WINTER

To escape the sudden downpour, Prince Deron shoved at the heavy wooden door, but it refused to budge. “If you don’t open this blasted…”

The door moved, creating a space sufficient for him to edge his way inside, despite its iron hinges protesting in the chilly air. His leather scabbard scraped the frame, and his short red cloak snagged at a splinter. Otherwise, he squeezed through untouched until a wood fragment grazed the golden clasp on his shoulder. Shouts covered his swearing as chaos unfolded.

A chair leg in Morgan’s hands identified him as the one who had unleashed the wooden hail. His eyes widened, seeing his prince’s perusal. Bryn, always a troublemaker, swung his fist at the towering Griffith’s jaw, not noticing Elis about to sweep his legs out from under him. Hotheaded Alan grabbed a stool to smash on Elis’s crown.

Having sufficient evidence to cow the ten soldiers, Deron unsheathed his longsword as pressure throbbed his temples. “Enough of this!”

The melee froze. Except for the red-bearded Bryn. He crashed onto his stomach with a mighty “Oof,” a smirking Elis standing behind him.

As the stench of sweating bodies and cheap ale roiled his stomach, Deron resheathed his sword and crossed his arms. Where was Camden? Remembering someone had let him in, Deron pivoted. A blue tunic stood apart from the red ones, thick brown leggings less stained than those of his men. The ends of his wheat-colored hair wrapped around his chin as he pretended to study his fingernails.

“Captain, outside.”

With a nod, the smooth-faced soldier swung the door wide this time, granting the prince a more fitting passage.

Sheltering under the barrack’s extended roof, Deron leaned his head back to rest it against the stone wall, closed his eyes, and inhaled the damp air. “Have you thought of a good reason why I shouldn’t relieve you of your command?”

Fingers interlocked, Camden stretched his arms in front of him before sighing as joints popped in quick succession. “The same reason I gave you yesterday. And the day before that. No one wants to babysit soldiers in the winter months.”

“Aye, I’d forgotten.” Deron’s shoulders drooped as he eyed the darkening skies. “If this rain ever stops…”

He apologized for his short temper and gripped Camden’s forearm, noticing a tear in the blue fabric. Had Morgan’s folly also struck the captain? “The king arrives this week with the royal guard. Keep them from killing each other until then.”

“Yes, sir.” The captain cleared his throat. “Have you received further news of Saxon infiltrators?”

“Most of the masses have contented themselves with the shores to the east. The council believes they will hug the coast to stay near their allies across the sea. We need only watch for spies.”

“That’s good. What of our disorderly men?”

“I’ve a mind to paddle them and send them to bed without their dinners.” Deron’s lips tugged at Camden’s grin, but he shook it off. “The other barracks manage quite well with their board games. What makes this group different?” The answer leaped into his mind. Bryn. Camden knew it, too.

Nodding, the captain went back inside to confront the man.

Despite strong leadership abilities, Bryn exuded an attitude that attracted the worst sort to him. But he dodged every punishment when unrest circulated among them. Not today.

Leading a shirtless Bryn past him, Camden yelled over his shoulder. “Lads, out with all of you.”

Deron gazed at the listless Britons as they plodded to the back of the building. Griffith, the strongest of the men, carried a rod. So, Camden had opted out of the customary flogging.

Waiting for the sound of blunted blows to end, Deron studied the black clouds. How much longer till fair weather? January, with its shortage of daylight and abundance of cold, mocked them all in its slow march toward spring.

A feigned cough broke his musing after the men reoccupied the barrack. “My prince, have you thought about what I said last week?”

He had and would acquiesce. But he scorned the local superstitions.

His friend likely guessed his reason for hesitating. “When have I ever steered you wrong?”

They locked gazes, Deron crossing his arms on his chest.

After a pause, Camden fluttered his hand, shooing away Deron’s unspoken contradiction. “Besides Avery’s tavern wench.” Humidity muffled but failed to smother Camden’s hearty laugh.

Despite himself, Deron smiled. What a winsome lass she was. Until the ale loosened her tongue. “Should I bring a bag of gold? I could inquire about a particular vintage to douse the discontent.”

Camden drew his eyebrows together, ignoring the quip. “No man asks the vinedresser anything. Just observe and obey.”

The unreasonable instructions heated his face. “I’m the prince.”

His friend’s snicker contested his complaint. “You tried that on the lassie at the tavern. How did that go?”

Knowing better than to answer, he instead considered his task. “Why would the vinedresser tend the vineyards in winter?”

Camden clamped a hand on his shoulder. “Why, indeed?”

***

When the sun eliminated the last of the night shadows and the short-eared owls’ nervous hoots ended, Deron left the wall’s protection. The hill’s steepness settled to a gentle slope, the rain lessened, and the sun peeked through the clouds. A conspiracy against his foul mood.

Following the road toward the Severn Sea, he circled to the fortress’s southern side until he spied chest-level wooden arms in the distance—trellises and arbors.

What a foolhardy mission. Watch a peasant to learn how to manage unruly soldiers? True, he'd assumed the role of pendragon just a year ago, but he knew more than a farmer. Rubbing his neck, he scanned the area. Of course no one was around. Who would be tending grapes in January?

A movement caught his attention. A dot at the farthest end of the vineyard. Seeing no one else in the vicinity, he sighed and trudged in that direction.

The vinedresser stood on a two-step ladder, her back to him. A woman? Ties gathered her plain woolen dress for a snug fit at her waist, but her long sleeves hung free. Although her drab gray defied the day's cheerful mood, golden threads wove into the dark-bronze braid that reached below her waist.

After circling the vine supports to face her, he noted the small knife her long, tanned fingers wielded with deftness. Her merciless strokes left many fallen as she found fault in most of the branches. A sheet caught the debris—a growing pile. Although the vine's trunk remained untouched, she spared two or three branches of every ten at most.

When the drop cloth could bear no more, a gaunt white-haired man also clothed in gray exited the lean-to of a barn. How did he know to come at that precise time? After a slight bow of his head to acknowledge his prince, he dragged the cuttings away.

Skin tingling, Deron stared after him until the vinedresser descended the ladder. She drew another cloth from a gunnysack braced against the shed. Could she justify her ruthlessness? "How can the vine survive your severe pruning?"

Although the woman started at the broken silence, she didn't look at him. Perhaps her preoccupation kept her from recognizing him because she failed to bow. "We must remove the unfruitful branches while the vine sleeps. Sap doesn't run in the cold, so no damage occurs. Before the daffodils have brightened the dreary days, the sap returns. With fewer branches to support, the vine flourishes, producing abundant fruit."

His chest tightened at the woman's disrespect. He opened his mouth in a rebuke until he remembered Camden's words: *Observe and obey*. Swallowing hard, he widened his stance, settling in to learn what he could. But his captain's nonverbal approach wasted time. "You have cut away most of the vine. How will it be healthy?"

Her lips thinned as a brief smile escaped them. "One never cuts a vine. Come."

As she grasped his royal wrist in a grip most difficult to break, his jaw fell, and outrage grabbed his tongue. Nevertheless, he allowed her to lead him to the peeling brown bark.

After placing his hand against the roughness of a trunk thicker than his fist, she laid her callused palm atop his knuckles. At last, she looked at him. Touches of gold in her light-gray eyes sparkled like glowworms in a hazy fog. So beautiful.

"What you have identified as the trunk we call the vine."

Had she heard his thoughts?

A warm lilt lifted her voice, obscuring her place of origin. Not Cardiff or even Cornish Tintagel. A quarter of an hour passed as she described a healthy vine, showing him how its inflexibility lent it strength. But instruction about the branches proved more relevant to his needs.

Some of them roved hither and yon, reaching for adjacent plants or matting desired open spaces. She removed them all. "They hinder the strongest branches and hoard the nutrients the

others need. Pruning looks cruel, but discarding the excess of winter prevents a burden in spring. The wayward branches must go."

Hooking one finger under a branch while the trellis rows stood firm, he thought of the long barracks. "Will you trim branches from every vine? All two or three dozen of them?"

"I planted thirty-one vines, one for each day of the coldest month. This reduced the chore, and with proper care, they live a long time. Unlike soldiers."

Sorrow shook her voice. Or did he imagine it? Was she speaking of the present, or had she lost a lover in the skirmishes with the Saxons? Granting her privacy for her unshed tears, he stepped away, heading north. A sweet perfume filled his nostrils, and a breeze ruffled his cloak. But something else caused the hair on the back of his neck to rise. Something her words implied. Not death. Life. Her life. Impossible.

He spun on his heels. "*You* planted…" No one stood behind him save for the vegetative skeletons stretched upon their supports. No figure hurried away, except a golden bird larger than an osprey winging its way to the sea. He checked the lean-to. It stood empty. As did the barn. Had he imagined the entire encounter? He clutched his sword hilt as the heat drained from his body. Camden had much to explain.

***

From the forest, a wolf howled in protest as Deron circumvented the fort's western entrance. His captain had removed the platoon outside the walls. Swords swung in lazy arcs. He shook his head. Pitiful. More like poor dancing than effective swordplay. If they knew his father arrived today, they would employ this time to improve and therefore impress their sovereign.

A whistle pierced his ear and enlivened some of the men. What had been half-hearted exercise transformed into bold clashes. A purple-faced Griffith retaliated after Alan's blade nicked his shoulder. Blow after blow, he pounded the weaselly man's guard. Morgan held off another, but Deron failed to identify who.

Had Camden alerted them of his presence? Where was he? A blue tunic fought, separated from the others. No. Isolated. This was no longer training. It was an attack. Deron withdrew his sword and sprinted to his captain's side.

Bryn, the probable leader of this uprising, and another had squared off against Camden. As of yet, neither aggressor had seen Deron. The stranger—a Saxon?—braced with Camden, exposing his unprotected back to Bryn.

Deron shouted as the traitor's blade started to fall and knocked it away. Bryn raised his short sword for a second attempt until his eyes focused on this new opponent. Camden dispatched the stranger and faced Bryn who now stood outnumbered. As a whistle sounded from Bryn's lips, the same signal issued before, the traitors separated from the true. Wintertime—Deron needed to prune these branches. He knew which two to cut first.

He spoke such that only the nearest men heard. "Alan, you will return to the barracks with the man of my choosing. Gather your belongings. I'm sending you home. If I need your services in the spring, I will send for you." He signaled the wily Morgan, ordering him to assist Alan as he packed, and sent the two men away. Morgan would understand to watch that Alan didn't *borrow* anything from the other men's belongings.

The strongest man in the garrison would not be sufficient to escort Bryn. He needed the fleetest as well. “Griffith and Elis, you will come with us. Captain, take account of your men before you dismiss them and meet me in the praetorium hall.” Camden would understand what he meant. But had he been able to mark which sides the men had taken?

As for Bryn, how many steps would he walk before he bolted? It was nine. But after Elis’s initial surprise, he raced after him and grappled his legs to fell him. Griffith joined, pinning Bryn’s arms behind his already sore back and driving his knee onto it.

Deron stood over the traitor. “How many men have you poisoned? No matter. I can dispense the antidote.”

Despite his defeat, Bryn snorted. But when Griffith dug his knee deeper, Bryn’s teeth gritted. “What about me?”

“My father arrives today. The king will decide, that is, if you’re still alive. If not, may God damn you for your deceit. How many others has Saxon gold corrupted?”

The traitor remained silent.

“Good. An investigation will occupy the men for at least a few days.”

Refusing to remove his gaze from the man’s face, Deron commanded his two most fruitful branches. “Stand him up.”

Griffith kept a tight grip on Bryn’s arms, but he removed his knee from the man’s back. They all knew what recourse Bryn always resorted to. When the traitor rose, he tossed his head back, smacking Griffith in the face. Although blood dripped from his nose, his viselike grip showed no evidence of slackening.

When Bryn tried to twist, the prince nodded to Elis who plunged a knife into Bryn’s chest. As the traitor sank to the ground, his eyes fixed on Deron’s. “I’ll see you in hell,” he said, gasping.

“Hold the door, but I won’t be the next one coming through.”

Nodding to Elis, he pointed at Bryn’s slumping body. “Grab his legs. We need to take him to the king while his breath is still in him. If God wills it, he will survive the trip.”

He signaled other men to carry the stranger’s corpse as well. *Why didn’t I go to the vinedresser sooner?*