look at me.'

Ida summoned her courage, did as he asked and was again caught in that predatory crystal stare.

His finger moved, to touch one of her gold cloak clasps. 'Ralph de Tosney's little girl,' he said softly. 'When last I saw you, you were a red-cheeked babe in your mother's arms, and now look at you – grown enough to have a babe of your own.' His eyes followed his words up and down her body and heat burned Ida's face.

'But still red-cheeked,' he said with a smile.

'Sire,' she whispered, feeling embarrassed and frightened. The looks she had received from young men in passing were as nothing compared to the way the King's gaze was devouring her.

'Your modesty becomes you,' Henry said and moved to the youth at her side, but he cast a lingering look over his shoulder.

Quailing with embarrassment, Ida awaited a dismissal that did not come. There was still time before the dinner hour and the King wanted to speak further with his wards and charges. He had a chair fetched and a fine cushioned stool which he bade Ida set under his left foot.

'The pains of old age,' he told her with a wry smile. 'I would have the sight of your youth and beauty take them away.'

'Sire you are not old,' Ida said politely as she arranged the footstool to his liking which took several attempts. She had to touch and lift his leg, which was an intimate thing to do, and all the time she

was aware of his scrutiny and was embarrassed. When she had performed the duty and would have retreated to an unobtrusive place at the back of the gathering, he would have none of it and beckoned her to stand at his side. ‘Be my hand maiden,’ he said.

Ida saw some of the experienced courtiers exchange knowing glances and their looks tied her in knots. Henry engaged the rest of the group in conversation, but now and again, he turned round to her with a glance or a gesture. She responded with tentative smiles but felt the strain at the corners of her mouth. She hated being singled out. As always when faced with things that worried her, she turned her mind inwards to embroidery. Fabric of gold damask silk covered the footstool with an exquisite diamond lozenge pattern. She began assessing how to recreate it on a rectangle of tawny wool she had in her sewing casket.

‘You are lost in reflection, little Ida,’ Henry said with amusement. ‘Tell me, what deep thoughts you hold in your head.’

She reddened and darted a worried glance around at the rest of the gathering. What must they think of her? ‘I...I have no deep thoughts, sire,’ she answered tentatively. ‘I was only thinking about the pattern on your footstool and how I would work an embroidery of my own.’

She saw laughter fill the King’s eyes before she lowered her own. Now he would mock her, and indeed he did, but with kindness and a note in his voice that made her shiver. ‘Ah,’ he said, ‘if only all the women I have known had minded their needle, perhaps I would be a less haunted man today.’

‘Sire?’

‘No matter.’ He shook his head. ‘You remind me, Ida, that there is still innocence in the world and gentle moments remaining in life – and that is one of the rarest and most difficult things anyone could do.’

Ida saw sadness in his eyes and despite her discomfort and unease, it awoke her compassion. His words lit a small flicker of warmth inside her too to think she had given him something others could not.
