

# Comfort of Home

*Life of Galen, Book 2*

Marina Pacheco

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## Glossary and Historical Information

### *General terms*

Burh: town or village.

Churl: a freeman of the lowest rank, a peasant.

Catamite/Sodomite: homosexual.

Ealdorman: nobility; this became the modern-day earl.

Enga-lond: the Anglo-Saxon name for England.

Englisc: the Anglo-Saxon word for English.

Thane: a warrior; what was to become a knight in later centuries.

Thrall: a slave. People might be forced into slavery when they fell upon hard times. Then they could offer their labour to someone wealthy or powerful in exchange for their freedom. This was usually described as putting your head into somebody else's hands.

Leech: a doctor. While for us leech may be a derogatory term, in the Anglo-Saxon era it was merely the name of their occupation.

Mint: place where money is made. During Anglo-Saxon times, most major towns had their own mint.

Flowery mead: A short cropped flowery meadow.

Lead plummet: a type of pencil used for preliminary sketches.

Wergeld: literally blood money, paid if someone did harm to another. If a person refused to compensate another for a wrong done to them, it could lead to a blood feud.

### **Book production**

Codex: a hand-written book.

Copyist/scribe: person who does the lettering in a codex; they copy texts from existing works.

Gathering: four sheets of vellum sewn together down the middle to form a booklet of 8 pages.

Illuminator/illustrator: the person who creates the major designs and images in a codex.

Rubricator/miniator: the person who adds rubrics, ornate initials and other decorative flourishes to the pages. It was very rare for the scribe, rubricator, and miniator to be the same monk.

Parchment: a kind of durable paper made from the skins of animals, usually pigs, sheep or goats.

Pattern book: a book filled with designs that an artist can use as references.

Pumice stone: a lightweight, coarse black stone that was used to scour ink off pages, much like we would use an eraser today.

Vellum: a high-quality parchment usually made from calfskin.

### *Religious life*

Abbey: a much larger establishment made up of several cloistered buildings and additional structures beyond the cloisters.

Divine offices: the seven periods throughout the day when the monks stop to pray.

Habit: the clothes a monk wears, these consist of, a tunic (plain single piece robe), scapular a garment that hangs from the shoulders but has no arms, and a cowl/ hood, which is a long single piece garment with a hood and wide sleeves. It fitted over the top of the tunic and

scapular.

Monastery: a single cloistered religious institution

Scriptorium: room used for codex production

### *Roles in religious institutions*

Abbot: leader of the monastery or abbey.

Armarius: the director of the scriptorium; the armarius gave necessary instructions, assigned tasks, distributed writing materials and managed all writing, artwork and collating.

Chamberlain: looked after the money, clothing and accounts. He also had the responsibility of the archives or records.

Cellarer: in charge of the abbey's food supplies and making sure guests were well fed.

Infirmarius: looked after the sick monks and any poor people who needed medical attention.

Porter: guarded the gate and made sure that no-one entered who did not have a right to be admitted.

## List of Characters

### **The Abbey**

Brother Galen: a scribe/ copyist from Thorpe Parva

Brother Alcuin, son of Maccus: an illustrator from the Wold and the Monastery of Thurby in the Wold

Brother Benesing: the chief of the infirmary, Galen's uncle

Abbot Dyrewine: the head of the whole religious establishment, in this case the Abbey of Yarmwick

Brother Ranig: the armarius

Brother Anfred: the librarian

Brother Haenric: a scribe/ copyist

Brother Kenric: the porter, meets everyone at the door

Brother Haward: the chamberlain

Brother Thored: the cellarer

### **Home**

Ealdorman Hugh: a local noble, Galen's father

Septimus the Red: a thane and Hugh's right-hand man

Ealdorman Maccus: Alcuin's father

Lady Bretana: Galen's mother

Cena: Galen's sister

Hild: Galen's sister

Emma: Galen's sister

Eni: Emma's husband

Tova & Nerienda: Emma's children

Willnoth: Galen's oldest brother, who died in a Viking attack

Fulk: Galen's second oldest brother

Lady Cwengyth: Fulk's wife

Octa: Galen's brother

Tonbert: Galen's brother

Niclas: the carter

Father Pifus: Thorpe Parva's priest

Redwald: the butcher

Alduini: one of Hugh's oldest and most experienced thanes

Wuffa: the blacksmith

Eba and Tatae: thralls that work in the long hall

Brinley: runs the mint and makes all of Ealdorman Hugh's coins

Eadbald: the glass maker

## Background to the book

This book starts in February 996 AD. It is set in Anglo-Saxon England. The abbey and the villages I mention are my own invention and never existed. I placed the abbey more or less in the Fenland area of England, which is nearish the east coast. However, England at that time was very different, and much marshier. It has been extensively drained since then, so at the time in which the book is set, the Fens were far more extensive than they are today. In my imagination, the Abbey of Yarmwick is on the westernmost edge of the Fens.

I have tried to be historically accurate, but looking back that far is difficult and can always only be a guess. The clothes, food, medicines and ranks, and daily and religious life, are as close as history permits.

At the time, the British Isles was a feudal society subdivided amongst a number of warring kings. In addition, Danes were alternately trading, attempting to settle and raiding all along the coast. Vikings were pirates. If the people were trading peacefully, they were called Danes, if they were raiding, they were called Vikings, but they were often the same people.

England, at the time, was Catholic, and religion pervaded everyday life. Monasteries, abbeys and convents dotted the land. They were centres of learning, and where the majority of books were produced. Monks frequently travelled between various institutions, and they also traded and swapped books. There are letters existing today that show that the religious houses borrowed each other's books so that they could make copies. It was the only way the knowledge in those books could be shared.

The two main characters, Galen and Alcuin, are both young. Galen is fifteen and has been working as a scribe for two years already. The view of children has changed markedly over the centuries. The Anglo-Saxons considered you an adult when you turned thirteen. Even before that, most young people were expected to dress and work alongside their elders and behave in the same way as all of them. So, although to us a fifteen-year-old seems very young, in his time Galen would already be considered an adult.

# 1

The manuscript Galen was working on was twice the size of what he was used to. So now he had to use the footrest and push himself into a half standing position to get to the top of the page on his steeply slanting desk. The effort pulled at his guts and caused pain each time he stretched forward. He'd tried other ways of working, including having the gathering of eight pages hanging off the bottom of his desk and slowly inching the vellum upwards, but the whole lot kept slipping as it was below the supporting lip.

So he had no choice. The pain would have to be part of what went into the creation of this most glorious of codices. Galen had hoped for something more interesting after he and Alcuin had finished their codex on the Venerable Bede's Life of Saint Cuthbert. Unfortunately, the abbot wanted a book of hours impressive enough to cause envy in every abbot and monarch in the land, and one intended to stave off any disaster the impending millennium might bring. To that purpose, he'd set his star illustrator and his copyist to work. Galen prayed as he worked and offered his suffering up to God as penance.

His sleeve flopped forward and Galen pushed it back up in irritation, then muttered, 'I'm sorry, God,' for losing his temper.

He hastily bit back a request for cooler weather. It was midsummer, and the sun was shining down mercilessly on the row of copyists, baking them all.

Usually, they were the fortunate ones with the seats beside the window. It gave them the best light by which to work. The disadvantages were that you froze in winter, when the cold air came in waves off the clear windowpanes, and you sweltered in summer. All things considered, Galen preferred the heat to the cold. When it was cold, it added the ache of frozen fingers to the permanent pain in his guts. It was a level of misery that he never felt in the summer.

Sweat prickled on his forehead, gathered into a droplet, slipped down his nose and, before he could intercept it, dropped onto his manuscript. It landed on the letter he'd just formed and the ink expanded into the drop, leaving a dirty, blackish-brown blob on his pristine page.

Galen suppressed a curse and reached for his black kerchief, secreted in the slot under his desk, and wiped his forehead to forestall any further accident. Then he held the tip of his kerchief against the drop. It sucked up into the cloth, leaving a damp oblong stain on the vellum.

His kerchief was too soggy now to do much more, so he used the edge of his sleeve to further dry the page. Then he reached for his pumice stone, resting on the left-hand side of the ledge of his desk, and roughed up the stain on the vellum, erasing all that was left. Finally, he took his square of chalk from the right side of the ledge and rubbed it over the roughened spot

until it was smooth and white again.

The perfectionist in him would have preferred to clean the whole lot and start again, because now he had a white circle of chalk marring his otherwise perfectly uniform sheet. But it would be impractical.

Brother Ranig, the armarius and tyrant of the scriptorium, would take him to task if he even thought of starting again. Brother Ranig's role, aside from ensuring all the scribes had the supplies they needed, from ink to gatherings of vellum, was to ensure the maximum production of codices. Rewriting half a page of text would never be allowed.

So Galen took up his pen again and sharpened it with three deft flicks of his penknife. As he did so, he became aware of the scratch, scratch, scratch of his fellow scribes hard at work. He was at the back of the room, at the bottom of the row. To his right were another three rows of monks, all similarly engaged in their work of manuscript production.

Galen dipped his pen into the inkhorn, suspended in place by a circular hole in the desk. The ink was thickening. It always dried out so much quicker in summer. Soon he'd have to signal to Brother Ranig that he needed water to thin it. But that could wait.

Galen shied away from any interaction with the armarius. His name may have been cleared of the gossip surrounding him since his arrival at the abbey, but it had resulted in no improvement in Galen's relationship with Brother Ranig. The armarius still treated Galen with the disdain he always had. Fortunately, it was not so with the rest of the brothers.

Galen was shy and found it difficult to put himself forward whenever he was in a group. As a result, he was still more of an outsider than his friend Alcuin, who was a newer arrival at the abbey. Galen looked towards the platform at the front of the scriptorium. That space used to be reserved only for Brother Ranig's desk. But Alcuin was such a renowned artist and illustrator that they'd set up his desk on the window side of the stage. He was also hard at work, so all Galen could see was his stubbly, blond tonsure with the golden curls below it.

Galen sighed as he went back to the familiar lines of the book of hours just as a shadow rippled over his page, causing him to look up again. The imperfections in the glass made it difficult to make out more than a watery impression of a thane. He looked like a big man, and he was walking briskly towards the abbot's house.

Galen wasn't the only one to notice him. Every head in the scriptorium had popped up and was now facing the window. On instinct, Galen's eyes flashed to Alcuin. He turned from watching the stranger to give Galen a big grin.

This was one of the many ways in which they differed. Alcuin loved anything new. He was no doubt thrilled that some stranger had appeared. For Galen, it was a more alarming proposition. He feared men of power. His father, Hugh, was an ealdorman, one of the toughest and most prominent in the land. He was surrounded by a band of fearsome thanes who regularly went out with him to stand against the Vikings marauding across his territory. He'd always intimidated Galen.

He'd also disowned Galen when he'd come across his naked body after he'd been raped. He'd finally come to Galen, three years later, to find out the truth. Galen had revealed who the rapist was then: his father's best friend.

Despite that, and much to his surprise, Hugh had taken Galen back into the family. No, he'd apologised and asked if he would return. Galen had never expected that. He'd been happy to do

it, though. It had brought him some peace, but it did little for his confidence. This was especially true with the arrival of unknown men at the abbey.

He must have looked more alarmed than he realised, because Alcuin came over.

A smile was playing on his lips as he said, 'Who do you think it is?'

'I have no idea,' Galen murmured, 'although he looked very purposeful.'

'He did, didn't he?' Alcuin said. 'No doubt we'll find out all about it at the chapter meeting.'

'The chapter meeting?' Galen said with a laugh. 'You'll no doubt know all about the visitor before we get to bed.'

'You know me too well. I was thinking I'd ask Brother Kenric what he knows.' Brother Kenric was the porter whose friendship Alcuin had cultivated assiduously. 'There isn't a thing that old man doesn't know about the comings and goings of the abbey.'

'Closely followed by you,' Galen said. He realised Brother Ranig was watching the two of them with a fearsome scowl, so said, 'What do you think of this page? I'm afraid a drop of sweat landed here and I couldn't quite obliterate the mark.'

Alcuin gave Galen a knowing smile as he also noted the armarius's gaze. He leaned closer to the page and examined it minutely.

'If you hadn't mentioned it, I wouldn't have noticed. Once my illustrations go in and the codex is complete and bound, it really will be so insignificant that nobody will realise it is there.'

'That's a relief,' Galen said, and it was the truth.

Alcuin might be a happy-go-lucky sort of fellow, but when it came to his illustrations and the production of a codex, he was every bit of a perfectionist as Galen was. Maybe that was why they got on so well.

'What do you think of the larger format?' Alcuin said. 'It is so large I see you having to rise off your seat to do the first few lines. That can't be comfortable for you.'

Galen shrugged away Alcuin's concerns for his health, although it always touched him deeply that Alcuin cared.

'It's fine. I'm sure I'll get used to the awkwardness, eventually.'

'For my part, I like the bigger space I have to work on. It makes a refreshing change.'

Galen nodded and was about to speak when Alcuin's gaze flicked back to the window. He turned in time to see the abbot emerge from his house. He was speaking to the unknown man but shaking his head and gesticulating wildly. Since he was pointing in the direction of the guest hall, Galen assumed the man was welcome enough that he was being allowed to stay, but only just. The man gave a brief bow and vanished from their view.

The abbot stood for a while, staring in the direction the man had gone. Then he apparently swore, because a hasty sign of the cross followed it. Galen expected the abbot to go back into his house. So he was surprised and alarmed when, instead, he stomped towards the main cloister of the abbey.

'Now what?' Galen murmured.

Moments later the abbot flung open the door to the scriptorium and stood in the entrance glaring at everyone. All the monks turned towards him, then froze and Galen held his breath. It was rare for the abbot to even look annoyed, never mind being as discomposed as he was now. His face was red and sweat beaded his brow.

To Galen's gathering alarm, the abbot made a beeline towards him and Alcuin and slammed his fist on the desk, a crumpled letter clutched in his grip.

'Are you alright, Father Abbot?'

Even Alcuin looked shaken by the abbot's behaviour.

'I'm fine, I'm fine,' Dyrewine muttered irritably, and glared at the young men. 'I need a word with the two of you.'

'With us?' Alcuin said.

It was just as well Alcuin was here to ask the questions Galen wouldn't dare ask himself. He was also uncomfortably aware of being the centre of attention. While the other brothers may have bowed their heads back over their work, lest they be told off, none of them had gone back to their writing.

'I have just received this missive from King Aethelred,' Dyrewine muttered under his breath, as he eased his grip on the crumpled letter but made no sign of handing it over.

'The king!' Brother Ranig said as he arrived, breathless, but determined to be included. 'Does he want a codex?'

'He does.'

'But isn't that a good thing?' Alcuin said, looking increasingly concerned by his abbot's lack of enthusiasm.

'Oh, a splendid thing,' Dyrewine said bitterly. 'An honour for our abbey, recognition of the quality of work we produce and we will be paid handsomely for it. All because I gave Ealdorman Hugh the book of hours you and Galen worked on.'

'I don't understand,' Alcuin said.

'The king has been on a visit to his lordship and saw the codex. He wants one himself, only more ornate. Something fitting with which to welcome in the new millennium.'

'Of course, as suits his dignity and this most significant of dates. But I don't see the problem. We can produce a very fine book of hours for him,' Ranig said.

'He wants images of himself and his family in the book,' Dyrewine said heavily.

'That shouldn't be a problem.'

'No indeed, but here's the difficulty, he wants the images of him and his family to resemble them.'

'We can't do that,' Alcuin said. 'We never do it. I just put indications of who people are symbolically, with crowns and things. If I were to make an actual image of the king and his family, we'd have to know what they look like.'

'Exactly! His Majesty wants you and Brother Galen to go to his court in Lundenburh to produce this manuscript.'

'Lundenburh?' Brother Ranig shouted so that all the monks looked back up at him, 'Brother Alcuin and Brother Galen?'

'I can't!' Galen gasped, surprised into speaking for the first time in the conversation even over Brother Ranig's disapproval.

'You have no choice. The king commands.' Dyrewine must have noticed the fear in Galen's eyes because he continued more kindly, 'The king made his decision when he was at your father's hall. Because of this your father has sent a note that he will arrange a cart to convey you and Alcuin to Lundenburh.'

Galen shook his head, unable to say the decision, but terrified by the idea of leaving the abbey.

‘Your father has also suggested that you stop over at home to break your journey and regroup your strength. He said that your mother would be pleased to see you.’

Galen’s eyes flicked up to the abbot’s face uncertainly, but the idea of seeing his mother was a great incentive. Despite his severe misgivings, he was able to give an accepting nod.

‘That helps, does it?’ Abbot Dyrewine murmured. ‘Well, I’m still deeply irritated. I wanted the two of you to remain here, producing the finest manuscripts for our library. What is the point of having my two most talented workers going off to produce fine works for the king?’

‘It won’t be all bad,’ Alcuin said. ‘It will buy us a few favours with the king.’

‘Huh,’ the abbot grunted. ‘I suppose so. Ah well, no use crying over that which we can’t changed. You are to start making preparations at once. You’ll need to pack all the supplies necessary for the production of a codex, all bar the cover. The king has his own craftsman who’ll probably produce some ivory, gold and gem-encrusted binding. But everything else,’ the abbot said, turning to Brother Ranig, ‘all the vellum, inks and paints have to be arranged here. The king is an impatient man, so we must work quickly.’

Ranig’s face darkened as he said, ‘Brother Galen is hardly the best representative of the abbey.’

‘When will the cart arrive?’ Alcuin asked in an attempt to move the subject off Galen.

‘I dare say in a day or two. You’d better rest up before that, Brother Galen, so you’re in the best physical condition to travel.’

‘What of the manuscript we’re working on now?’ Galen said, shocked by how quickly his life had been upended. Even the promise of seeing his mother couldn’t smother his anxiety about travelling all the way to the king’s hall.

‘It will have to be repurposed for the king!’ Dyrewine snapped, angry all over again. ‘You may as well take what you have already started with you. But the two of you must make sure you work quickly so that you may come back as soon as possible. I am every bit as impatient as the king.’

‘My abbot, I must protest,’ Brother Ranig said. ‘Think of our reputation.’

‘The king want’s the best codex money can buy, Brother Ranig. Who else would you suggest we send?’

‘Brother Haenic is every bit as good as Brother Galen. He deserves this trip more too.’

Galen clenched his fists to still the tremor of fear that shook his body. Brother Ranig’s open dislike of him scarily mattered, though. It was the trip that made him dizzy with the shock of it all. How on earth could he manage such a thing? It would have scared him even when he was healthy, but now?

‘Father Abbot?’ Galen blurted out before he could stop himself.

Dyrewine heaved a great sigh, as if he already knew what was coming.

‘Yes, Brother Galen?’

Galen couldn’t hold his exasperated gaze, and his eyes dropped to the floor.

‘Um... I was wondering... well... do I have to go on this mission to see the king?’

‘He asked for you.’

‘I was just thinking... couldn’t another copyist go in my place? I mean... it’s Alcuin’s

illuminations that the king wants, and Brother Haenric... Brother Ranig is right, he has a very fine hand.' Galen trailed off, unable to say more.

'You see?' Brother Ranig said, jabbing his finger in Galen's direction, 'even he doesn't want to go.'

'Galen?' Alcuin gasped. 'No, you can't fob me off. My work won't be the same without you.'

'I'm sorry, but he's right,' the abbot said. 'The king wants a book that is better than your father's. Young as you are, Galen, you are my best copyist. If I send anyone else with Alcuin, their work will not look half as good as it does with your fine script.'

'Oh,' Galen said, and his shoulders slumped as he glanced at Brother Ranig.

'Armarius, you'd best prepare a list of what we'll need,' the abbot said by way of dismissal.

Brother Ranig looked like he wanted to keep arguing against Galen going, but he knew when the abbot would no longer enter into discussion so muttered, 'I'll go check our supplies,' and stomped off.

The abbot leaned closer to Galen and murmured, 'Come now, Galen, you can't be so afraid, can you?'

'I never liked to travel,' Galen whispered. 'I always preferred to stay at home... with people I know. The abbey... I've grown accustomed.'

'You will get used to the court too. And don't imagine you'll have to mix with the king's men, because you won't. You and Alcuin will be given a room to work in and left to get on with it. You won't have to mingle.'

'Do you think so?' Galen said hopefully.

Dyrewine roared with laughter and, shaking his head, said, 'Bless me if I've ever come across anyone who looked pleased to know they wouldn't have to roam the royal halls.'

Galen gave him a perfunctory and, he was aware, not very happy smile, and Dyrewine eyed him more solemnly.

'The king has a talented healer too. He may be able to help you where your uncle could not.'

'Yes... perhaps,' Galen murmured, aware that the whole scriptorium was still listening in. They all knew everything about him, but it was uncomfortable to give them this reminder.

He could do no more, though. He had his orders and lacked the courage to resist any further.

'I'm sorry, Galen, but you, like me, really have no choice. However, you aren't travelling alone. Alcuin will watch over you,' the abbot said, then nodded his farewell and left.

Galen hugged his arms about himself to hide yet another tremor of fear and to try to quell the pain that had blossomed in his nether regions in sympathetic dread.

'You'll be alright,' Alcuin said, in the calm tone of voice he always used when he realised Galen was about to panic. 'And you'll have an opportunity to spend time with your family, which you'll like. I know how much you've missed them, especially your mother.'

'Yes,' Galen said, as an embarrassed, warm flush suffused his face. 'It will be good to see my family again.'

## 2

Unlike Galen, news of the trip to the king's hall thrilled Alcuin. He'd been at Yarmwick for a year and a half now, and he was growing restless. Alcuin liked novelty. He loved meeting new people and seeing fresh sights. As a monk set to illustrating, he had few opportunities to leave the confines of the abbey. This trip was therefore a rare treat, and he intended to enjoy it.

His anticipated enjoyment would have been greater if it wasn't for Galen's genuine fear. But he was a natural optimist, and he was sure he could cajole Galen into enjoying himself. In the meantime, Galen had been given a cell so he wouldn't be disturbed and ordered to stay in bed until his father's cart arrived.

It therefore fell to Alcuin to gather all the supplies they would need for their journey. The less difficult list was the food and drink they needed to take with them. Brother Thored, the abbey's cellarer, was used to providing provisions for any man who had to go on a trip and had already worked out what was needed.

The more tricky list was everything they would need for the production of a large codex. Fortunately, Brother Ranig could tell him how many sheets of vellum and barrels of ink were required for any kind of book, including the king's very large book. Alcuin had little respect for Brother Ranig because of his hostility towards Galen, but he accepted that the armarius knew his job. When it was just the two of them Brother Ranig was always perfectly affable to him too. Alcuin suspected that Ranig was torn between his dismay that Alcuin had befriended Galen, and his respect for Alcuin as an artist.

'That just leaves the amount of gold leaf to take, and the coloured paints,' Alcuin said as he and the armarius conferred in the scriptorium, each sitting side on in their desks as they drew up a list of supplies. 'I would hate to run out at court.'

'There's no need to worry about that. The abbot will give you sufficient funds to cover any unexpected expenses,' Brother Ranig said. 'And the king has a royal artist. He'll be able to point you toward a supplier should you need one.'

'That's assuming he likes me enough to share his information.'

'If he doesn't, you can always approach the king.'

Alcuin laughed and said, 'Oh yes, just like I've always lived at court.'

'Haven't you? I thought your father was an ealdorman.'

'He is. My father and my oldest brother are regularly in attendance to the king. But, since I was always going to join a monastery, it wasn't considered necessary for me to go to court.'

'Well, you are nobility,' Brother Ranig said. 'You'll find your feet easily enough.'

Alcuin was sure he was right. He was an adaptable fellow. He was going to say more when

he spotted Brother Benesing hovering in the doorway.

‘Forgive me, Brother Ranig, I’d better go,’ Alcuin said as he hurried away.

He didn’t want a lecture from Ranig of how he wasn’t to mollycoddle Brother Galen. That could be the only reason Brother Benesing was there. As the senior infirmarius, he looked after the health of their entire community. Although, as Galen’s uncle, he would always be considered partisan and hence was disliked by Brother Ranig because of their connection.

Brother Benesing turned towards his house the moment he saw that Alcuin was on his way. So he was halfway down the cloister by the time Alcuin caught up with him.

‘Do you want to speak to me, Brother?’

‘I do,’ Benesing said, his stride lengthening.

Alcuin had to put all his energy into keeping up and said breathlessly, ‘About Galen?’

‘I have a favour to ask of you on that front.’

That didn’t surprise Alcuin. It would have been stranger if Brother Benesing didn’t wish to speak to him. ‘What kind of favour?’

‘I will tell you once we are indoors.’

Alcuin knew this was to keep his conversation away from prying ears; the brothers were ever an inquisitive lot. They had a way of sniffing out what was going on, even when you might swear you were only sharing the confidence with one other person. So Alcuin said nothing as he followed Brother Benesing down the path that led to the infirmary. It was a large building set away from the main cloister. This ensured that no infections spread to the community. As Alcuin suspected though, they weren’t heading for the infirmary. Brother Benesing continued on, past the peas patch, flush with ripening peas and beans, through a squeaking gate and into a walled garden. It was Brother Benesing’s herbarium and the source for many of his medicines.

On a sunny day, the garden was a delight to behold. It was a lush Garden of Eden, filled with a wider variety of herbs than Alcuin could name. Many of them were covered in flowers so that drifts of tiny lavender blooms from one bush merged with the larger white blooms of another. Butterflies flitted delicately around the garden, and a profusion of bees buzzed over every flowery mound.

‘I really must come and do some sketches here one of these days,’ Alcuin murmured.

‘Not anytime soon,’ Brother Benesing said as he stood in the doorway to his hut at the end of the garden path.

Alcuin would have preferred to sit outside on the bench against the hut’s wall and carry on admiring the plants. The hut was hot and stuffy, not only because it was built in a deliberately sunny place, but because Brother Benesing’s fire was lit. The small black cauldron he always had over it was bubbling away and giving off an aromatic vapour redolent of sage.

‘I suppose at this time of the year you are at your busiest with the making of your tinctures and salves.’

‘I am indeed,’ Brother Benesing said as he closed the door on the two of them.

He indicated for Alcuin to take a seat at the central table piled high with jars, bottles, bundles of herbs, a cutting board, a large sharp knife and a variety of pestles and mortars.

Benesing examined Alcuin thoughtfully and paced back and forth. Alcuin was expecting a few instructions from Brother Benesing, but his apparent hesitance to speak worried him.

‘I have asked the abbot most strenuously not to make Galen take this journey, but he has told me it isn’t in his power to prevent it.’ Brother Benesing said eventually.

‘Why? Is Galen really so unfit to travel?’

‘He is very ill. Just because he doesn’t make a fuss doesn’t mean that his condition isn’t grave. I wish... well, it’s no matter. I can’t change things now. The fact is that Galen needs to be watched over. He tries his best to rest and not to strain himself, but it isn’t always possible. Sometimes he’s in such pain he doesn’t spot the warning signs. But I’ve come to know when he needs to be medicated and to lie up.’

‘Do you want me to do that while we are away?’

Benesing gave a curt nod and said, ‘I’ve given Galen a supply of medicines and mostly he can take care of himself. But you know what a soft young man he is. He could all too easily be bullied into doing something he knows is bad for him because he won’t dig his heels in and refuse.’

‘I’m not sure I follow you?’

‘On this journey they might expect you to travel faster than he can stand. His father is sending a cart. But if it goes too fast, bounding over our poor roads, it might shake Galen beyond what he can bear. Or when you arrive somewhere, they might expect him to hurry off to meet people without being able to catch his breath. You will need to step in then and make sure people don’t hurry Galen along.’

‘For he won’t do it himself,’ Alcuin said, ‘you’re right.’

‘I’m sorry to place such a burden on you.’

Alcuin smiled and said, ‘Galen is my friend, I don’t mind doing that. Don’t think less of him because he can’t stand up to people.’

Benesing scowled, then after considering the matter gave a dismissive shrug.

‘Perhaps in time he might have developed a sterner soul. But with this illness dragging him down, he has become even less able to overcome his hesitancy. Still, there is no point in debating the matter. I have an additional favour to ask.’

‘Anything.’

‘Humm,’ Benesing said, gazing thoughtfully at Alcuin. ‘Well, it can’t be helped,’ he said to himself. ‘As I’ve already told you, Galen has a supply of medicine. It should be sufficient. However, there are things I would never give into his care. Or into the care of anyone in as much pain as Galen.’

‘Why not?’ Alcuin asked, more alarmed now.

‘Because they are powerful medicines with potent side effects. When Galen is in extreme pain, or when he starts to bleed I give him these medicines. They still the pain and put him into a deep sleep through which he barely moves. This is essential if he is to heal. But the medicine has claws. The more a man takes, the more he craves. If it was in Galen’s hands he wouldn’t be able to resist taking it regularly. Before anyone knew it, he’d be in thrall to the medicine and beyond helping for there’s no coming back from the stuff,’ Benesing said as he took down a stoppered brown flask from one of the shelves beside his fireplace.

‘Surely such a powerful drug shouldn’t be used at all,’ Alcuin said, unable to hide the horror in his voice. All the same, he held out his hand for the flask, but the infirmarius held onto it worried about handing it over.

‘There are times when Galen needs this medicine, believe me. I’ve tried not using it on him and nearly lost him to the pain for he was thrashing about in an agony and that, as you know, makes everything worse.’

‘I see, this is a great responsibility you’re placing on me, Brother Benesing.’

‘I know it, and I am sorry, but there is nobody else I can ask. If Galen is to make it to Lundenburh, then you will have to make certain he arrives,’ Benesing said and finally decided that he would hand over the medicine. He placed the cool earthen flask into Alcuin’s hand and folded his fingers around it.

‘I will do it,’ Alcuin said, ‘but you must explain the use of all these medicines carefully to me for I’m no healer.’

‘I’ll take you through them all and tell you what to do if Galen starts to bleed. I have also composed a detailed letter to the king’s leech. I hope that once you get to court some of the care of Galen’s health can be handed over to him.’

Alcuin breathed a sigh and said, ‘You’ve relieved my mind of some weight now.’

‘Don’t think your vigil can ease there. You will still have to watch Galen and make sure he goes to the leech when he needs to. Remember, the man will be a stranger to him and therefore he’ll avoid him.’

‘Of course,’ Alcuin said with a laugh, ‘well, never mind, I’ll do it.’

‘You really are a good friend,’ Benesing said, ‘Galen is lucky to have someone like you on his side.’

‘I can say the same thing about Galen,’ Alcuin said, which got him a surprised look from Brother Benesing.

It wasn’t appropriate to discuss the matter further, but Alcuin wondered whether his friendship with Galen would protect him from the blood feud that stood between his and Galen’s family. Ealdorman Hugh had been surprisingly relaxed about the issue when Alcuin first met him. Maybe it was because it was the fault of Galen’s family and it was Alcuin’s duty to avenge the family name. He had no intention of getting involved, he’d leave that in his father and older brother’s hands. Still, he was more than a little uncomfortable about spending a protracted time in the burh of his family’s sworn enemy.

### 3

Galen sat on the edge of his bed, staring thoughtfully at the floor. A bowl of pottage and a hunk of bread on the table beside him. Two days of rest had undoubtedly been good for him. But last night had brought the arrival of his father's cart and Alcuin, hotfoot, to inform him they'd be leaving at dawn. The thought of venturing out of the abbey closed a fist of fear around Galen's stomach and made him incapable of swallowing even a morsel of food.

It wasn't the king's hall he was so afraid of, Galen realised, it was going home. His heart ached to see his mother and sisters again. It was the thought of them that gave him the courage he needed, but he dreaded the rest.

His father might have forgiven him and taken him back into the family, but what did that mean? Try as he might, Galen couldn't envision talking to his father. The only time in his life they'd actually had a conversation was at the abbey when Hugh had asked Galen for his forgiveness.

Galen had still been recovering from his mauling by Septimus's hand, so the whole meeting had a vague dreamlike quality to it. Once he was home he doubted his father would have any more to do with him than when Galen had called the long hall, home. Contemplating that filled him with sorrow, but he had to accept that was the way of things.

What frightened him more was seeing his brothers. Wilnoth was dead, killed in a Viking raid, and now Fulk was the heir and he'd never liked Galen. Wilnoth had been like his father and just ignored Galen, but Fulk behaved as though Galen was an affront to the family because of his shyness and his small stature. Heaven alone knew what he'd say now after a rape that left Galen in permanent pain and incapable of even walking upright.

'Please, God, keep Fulk away from me,' Galen whispered, then thought better of it. 'I'm sorry, God. I shouldn't have asked that. I will try to face my fears and accept whatever Fulk says and does. Please give me the strength to do so.'

He hoped he could at least face Fulk and the others bravely. His other brothers tended to follow Fulk's lead, so if Fulk was determined to go back to belittling Galen the rest of the boys would do the same as would the thanes who were now loyal to Fulk.

Thought of the thanes led Galen to consider the rest of the burh. Everybody knew what had happened to him. Would he be able to stand the whispers and the glances cast in his direction?

And what would Father Pifus say? The recollection of his old teacher made Galen shudder in fearful anticipation. Even though Galen had been Father Pifus' student, had worked his hardest and demonstrated his ability, the old man had never unbent towards him. Father Pifus demanded complete obedience, which included agreeing to his every theological

pronouncement.

That Galen couldn't do. Father Pifus's theology was too harsh and judgmental. Galen believed in a more loving and understanding God. Shy as he was, he couldn't keep quiet when he thought Father Pifus had gone too far. For that he had earned innumerable beatings.

Galen's shoulders ached just to remember that. He also remembered how unforgiving the priest was of even minor sins. Galen was certain that Father Pifus would view him as an irredeemable sinner, and no doubt he would tell all the townsfolk the same.

That thought robbed Galen of what little appetite he still had. All the same, he had to force himself; he had to keep his strength up. He also had to make it clear to everyone else that he was alright.

He'd seen the concern in Alcuin's eyes and in his uncle's and more worryingly in those of the abbot. Did they all doubt he could make such a journey? Perhaps they did. After all, even he didn't know if it was possible. All he did know was that it would be difficult.

With a sigh, Galen dunked the wooden spoon into the pottage and shoved the contents into his mouth when a firm knock at the door made him jump.

'Are you ready?' Alcuin said as he peered through the half-open door.

Galen wiped his mouth with the back of his sleeve and made to stand. 'I will be in a moment.'

'No, you need to finish eating first.'

'I don't think I can.'

'Two more mouthfuls, and the same for the bread, then I'll let you go.'

Galen smiled up at Alcuin, trying his best not to let his anxiety over the journey show. He appreciated the way Alcuin bullied him because he knew it was for his own good. So he forced himself to take another couple of spoonfuls of pottage and shoved some bread into his mouth. The food was warm and salty, but beside that he couldn't taste much. Everything shut down when he was worried, even his sense of taste.

'We're all packed,' Alcuin said. 'I checked a hundred times last night, but I still worry we'll get to the court and discover we've left something vital behind.'

Galen swallowed down an over large mouthful of food and said, 'I'm sure we have everything. I've gone through the list myself and can't imagine what we might have left behind.'

'Well, it's a good thing your father is lending us a cart, because what with all the supplies and food we're taking, there will be precious little space for you.'

'I don't mind that,' Galen said as he pushed away the rest of the food and slowly rose to his feet. It took effort. It always did, but it felt like more of a challenge today. This wasn't because of his injury, this was the dread of what was to come.

'Do you want some support?' Alcuin said, holding out his arm.

'No, I'll be fine,' Galen said and forced another smile.

The walk from the cells, through the cloister and across the church was a slow one. Alcuin let Galen set the pace, for which he was grateful, but he pushed himself so he didn't waste their time.

He paused before stepping out into the yard that formed the entrance to the abbey. It felt final to be doing this; it made the journey a reality, something he'd been worrying about but hadn't quite believed would happen.

Now, as he stepped outside, he knew it was all too real. The sun had already been up for a couple of hours and was shining down from a remarkably clear blue sky. Overhead, swifts shrieked as they plucked the thousands of insects that swarmed out of the marshes from the air.

That was just a distraction, something to divert his attention from the little group standing beside an astonishing looking cart. Alcuin hadn't described it to him, so Galen had been expecting nothing more than a simple wooden cart. But they had modified this vehicle. They'd added struts that held up a canvas canopy to provide shade during the journey.

'It must be upon your father's orders,' Alcuin said, noting Galen's surprised look.

'Yes,' Galen said and then tried to straighten up from his perpetual stoop as they approached the porter, Brother Kenric, Abbot Dyrewine and Brother Haward who was peering over the side of the cart, his record book in one hand.

'Brother Haward, there's no point in taking another look at the supplies our pair are taking, you're just irritating the carter,' the abbot said.

A tall, well built, sandy-haired man dressed in a tan tunic with a mustard-coloured edging was standing to one side, watching. Galen's stomach did a sick flip flop to see him. He recognised the man from home. He'd been born a thrall and released from servitude by Ealdorman Hugh when he reached his majority. But for his low birth, his build and muscles would have turned him into a thane. As it was, he was one of his father's best fighters when the burgh was called upon to defend itself. No doubt that was why he'd been sent as their escort.

As he spotted Galen, he gave a start that brought a blush to Galen's cheeks. He knew he was changed by his injuries but it embarrassed him, it was so obvious that the carter couldn't hide his shock.

'Niclas, isn't it?' Galen said and hoped he at least sounded calm.

'Master Galen,' the man muttered as he gave a deep bow.

'It's Brother Galen now.'

'Oh yes, of course, forgive me,' Niclas said and actually looked like he was squirming.

Galen wasn't used to making people uncomfortable and was at a loss to know what to do about it.

'Come on, let's get you settled,' Alcuin said, taking charge again.

Niclas also looked relieved to have something to do and removed the back of the cart by pulling out a pair of wooden pegs that held the board in place. They had placed a pile of cushions in the corner of the cart, most on the base, but a couple against the side wall.

Galen sat on the cushions, then swung his legs round so that they were stretched out in front of him. He took a moment to straighten his black robes and wished that he could swap his woollen habit for Niclas's linen tunic. That wasn't allowed, but at least he had some shade from the canopy.

'All set?' Alcuin said and readjusted a couple of cushions before Niclas replaced the back board. Then he turned to the abbot who'd watched the whole procedure and said, 'I believe we're ready.'

'God speed you both,' Abbot Dyrewine said, making a sign of the cross over the party that got a nod of agreement from Brother Haward and Brother Kenric. 'Make sure you behave properly at court. Remember, you are representing the good name of the Abbey of Yarmwick.'

And make haste, we'll be expecting your return with more eagerness than I suspect you'll be feeling.'

Galen gave him a perfunctory smile at this mild jest, his mind already fixed on the rigours of his journey.

Alcuin laughed and said, 'We'll hurry back, Father Abbot. I might not be in a rush, but I'm sure Brother Galen will be.'

Then the carter flicked his whip and set his mule into motion. Alcuin hoisted himself up onto a second mule that Galen hadn't registered till now. He assumed it had arrived with Niclas. Then the little group rumbled out of the Abbey yard and onto the raised path that led across the marshy fields that surrounded the abbey.

It was the first time in three and a half years that Galen had left the confines of the abbey grounds. The vast flat open plain that greeted his eyes came as a shock. He looked back at the mass of abbey buildings and a pang of loss shook him. It had become home.

The cart hit a pothole with a solid thump and then wrenched itself free. It jolted Galen, and he bit back a cry of pain as the cart rolled into yet another hole and then rocked out of it. It seemed the wooden wheels found every hole in the road and hit every rock. The shaking wrenched at his body and Galen clung onto the side of the cart, lifting himself off the base to reduce the pain this jerking and swaying brought to his nether regions.

To try for some distraction, Galen looked about at the landscape slowly rolling by. The strange appearance of their little group made the farmers pause in their fields to watch them, and the churls in the village just outside Yarmwick ran out to see who was passing through. At least with them, Galen couldn't see any of the doubt in their eyes or the whispering that he'd grown accustomed to from people. Nobody here knew who he was or what had happened to him.

That made the knot of panic rise in his chest again. At home they all knew. Not only that, but he'd been bundled away in disgrace, never to be seen again. His mind nearly shut down when he tried to imagine what his homecoming would be like. He battled down the panic and conjured up the image of his mother's face instead. Her letter had been so kind. She'd sounded pleased to hear that he was doing well, and he hoped there would be a similar lack of constraint at their reunion.

Alcuin was thoroughly enjoying his escape from the ordered days of the abbey. To be out riding again was wonderful, and he pushed his mule into a gallop for the sheer joy of it. That couldn't last of course, the cart could never keep up, laden as it was and only drawn by a single mule, but it was good to feel the sun and the wind on his face.

It was a glorious day, hot and cloudless, and the fields were alive with life. Alcuin slowed to riding just ahead of the cart and grinned as a deer froze, looked at him and then dashed away. All around them the hedges that lined their path were alive with birdsong and the hum of insects. Every now and then a leaf green grasshopper would flick across his path and vanish back into the shrubs.

Alcuin's gaze darted from one scene to the next, trying to fix everything in his mind for when he got to the palace. The king might want images of his family for his book of hours, but around them the pages would be populated by scenes of this bountiful summer.

At a point where the road widened enough for him to ride abreast with the cart, Alcuin reigned his mule to a slow walk and dropped back to talk to Galen.

‘Isn’t this just marvellous! Truly this time of the year is the greatest testament to God’s bounty.’

Galen gave a start and opened his eyes.

‘Yes,’ he said vaguely.

Alcuin noted with alarm that Galen was paler than when they’d left. He looked tense, curled up against the cushions, and he flinched every time they went over a bump.

‘Should we be travelling slower?’

‘Do you think it will make a difference?’ Galen said faintly.

‘I’m sure it will.’

‘But it will take longer to get to Lundenburh.’

‘Not that much longer,’ Alcuin said, as he was reminded of Brother Benesing’s words that Galen would be anxious not to delay them. ‘Don’t worry.’

Galen gave a slight nod.

Alcuin smiled reassuringly down at him and said, ‘Try to take a look around, it might distract you.’

Then he trotted forward till he was in line with the carter, sitting on a bench at the front of the vehicle.

‘Niclas, isn’t it?’ Alcuin said.

‘Yes, my lord, what can I do for you?’ Niclas said, touching the whip he held loosely in his right hand to his forehead.

‘Don’t call me a lord for a start. Like Galen, I’m merely Brother Alcuin.’

‘No mere about it, sir,’ the carter said. ‘You’re nobility for certain.’

Alcuin shrugged the comment away. People existed in ranks and being a monk was a higher position than a churl, so either way, he outranked Niclas.

‘I was wondering whether you could go slower.’

Niclas glanced over his shoulder, in Galen’s direction, but Galen was hidden from view by the canopy and the supplies.

‘It’s because of the young master, is it?’

Alcuin hoped that what with sitting at the back and the rumbling of the cart’s wheels their conversation wouldn’t be heard by Galen.

‘It is.’

Alcuin didn’t know Niclas well enough to say more. He also wasn’t sure what the man knew, but he had no intention of divulging any more than was necessary.

‘I’m used to travelling faster,’ Niclas said. ‘But, truth to tell, the change in young master Galen’s appearance shocked me. I’m sure the rest of the burh will be just as shaken.’

‘Will they?’ Alcuin said, and his heart sank. He’d been worrying about Galen’s reception at his old home, mainly because he knew that Galen was worried about it. The carter confirmed the inevitable. No doubt the burh was alive with gossip over Galen’s homecoming.

‘Ealdorman Hugh told me that Master Galen was ill,’ Niclas continued. ‘He said that on no account were we to force him to travel faster than he was comfortable with.’

‘That’s good to know,’ Alcuin said, relieved that the ealdorman had given this instruction.

‘One look at Master Galen’s pale face this morning was enough to tell me that Ealdorman Hugh wasn’t lying. I’m happy enough to go slowly. Not that any speed will be slow enough.’

Alcuin was saved from replying by the mule who, scenting something delicious, suddenly veered away from the cart and dropped his head to nibble on a green mound on the edge of the road.

‘Hey!’ Alcuin shouted and tried to pull the mule’s head up.

He resisted and kept on grazing.

‘That’s Goat for you,’ Niclas said with a chortle. ‘I had my doubts about bringing him, but he’s a tough old boy and well suited to the journey.’

‘Goat?’ Alcuin said as he finally succeeded in pulling the mule away from his snack and gave him a firm prod with his heels to get him back into motion.

‘They named him for his habit of eating pretty much anything put in front of him,’ Niclas said.

‘So I see.’

Alcuin realised that Niclas was a chatty man. He’d be willing to while away the entire journey in conversation. Alcuin was less keen.

‘How long do you think it will take us to get to Ealdorman Hugh’s burh?’

‘At the speed we’re going?’ Niclas said, and looked around to get his bearings and estimate where they’d got to. ‘I’d say at least three days.’

‘I see.’

Alcuin had suspected the journey would be a long one, but as he’d never been to Thorpe Parva, Galen’s home, he had no idea how far it was.

‘The land about here is peaceful enough. We’ll be able to sleep beside the cart without fear of ambush,’ Niclas said, misinterpreting Alcuin’s silence. ‘I’m not worried about that,’

‘Fair enough,’ Alcuin said. ‘Will you be taking us all the way to see the king?’

‘That is the intention.’

‘How long will that take?’

‘I’d say a week, maybe more,’ Niclas said, as he scratched meditatively at his stubbled chin.

‘Ah, oh well, it can’t be helped,’ Alcuin said and then to forestall any further conversation he added, ‘I’d best go check on Galen again.’

What he really wanted was some quiet so he could look around more. There would be time later to chat to Niclas. He did look in on Galen, though. Despite his suggestion that he take in the scenery, Galen had his eyes shut tight. Alcuin knew he wasn’t asleep though, because he was still clinging onto the side of the cart and his lips were moving in what Alcuin assumed was a silent prayer.

Alcuin hoped that the cart slowing down helped. The road itself was a pale tan clay. During the winter the vehicles that used the path had carved deep ruts that were now dried and hardened by the summer sun and made for a bumpy ride.

Alcuin wondered whether it wouldn’t be more comfortable for Galen to ride a mule. He dismissed the thought only moments after it had occurred to him. Brother Benesing had told him that Galen couldn’t ride. The sway of the mule’s gait would be uncomfortable, and Galen probably didn’t have the strength to control an animal, anyway.

Alcuin couldn’t do more for Galen than had already been done, so he went back to

contemplating the countryside. A skylark was soaring high in the sky, his call ringing through the clear air. It was a joyous sound and sufficient to draw Alcuin's attention back to the beauty all around him.

Several hours of contemplation passed, and they finally emerged from the marshland to more solid ground. The road they were on was level with the ground now, and trees became more common. Their shade brought blessed relief from the searing sun.

It had started off as a pleasant day, but riding in a black habit, in the height of summer, was turning into a sweaty torment.

Alcuin flicked his hand across his face to chase away the flies and looked back down at Galen. He still had his eyes shut.

'Galen?' Alcuin said, drawing closer.

Galen gave a start and opened his eyes, blinking at the sudden brightness.

'Are you ready for dinner?' Alcuin said. 'It's maybe a little early to stop, but you look like you could use a break.'

'I could, but I doubt I'll be able to eat anything,' Galen said and his voice was soft with fatigue. 'The heaving about of this cart has made me feel quite nauseous.'

'Poor boy,' Alcuin said, 'it seems the swaying of the cart is as bad for you as all the rest. But have no fear, once you're on solid ground you'll be feeling much better and able to eat.'

'Thank you, Alcuin,' Galen said with a slight smile. 'For putting up with my miserable ways as well.'

Alcuin gave a crack of laughter and said, 'You remind me of that a week from now when I'm no longer charmed by the journey!'

'You always enjoy whatever you're doing.'

'Not always,' Alcuin said, then shouted ahead, 'Ho, there, Master Niclas, we're going to stop and eat.'

'Right you are,' Niclas said as he pulled the cart to the edge of the road and came to a gentle halt. 'Do you need a hand?' he asked once he'd jumped down and removed the backboard. 'It looks like Master Galen has been stretched pretty thin.'

'I'm fine,' Galen murmured but flushed in embarrassment.

'But not above accepting help,' Alcuin said and had the carter help Galen down. Then the two of them walked Galen a little way into a field.

'You rest under this tree,' Alcuin said as he eased Galen down onto a pleasant grassy patch and made sure he was resting against the trunk of an oak. 'I'll fetch the food.'

Alcuin took his time getting out the beer, bread, and cheese packed into the cart. He wondered what he should do about Niclas because he sensed that Galen didn't want company. Fortunately, the carter didn't look like he planned to join them. He settled against a wheel in the cart's shade and fell upon his own food.

'Are you hungry yet?' Alcuin said as he returned to the tree and settled himself cross-legged opposite Galen in the blessed shade.

Galen gave a wan smile and a quick nod, which didn't convince Alcuin. But at least Galen was sensible enough to eat, if only to keep his strength up.

'We should probably give you extra, you'll need it just to put up with the pain you're having to deal with.'

‘It isn’t so bad.’

‘If you say so,’ Alcuin said but wasn’t able to keep the scepticism from his voice.

Galen gave him his usual slight smile, then closed his eyes and mouthed a prayer of thanks for the food. Alcuin did the same and then waited till Galen was finished before he started eating.

Galen tore off a crust of bread and chewed absently on it, lost in contemplation.

‘Why would anyone live at the top of a pillar?’

‘What?’ Alcuin said. ‘What on earth brought that thought into your head?’

‘I’ve been trying to distract myself during the journey and I fell to contemplating Saint Simeon Stylites, who lived at the top of a pillar without ever coming down for thirty-seven years.’

‘Oh yes, I remember we were discussing him in the chapter house recently.’

Galen nodded and said, ‘How do you think he got food if he never left his pillar?’

‘I expect people sent food up to him by means of a rope and basket. It couldn’t have been so difficult. Besides, he did come down from his pillar, for he had more than one pillar. Remember his first pillar was only nine feet high, people could just hand things up to him at that height.’

‘Only with difficulty, and certainly not by the time he was living at the top of a fifty foot pillar.’

‘That’s when the rope comes in handy.’

Alcuin poured two measures of beer into two clay mugs and handed one over to Galen.

‘And what about excrement?’ Galen said, ignoring the mug because he was too deep in thought. ‘If he never left his pillar, he must surely have had to relieve himself over the edge which means the base of the pillar would have been a miasma of human dung through which his followers would have had to tramp.’

Alcuin gave a shout of laughter and said, ‘God’s Breath, what makes you ask a question like that?’

‘Well... because it troubles me,’ Galen said, looking up at Alcuin who waved his mug meaningfully to get Galen to drink. ‘Our books on the lives of the saints go into all the details we could ask for on the saint’s thoughts and their words and the meanings of their actions, but they never explain the practicalities. I mean... if I wanted to do the same. If I wanted to live at the top of a pillar. I would need to deal with things like—’

‘What to do with your dung,’ Alcuin finished with a grin. ‘Yes, I see. You have a most sensible streak running through you. But I dare say our elders would tell us that a saint need not excrete. Just as they need not eat or drink. For wasn’t it said that Saint Simeon touched neither food nor water for the whole of Lent? I don’t know about you, but I couldn’t last four days without food and drink, never mind doing it for forty.’

‘I suppose so,’ Galen said. ‘And that’s not even including the fact that he stood for all those thirty-seven years of his life on a pillar without protection from the sun and the wind and the rain.’

‘A great man indeed with a laudable devotion to God which we can never hope to equal,’ Alcuin said.

Galen gave him a measuring look before he finally took a sip of his beer.

His expression was so dubious that Alcuin had to ask, ‘What?’

‘Do you not think... no.’

‘You come to this point, your face tells me you have an opinion on the matter and then you lose the courage to speak at the last moment? No, I can’t allow that, you have to tell me what’s on your mind!’

‘Only if you don’t repeat it.’

Alcuin’s eyebrows rose in surprise and for a moment he wondered if he was about to hear something heretical, something it would be best if he didn’t hear. Then he shrugged it off and said, ‘I’ll tell no-one.’

‘Well... don’t you think it’s a bit... a bit silly to spend your entire life at the top of a pillar?’

Alcuin roared with surprised laughter. Then rubbing his eyes to clear the tears he said, ‘Maybe it is, but you could argue it gave him plenty of time to think about God at the top of his pillar. And to pray and even to put some of his thoughts down in letters.’

‘All while standing fifty feet in the air,’ Galen said with a nod.

‘I see you still disapprove, and mind you, I don’t think he’s the only saint you find odd.’

‘He isn’t?’ Galen said in surprise.

‘Your face is like a well-drawn manuscript, it holds no secrets. Sometimes in the chapter house I’ve wondered why one saint or another didn’t get your wholehearted approval.’

‘Oh dear!’ Galen said. ‘It isn’t that... not really. I just wonder—’

‘About the practicalities, yes I see.’ Alcuin watched Galen who subsided into thought again. He suspected that his friend wasn’t only contemplating unusual saints to distract himself from the discomfort of the journey. ‘Did you used to have conversations like this with your old teacher?’

‘Father Pifus?’ Galen said, and his smile vanished. ‘No, never.’

‘Really?’

‘I tried with Father Pifus, but he is dogmatic and austere. He would beat me if I ever disagreed with him.’

‘He’d beat you? Good Lord Galen, he must be extremely intolerant. I mean, you have said nothing heretical.’

‘Maybe not about Saint Simeon.’

Alcuin waited for more but when it wasn’t forthcoming he said, ‘Is Father Pifus the reason you hold your council at Yarmwick as well?’

‘Partly, I suppose. I’m aware my theology doesn’t always agree with the majority.’

‘We could all say that. The holy books aren’t always as clear as we’d like them to be.’

‘They are written by people who colour what they hear from God with their own beliefs and personal experience.’

Alcuin paused to consider what Galen had just said. ‘Maybe it is best that you aren’t always as outspoken as you are with me.’

Galen flushed but nodded his acceptance.

‘I’m sorry, Galen. That was overly harsh, and I know you often don’t say things because you are shy, rather than from any doubts you may have.’

‘Perhaps I should have more doubts about my own thoughts, but sometimes I can’t help myself and say what I shouldn’t.’

‘You need someone like Saint Cuthbert to talk to about things like that, not a clueless artist

like me,' Alcuin said, trying to lighten the mood again. 'Now finish your food and then you'd best get some sleep. You look as pale as a martyr right now.'

## 4

Galen clung to the back of the cart. His fingers were curled tight over the edge of the backboard trying to hoist himself off the base so that each thump of the cart was at least lessened. It felt like he'd been hanging onto the cart for his entire life. Just one eternity of rocking and dropping, pitching from side to side and slipping into cavernous ditches.

Each drop felt like a shock that shot through his viscera in a never-ending series of painful blows. The worst was that he could never anticipate the next shock. He was so exhausted that his arm muscles were shaking. He wouldn't be able to keep this up for much longer.

At least the pain had one advantage, it occupied all his thoughts. Whenever his mind drifted to arriving at his home, his stomach churned with more than pain. He even had moments of doubt about his mother and sisters. Would they be the same after all this time? Would he be able to slip back into how he used to be with them? He didn't want to be a stranger to them like he was to the men of his family and the rest of the burh.

'Please God,' Galen whispered, 'please help me be at ease, at least with my mother. Please help me speak to my father and rub along without conflict with my brothers. And please... take some of my pain away.'

As if in answer to his prayer, the motion of the cart changed. It evened out and there were fewer drops. It sounded like they were rolling over stone now rather than hardened clay, and there was a slight clack at a regular interval.

'Thank you, God,' Galen sighed with relief.

He let go of the cart and was about to curl into a ball and just rest when it struck him, he knew this road! His eyes flashed open, and he pulled himself upright and looked about.

Was it his imagination or did the land here look familiar? He looked down. They were rolling over stone flags. It was a Roman road. It was the Roman road that led to Thorpe Parva.

A quiver of dread shot through Galen. He was nearly home. He'd never expected to see it again. Then the journey had gone on for so long that nothing else seemed real. But it was, and he was nearly there.

'Alcuin,' Galen muttered and looked around.

He couldn't see Alcuin, but he could hear a murmured conversation up ahead. He'd been vaguely aware of Alcuin and Niclas chatting during the journey, but he'd not been able to make out what they were saying. He'd been too wrapped up in his own torment to care either way. Now he needed to make himself heard.

He took a deep breath and shouted, 'Alcuin!' It came out as a croak.

Fortunately, Alcuin heard, and he dropped back, slipped off his mule and walked beside the

slow moving cart.

‘Are you alright?’ Alcuin asked as he gave Galen’s face a sharp appraising stare.

Galen blushed to be examined so closely. He was sorry that he was such a burden to Alcuin.

‘Can we stop for a bit, please?’

‘Of course,’ Alcuin said and shouted, ‘Niclas, pull over.’ Then he went back to examining Galen as the carter pulled up on the side of the road. ‘Is something the matter?’

‘Do I look bad?’

‘A little paler than usual. Is that why we need to stop?’

Galen hesitated. How did he explain? There was really only one way.

‘We’ve nearly reached my home. I just... I wanted to rest a bit. I don’t want to worry my mother by looking ill when we arrive.’

Alcuin’s face flickered through thought that was hastily smothered. Galen guessed that he was thinking no amount of rest would make him look better. Still, he was an understanding fellow, so he simply pulled the pegs out of the backboard and helped Galen out and to a shady spot where he eased him to the ground.

Alcuin squatted down so he could get a closer look at Galen and said, ‘Would you like some medicine?’

Galen smiled up at him, relieved that Alcuin could take this in his stride.

‘One of my uncle’s herbal teas will be very welcome.’

‘Consider it done,’ Alcuin said, and went back to the cart to fetch the kettle and get a fire started.

Galen curled up on his side on the blessedly cool grass that was liberally dotted with buttons of white daisies, lengths of shining yellow buttercups and the short deep purple spires of selfheal. He was shaking, and he wasn’t sure if it was from exhaustion, pain or the dread of what was to come. Probably a mixture of all three, he decided.

The tea would help. Alcuin had a good fire going now, and the kettle filled with water that would soon come to a rolling boil. It helped to watch this simple domestic task as it was a distraction.

In no time at all, Alcuin was back. He settled beside Galen and held a mug out to him.

‘Careful, it’s still hot.’

Galen pushed himself upright and, trying to control the tremor in his hands, he took the mug and blew across the top, dissipating the fragrant steam.

Alcuin looked around to make sure that Niclas was out of hearing and said, ‘Are you worried about this meeting?’

Galen gave a quick embarrassed nod followed by an equally ashamed smile and said, ‘I don’t know why. My mother assured me she and my sisters miss me. I should be glad to see them... looking forward to it. But when I think back to the way I left...’ Galen couldn’t go on as he sank into memory.

‘It was a long time ago. Since then your father has cleared your name. It will be fine.’ Alcuin said, his hearty, reassuring voice calling Galen back to the present.

‘Do you think so?’ Galen said. ‘I suppose I shouldn’t really worry, nothing will come of it and...’

‘What?’ Alcuin said.

Galen gave a quick embarrassed smile and said, 'I don't think many people knew me.'

'You're Ealdorman Hugh's son, of course they knew you.'

'I'm not like you, Alcuin,' Galen said and dipped his head to take a sip of the tea, breaking eye contact with Alcuin. 'You're so handsome and friendly and always ready to laugh. I'm sure everyone in your father's home knew who you were. But I've always been painfully shy. When people came into a room... I'd slip out. I doubt even half of them knew I existed.'

'You might be surprised.'

Galen shook his head. On this he knew he was right.

'I dare say they all know what happened to me after I was carried away. And they'll have been reminded again at Septimus's trial. But they'll be hard pressed to recall my face from their memories.'

'You should concentrate on the people you want to see, rather than worry about the others.'

Galen nodded, put down his mug, plucked a daisy out of the grass and rubbed it into a mashed up mess between his fingers. Alcuin was right, of course, but it wasn't so easy to ignore all the people he feared.

Alcuin gave him a sympathetic smile and said, 'Who do you wish to see the most?'

'My mother,' Galen said without hesitation. He yearned to see his mother with an intensity so great it sometimes caused him pain.

'And your sisters,' Alcuin said. 'I know how fond you are of them. But who else draws your attention?'

Two people sprang instantly to mind. The first was easy to speak about, the second embarrassed Galen, and he wasn't sure he could mention her.

'My father,' Galen said. 'I wonder... I wonder whether we'll be able to speak again. We've only had one conversation, and that was at Yarmwick. Before that there was nothing. I hope... I hope that I may be able to talk to him on this visit too.'

'But you have your doubts.'

'I am not a worthy son for him to spend time on,' Galen said and saw Alcuin gearing up to dispute that so he hurried on. 'After what happened to Septimus, I don't know. He'd just unmasked him when he came to the abbey, but his resentment towards me may have grown since then as I deprived him of his bosom companion.'

'I don't know your father very well, but he didn't strike me as the kind of man who would hold a grudge.'

'Perhaps it isn't his intention, but his heart may feel different. I've not changed from when I was a boy and I fear if we spend any length of time in Thorpe Parva I will begin to irritate him again.'

'Don't let it weigh too heavily on your mind, wait and see, you might be surprised,' Alcuin said and handed Galen his unfinished tea. 'Who else would you like to see?'

'What do you mean?'

'You blushed when I asked the question, and you wouldn't blush over your father.'

'You are too perceptive.'

Galen wondered whether he could tell Alcuin about Cwengyth. Much to his own surprise, he'd told his father about Cwengyth but regretted it later. Besides, it was not an appropriate thing for a monk to have a passion for a lady or to discuss the yearnings he felt for her. He

didn't want Alcuin looking at Cwengyth in that way either.

'It isn't important,' he murmured.

Alcuin gave him a considering look, as if weighing whether he should press him then, much to Galen's relief, he shrugged it away.

'It won't matter,' Alcuin said. 'It's your family you want to see, after all.'

'I just... I did want to be noticed, you see?'

It amazed Galen that he was telling Alcuin of his deep and secret longing. He supposed it showed how much he trusted Alcuin. Still, it was easier said when gazing into his mug rather than looking at his friend.

'I wanted my father's people to love me the way they loved him and Willnoth and the other boys. I had this foolish dream that one day I'd go away and perform a famous deed and come home to great acclaim. This... this wasn't the homecoming I so dearly wished for.'

Alcuin placed his hand on Galen's shoulder and gave it a gentle squeeze.

'I have been fortunate in life, Galen, you're right. I mingled freely with the people of my father's burh whenever I went home. I'm also ashamed to admit that I probably wouldn't have noticed someone like you. Someone shy. And I'm sorry about that. It makes me feel like I am thoughtless and selfish.'

'No, you aren't,' Galen said, looking up, shocked that he'd made Alcuin feel bad. 'I meant no criticism.'

'I know that, fool,' Alcuin said with a laugh. 'You don't have a vindictive bone in your body. The people who truly know you will remember you with fondness. They are waiting for you now.'

Alcuin's words surprised Galen and gave him the courage he needed to go on. He nodded and hoped this slight gesture conveyed his gratitude sufficiently because he'd already said too much and revealed what he shouldn't have.

Galen downed the last of his tea, handed the mug back to Alcuin and said, 'I'm ready.'

## 5

Once they were back on the road, Alcuin reflected that he hadn't needed Galen's confirmation that they were nearing his home. For a while before Galen called to him, he'd noticed that the people working in the fields seemed more alert. All along their journey people had stopped to watch them go by. But over the last couple of hours the reaction of the watchers had changed. The churls before had been surprised to see them pass. But now, instead of gaping at the cart as a novelty, the people whispered and nodded to each other.

Secrets were impossible to keep in this land, Alcuin knew. Any kind of story leaped from eager lips to expectant ears, rippling ever outwards from the source. Although he'd downplayed it, what had happened to Galen, and the three men killed by Septimus, plus the subsequent trial, would have been the most newsworthy thing to happen for miles around.

He doubted there was a single thane, churl or thrall who didn't know the story or versions of it at least, probably with monstrous embellishments. He certainly would not tell Galen that. He rather hoped, just this once, that Galen was too distracted by the pain to put all this together. His friend was clever and observant, but it would be better for him not to realise how notorious he'd become.

'There it is,' Niclas said, breaking in on Alcuin's ruminations.

Niclas was pointing along a path that dipped down and then up again through lush farmed fields filled with ripening corn and burgeoning trailing beans and ended at an impressive fortified burh. They had built the earth up around the hill the town occupied. A wooden stockade had been added to the earthworks creating a tall impenetrable wall and a ditch all the way round was an additional barrier. Tall wooden towers stood at four points along the wall and were all manned by lookouts. The moment they were spotted, Alcuin saw one lookout climb down from the tower and vanish. No doubt to alert Ealdorman Hugh that his son had arrived.

Wide wooden gates provided entry to the burh and stood open to allow for the free movement of traders, farmers and local artisans. The cart's arrival must have been anticipated as several people were gathered along the path. They had an expectant air, although most of them were pretending to be busy at work.

Alcuin felt his own anxiety rise to be here, and only part of that was because of Galen's fears. His family, after all, had a blood feud against the house of Hugh. While they were at the abbey and while Galen was disowned Alcuin could make a fair case as to why he didn't need to do anything about the feud. That was harder now, when he was riding into the stronghold of his family's sworn enemy.

‘We’ve been noticed,’ Niclas said.

‘So it seems,’ Alcuin said as people came running from their houses. ‘I’m afraid we’re rather conspicuous with our cart.’

Niclas grunted agreement and, more to give himself something to do than because it was necessary, flicked the whip over the head of the mule. The crack made the animal jerk forward.

‘Careful,’ Alcuin snapped.

The commotion outside attracted all the residents of the burh who emerged from their businesses and homes, so that by the time the cart rumbled through the gates the main street was full of shoving people, craning necks and a hubbub of conversation. As with all burhs, the main street ran the length of the town and exited at a gate on the other end. To Alcuin’s left was a field where a mule attached to a hoe stood patiently waiting for the churl to return to his work. He was doubtless part of the crowd who now stood watching.

To Alcuin’s right was a collection of wooden houses, a few had enclosed yards in which chickens were scratching contentedly. At the end of those houses stood a stone church with an impressive tower that rose four stories high and dominated the crossroads. A sturdy-looking man dressed like a priest with greying hair that frizzed about his scarred face, stood at the church door. As he spotted Alcuin and the cart his expression darkened and he crossed himself three times, turned and walked into the church, slamming the door loudly as he went.

Alcuin turned to Niclas with an enquiring arched eyebrow.

‘Father Pifus,’ Niclas said. ‘He’s a bitter old man and none too pleased to see Master Galen back.’

‘Why not? They have cleared his name, after all,’ Alcuin said and kept his voice low so that the pushing, nosy crowd couldn’t hear him.

‘He says he’s unclean,’ Niclas said with a flick of his thumb to where Galen was sitting hunched up at the back of the cart.

Alcuin wasn’t surprised to hear the priest’s opinion. Some of the brothers in Yarmwick had said the same. He didn’t have time to worry about it though as they trundled through the crossroads. A dense collection of houses was packed along the left side of the road now. A denser group of people stood before the long hall that occupied the full length of the right-hand side of the main road. Despite the crowd, Alcuin took a moment to examine the hall. This reflected the power of the local ealdorman. The long hall of Thorpe Parva was larger than his father’s own. It was longer and built higher and had an impressive thatched roof.

‘Clear the way,’ an imperious voice shouted, and the whispering crowd parted so that an avenue formed between the cart and the entrance to the hall.

Ealdorman Hugh stepped out into the sun, tall and imposing, the gold torque around his neck flashing in the sunlight. The already subdued whispering of the crowd fell silent. Hugh was accompanied by five equally powerful looking men. Their bare arms rippled with muscle and each had a sword hanging from their broad leather belts.

Three of the men had a close resemblance to Hugh and to Galen. Family for sure, Alcuin thought, and wondered briefly why Galen was so much shorter and slimmer than his brothers. The other two men would be thanes, warriors that formed part of Hugh’s army. They were shorter than Hugh, but intimidating all the same. Not as intimidating as the red-headed giant Septimus had been, though.

Alcuin dismissed that thought as a woman emerged from the long hall, an expectant expression on her face. She was wearing a white underdress with a blue overdress attached at each shoulder by an ornate gold circular pin. A brightly embroidered silver and blue belt was fastened around her waist, hitching up her skirts sufficiently that she wouldn't trip.

Alcuin guessed this was Galen's mother. Her white hair hung down her back in a single plait, but she didn't look that old. Her face looked kind and radiated a soothing calm. Her figure was slightly plump, and she was shorter than Alcuin had been expecting. Glancing across to the tall, handsome Ealdorman Hugh, he could see how their natures didn't match. Galen had confirmed that during one of their chats too, Hugh and Galen's mother were married for an alliance and not love.

Although she was hiding it well, there was a tightness about her eyes and mouth that betrayed her anxiety. She was accompanied by four young women. Three looked like sisters to the tough group of men, with long brown hair and brown eyes, the fourth was the most beautiful woman Alcuin had ever laid eyes on. She was tall and slim, with blonde hair and sparkling blue eyes. She was also heavily pregnant and hanging back from the rest of the group.

Lady Bretana hurried towards the cart, trailed by her daughters as Hugh and the rest of the men stepped aside.

'What am I thinking,' Alcuin muttered to himself.

He had to help Galen, who was still in the back of the cart. He jumped off his mule and, trying not to look like he was entering into a race with anybody, hurried to undo the backboard of the cart.

Galen's white face peered out at him. He had the panicked look Alcuin had come to recognise when Galen was confronted by crowds.

'Come on, let's get you standing before your mother gets here,' Alcuin murmured into his ear.

If anything would help galvanise Galen into motion, it was concern about his mother.

'Is she near?' Galen whispered.

'Nearly upon us.'

Galen pulled his arm out of Alcuin's supporting grasp and straightened to his not very impressive height as he stepped around the cart.

'Galen!' Lady Bretana gasped and stopped, frozen to the spot as she got first sight of her son.

'Mother,' Galen murmured and took a step towards her.

Galen's eyes flicked up to his mother's with such a look of entreaty it hurt Alcuin to see it. He was frozen too, uncertain of what he should do next.

'Oh, Galen,' Bretana said as she surged forward and embraced him. 'My son, welcome home,' she said, leaned away and gently ran her hand down the side of his face.

It shocked Alcuin to see such an open display of affection, and he was about to step in and separate them. It was forbidden for a monk to touch a woman, even if she was his mother.

Galen took a quick, relieved breath and said, 'Mother!'

It was so soft only Alcuin and Lady Bretana were close enough to hear it.

Alcuin didn't move. He couldn't break Lady Bretana and Galen apart, not when Galen so obviously needed this touch.

Bretana took Galen's hand and drew him closer to his sisters.

'Come, Cena, Anna and Hild are eager to see you again and when you get to Lundenburh Emma will be there with her husband so there will be at least one friendly face for you.'

The girls each gave him a hug and a kiss, looking a little self-conscious, but fell back as Hugh approached their group and said, 'Well, Galen, how was the journey?'

'It was fine thank you, sir,' Galen said and there was only a slight tremor in his voice. 'The cart was a great help.'

'Glad to hear it,' Hugh said gruffly, then apparently ran out of anything to say.

The rest of the group seemed to feel the same as silence descended and Galen's eyes sank to the ground, only to flick briefly up to take a quick look at the heavily pregnant young woman.

'Fulk and Cwengyth are expecting their first child,' Hugh said, noting the glance.

'I wish you both happy,' Galen murmured and Cwengyth gave him a perfunctory, disinterested smile which brought another flush to Galen's cheeks as he quickly looked away.

Alcuin was surprised by that. Galen was always shy, but seemed to be even more so in front of the glorious Lady Cwengyth.

Bretana took Galen by the arm and said, 'You look like you need a rest. Come into the hall and have some refreshments. Then you can tell me all about the life you have been leading.'

Hugh stepped back to allow everyone through but put a restraining arm out for Alcuin and said, 'Was the cart a help?'

'It was, my lord, not only for Galen but also for our supplies.'

'Indeed, you look like you packed for a journey of a year. But tell me, are you sure it helped Galen?'

'Travelling was a trial for him,' Alcuin said, his eyes drifting across Galen's brothers, none of whom seemed interested in following him. 'We actually stopped to rest just before we arrived.'

'You did? Why?'

'Galen didn't want to alarm his mother.'

'Well he did, but even if he'd been perfectly rested she'd be shocked by how he looks now.'

'I didn't have the heart to tell him that,' Alcuin said with a reluctant laugh.

'Aye, well perhaps it was best not to,' Hugh noted that Alcuin was still watching the pair and added, 'his mother could ever cheer him up when the rest of us couldn't.'

'She seems a very kind woman.'

Hugh grunted noncommittally and said, 'She has the loyalty of all her children.'

'As she should,' Alcuin said and looked up at Galen's brothers who'd clustered around him and Hugh.

'My sons,' Hugh said, 'Fulk, my heir, Octa and Tonbert.'

Up close, the differences between the men were more pronounced. Fulk, the oldest, was also the darkest of the three. His brown hair tended towards black, Octa, by contrast, was the fairest of the three with light brown hair and, unlike the rest of his family, his mother's blue-grey eyes. The youngest looked to be only a couple of years older than Galen. He closely resembled Galen and was what Alcuin guessed Galen would have looked like if he hadn't been stricken with illness.

'And this,' Hugh said turning to his sons, 'Is Alcuin, son of Maccus the Dog.'

There was a collective hiss, and the expressions of the men all around him changed. Alcuin

held his breath and prayed to God to get him out of this. How could he have been so foolish as to walk into the heart of his enemy's stronghold?

'Maccus?' Fulk said, 'Ealdorman Maccus?'

'The same,' Hugh said, and his gaze flicked between Alcuin and Fulk as if weighing the two up.

'And you befriended Galen?' Fulk said, his voice dripping with suspicion.

'Why do you assume that?' Alcuin said, pleased that his voice sounded calm even if he was tensed and ready to run. He doubted he could outrun Hugh's sons, but he'd give it a damn good try. 'Maybe Galen befriended me.'

That got a crack of cynical laughter from Fulk and broad grins from the rest of the men. 'Galen never befriended anyone in his life.'

'Are you sure?'

Alcuin was annoyed at how dismissive his brothers were of Galen.

'Oh yes,' Fulk said, flicking his head towards the hall that Galen had just disappeared into with his mother and sisters and a trailing Lady Cwengyth. 'He's shy that one.'

'But with a formidable talent,' Alcuin said, and wondered whether he could keep them talking and thus distracted.

'Still, knowing who he was, you befriended him. Why?' Fulk asked.

'Well... I didn't know at first, and by the time I found out it didn't seem so important.'

'A blood feud didn't seem important to you?'

Fulk got so close to Alcuin that he took a step back to increase the distance between them. Fulk's scowl deepened as he examined Alcuin. Trying to guess whether he was lying. Alcuin looked over his shoulder and the still watching townsfolk. What would they make of what was starting to look like an argument? There was no doubt they would stand by their lord. He couldn't appeal to them to keep him safe.

'Peace,' Hugh muttered.

His intervention relieved Alcuin.

'I am a monk now. My father's feuds are not my own, they can't be. Galen is my brother in Christ. I can't have a blood feud against a brother.'

'Prettily said. All the same, it's a great irony that you have befriended my son with the history that lies between our two families,' Hugh said. 'Does Galen know about it?'

'More than I did. My father always warned us to beware of your family, but he never gave me any details. Galen, though, knew about the poisoning of my aunt.'

'It wasn't done by any member of my family,' Hugh said sharply. 'That's why I refuse to pay the wergeld, that would be an admission of guilt.'

Alcuin gave a noncommittal shrug and said, 'But I have considered the matter and you can't deny that it was useful to you.'

'It tipped the balance of power in our favour, yes.'

'Galen thought it was his grandfather.'

'My son knows nothing of the matter,' Hugh said sharply.

'How could he?' Fulk said. 'He's never even been to court or met Maccus.'

'He's observant,' Alcuin said, frustrated by how readily the men of his family dismissed Galen. 'He watches everything, and he thinks a lot.'

‘His grandfather, hmm?’ Hugh said and rubbed his chin meditatively. ‘There is no evidence of that.’

‘No, and I didn’t ask Galen to furnish any. It isn’t a matter I want to intrude between the two of us.’

‘Perhaps it’s better that way. Does your father share your opinion?’

‘He doesn’t know about Galen.’

‘But he will be at court,’ Hugh said grimly. ‘He always is.’

‘I believe so, yes. However, Galen and I are going there in our capacity as monks to produce a manuscript for the king. I don’t expect that we’ll fall into any difficulties.’

‘It must be your optimism which my son finds so attractive in you,’ Hugh said dryly. Much to Alcuin’s relief he clapped him on the shoulder and said, ‘Come into the hall, no doubt you are hungry and thirsty after your journey.’

A barrage of joy, fear and shame pummelled Galen and froze him to the spot. His mother’s face gazed anxiously at him through a blur of impressions, the long hall, the burh walls, the crowds that surged closer and washed backwards although he was pretty sure they weren’t actually moving, the buzz of voices, his father and brothers speaking to Alcuin. He wanted to turn and make sure Alcuin was alright, but he couldn’t.

‘Come,’ his mother said and took his hand.

Her calm voice had the steadying effect he needed. He took a deep breath and concentrated on walking. He couldn’t keep his head up, not with so many people staring at him, but he was trying to walk like a normal person. It was an agony, and he squeezed his mother’s hand tighter than was fair. He hoped he didn’t hurt her, but he couldn’t help himself.

His sisters clustered about him, instinctively forming a protective wall as they walked the dozen steps it took to reach the entrance of the long hall. The hall was darker and cooler, the earthen floor worn to a uniform smoothness. The fireplace in the centre was smouldering. It wasn’t needed in this summer heat. The air inside turned golden as the light streaming in through the windows struck the suspended dust particles. Blackened oak beams, as broad as the trees they had originally come from, held up the dense thatched roof that trembled and chirped, alive with the sparrow colony that had lived there ever since Galen could remember.

Galen reached out to one white painted pillar that ran the length of the hall. Higher up it was painted in a green, blue and gold knot work pattern. It felt so strange to see it again. To see his home, after so many years and after everything that had happened to him.

‘Nothing has really changed, has it?’ his mother murmured.

‘Nothing at all,’ Galen said as his eyes swept the raised dais that ran the length of the hall. It was where his family ate, his father in the centre, his eldest sons and most valued thanes beside him. ‘It’s so odd. I feel as if I have never been away. As if the life I lived at the abbey was just a dream I have woken from to find myself back in this familiar place.’

‘Let’s go to the ladies’ room,’ Bretana said as she took Galen’s hand again. ‘It’s quiet now as everyone stepped out to see you, but they’ll all be rushing back inside soon.’

‘To see the oddity,’ Galen said and bit his lip. He shouldn’t have said that.

‘To welcome you home,’ Bretana said firmly.

She was deciding the narrative that would hurt him least, and Galen accepted it. It wasn’t in

his nature to resist and, despite the rest they'd taken before arriving, he was exhausted. All he wanted to do now was curl up and recover.

Cena came up beside him and took his other arm. So now he was supported by her and his mother.

'I missed you,' she whispered into his ear with an accompanying warm smile.

'I had a bed made ready for you,' Bretana said as she led Galen down the length of the hall and into a section that had been partitioned off. It was the ladies' private room where the women of his family and their most trusted servants slept and worked. It was filled with their weaving and their needlework and a dozen other projects of fixing and mending which would make life in the hall more comfortable.

'It's good to be here,' Galen said, looking around.

The ladies' room was Galen's favourite place. He'd spent many a happy hour here winding yarn and chatting to his mother and sisters, or merely watching and listening whilst he was supposed to be working on his Latin. Here there was a change, though, because they had hung a curtain dividing the room, the smaller part of which now held two pallets.

'Your uncle wrote to tell me of your needs,' Bretana said, and she and Cena led Galen to a pallet with a straw mattress and over that several sheepskins.

Thank the Good Lord the hall was a dim place filled with shadow, so Galen's embarrassed flush would be less visible.

'I'm fine,' he murmured.

'That is for Brother Alcuin,' Bretana said of the other pallet pulled up against Galen's.

Although he couldn't see it because of the curtain, he knew more pallets were lined up along the wall where the rest of the women usually slept. His father and brothers usually slept on the dais in the hall with their cloaks covering them.

Bretana sat down beside Galen, and his sisters arranged themselves about them. Galen noted that Cwengyth had followed them in, but pushed the curtain dividing the room back and occupied the pallet closest to the door that led out to the back of the hall and his mother's garden.

She appeared disinterested in anything that was happening around her. She hadn't bothered to approach Galen and greet him, which he found hurtful. Now she was gazing out of the door, her hands resting on her stomach. She looked lonely. But that couldn't be, not in this household where the women were always so warm and welcoming.

There was a constraint amongst his mother and sisters as well, though. They looked shocked by his appearance and uncertain of what to say. It wasn't like they'd had a chance to say their farewells either after he'd been raped. The men had loaded him onto a wagon and sent him away the moment they had found him.

'I have so much to tell you of all the goings on at the burh,' Bretana said as she gently stroked his arm.

It helped break the uneasy silence and reminded Galen of how they used to while away their time. It brought such profound relief that Galen started to relax. Here he could savour the quiet and his mother's touch. It nearly brought tears to his eyes to see her again, but he resolutely suppressed them and instead tried to fix this moment in his memory.

His stay at home would be brief, and it could be many years before he saw his mother again.

His sister's lives were even less certain. Once they married they'd be scattered to the four corners of the land and he might never see them again. Still, for years he'd thought he'd never see any of them for the rest of his life, so to actually be here with them clustered about him was like a dream.

The curtain that separated the room from the hall was flicked open. Hugh stepped inside and looked the little group over. He had the same displeased expression he'd always had when examining Galen. As usual, Galen couldn't hold his gaze and his head dropped. He heard Hugh's exasperated sigh, though.

'We're holding a feast in your honour tonight. Will you be up to it?'

'A feast in my honour?'

It was such an outlandish statement that it didn't even make sense.

'Mmm,' Hugh grunted. 'The people need to be shown as well as told that you are welcomed back into the family.'

'I see.'

'Will you be well enough to attend?'

Hugh spoke gruffly, and Galen couldn't tell from his tone whether or not he actually wanted him there. He feared he was exasperating his father as much now as he ever had.

'I... if you wish it, I will be there.'

'I think it's necessary,' Hugh said and with another swish of the curtain he was gone.

'That may not have sounded like it, but it's your father's way of apologising. He told me that the two of you spoke when he visited Yarmwick.'

'More than we'd ever spoken before,' Galen said.

'I'm glad,' Bretana said and gave his arm another gentle squeeze. 'Now, you'd better rest so you are ready for the feast tonight.'

Galen wished he could just stay in this room with the only people he'd ever felt comfortable with. But his mother was right, if he was to face the ordeal of a feast he needed to recover from the journey.

## 6

Knowing he needed to sleep and achieving it were two different things. The anxiety of appearing before the whole burh in the long hall left Galen with a sick feeling in his stomach that had nothing to do with his illness.

‘How are you doing?’ Alcuin said as he came into view.

‘Alcuin, thank God,’ Galen said and pushed himself up onto his elbow. ‘Are you alright? I’m sorry I didn’t stay by you when my father and brothers—’

Alcuin waved the apology away and said, ‘Don’t worry about me, I can look after myself.’

‘But the blood feud? I totally forgot about it till I saw you with them,’ Galen said and couldn’t suppress a shudder over what could have happened.

‘I told them it was impossible between monks.’

‘Well, that’s not entirely true,’ Galen said and checked the room to make sure they were alone. His mother and sisters had vanished off to the kitchen to help prepare the feast.

‘Isn’t it?’ Alcuin said. ‘Tell me more, I can see by your face you have a story about this.’

‘A story... no, just something that happened at Yarmwick before you arrived. There were two brothers from feuding houses at the abbey. They were always perfectly polite when they were at home, but it changed when they were sent on a mission together. Then one brother turned on the other, stabbed him to death, left his body where it fell in the road and fled. They sent search parties to find him, but they never did.’

Galen plucked anxiously at the sheepskin he was lying on, pulling at the cream fibres as he spoke.

Alcuin just laughed. ‘You know I won’t do that to you.’

‘I know, but it was widely believed the monk hid amongst his kin. And here... you are amongst my kin.’

‘Your father has made it plain I am a guest here. I don’t fear for my life,’ Alcuin said. ‘Besides, it would be foolish for your family to escalate the feud between us, which I think makes me doubly safe as your father is no fool.’

The way he spoke gave Galen the distinct impression that there was more being left unsaid.

‘Who is the fool you fear?’

‘Ha, you see, this is what your father and brothers don’t know about you. Even when you are unwell, you are observant. I did have somebody in mind when I spoke about foolishness.’

Galen pushed himself all the way up and swung his feet out of the bed so he could see Alcuin’s face better. Evening was drawing in and it was darker in the family room where no lamps had been lit yet.

‘My father,’ Alcuin said. ‘He isn’t a fool, but he is quick to anger, and it sometimes drives him to do things no sane man would do. I fear what might happen once we arrive at the king’s hall.’

‘I see.’

This was precisely why Galen hadn’t wanted to go to Lundenburh. Danger lurked around every corner.

Alcuin shrugged, stood up and said, ‘No need to worry about that till we see my father and with any luck, he’ll not notice either of us.’

‘He wouldn’t notice you?’

‘Our family isn’t as affectionate as yours,’ Alcuin said. ‘I doubt my father would seek me out at court.’

This surprised Galen, but then thinking back he realised that Alcuin had never received a letter from home either. Why hadn’t he noticed that before? Really, his illness made him selfish and unobservant.

He was about to apologise when his mother walked in and said, ‘Are you ready?’

A fist of fear tightened around Galen, squeezing the breath out of his lungs and the reason from his brain. He had never felt comfortable in the long hall, sitting at the dais with all the thanes and churls ranged along the tables below them, eating, drinking, singing and sometimes brawling. But at least then, nobody paid him any attention. Tonight would be different. Tonight everyone would be reminded of what had happened to him because of his conspicuous presence and Septimus’ conspicuous absence. A shudder ran through him to even think of Septimus.

‘Are you alright?’ Alcuin said.

Galen nodded and glanced at his mother. He noted her concerned expression was replaced by an encouraging smile the moment he looked at her.

‘I’m fine,’ Galen murmured and wished it wasn’t such a big lie. The sound from the hall beyond was growing louder.

‘We are nearly ready to eat,’ Bretana said. ‘I’m afraid as the guest of honour you can’t stay away.’

Galen nodded acceptance and said, ‘Let’s go.’

Alcuin pushed aside the curtain and stepped through. He offered Galen his arm, but Galen ignored it. He couldn’t have support tonight. Redwald, the butcher, was talking by the doorway and was the first to notice Galen. He gave his neighbour a sharp shove with his elbow. He spun round and his eyes met Galen’s. On instinct, Galen looked down. Silence flowed like a wave away from him, and all he could hear was the shifting of men’s feet and the crackle and hiss of the torches that lit the hall.

‘Galen, welcome,’ Hugh said, his powerful voice carrying across the silent crowd.

With monumental effort Galen looked up at his father, standing beside his chair on the dais, tall, proud, and scowling.

‘Thank you,’ he whispered and because nobody moved or made a sound, his words were also heard by everyone.

‘And Brother Alcuin, you too are a welcome guest in my hall,’ Hugh said.

‘I am honoured,’ Alcuin said and gave a deep bow.

His mother stepped up beside Galen and it gave him the courage to move, so he made his slow way to the dais. Men stepped back as he approached, clearing a path. That was a novel experience, he'd had to skirt round people in the past, dashing through gaps when they became available. It might have been gratifying, except Galen couldn't help remembering how they had seen him last, naked and bleeding. He stopped with a shuddering breath. He couldn't go on, he couldn't face these people.

His mother's hand closed about his and squeezed. He had to do it, if not for himself, for her. So he gathered his reserves and mounted the dais.

'Here,' his father said and pushed out the chair on his right.

There? Right beside him? Galen had never sat in that honoured position before. It was reserved for high-ranking guests, the eldest son and, on days when the men had returned from battle, for the thane who had achieved the most. Inevitably, that was Septimus.

Hugh's face was unreadable, but Galen doubted it pleased him that his son was his usual hesitant self and that he looked so weak. It made him take another deep breath and push himself faster than was wise to get to the seat.

His brothers were waiting too, standing behind their chairs. Galen was horrified to discover that Fulk would be sitting next to him. Fulk was eleven years older than him, and he'd only sought him out if he'd felt like a bit of mindless teasing. Alcuin was waved to the chair on Hugh's left. Galen wished his father wouldn't be sitting between them. What on earth was he going to say to Fulk?

His mother gave him a reassuring smile, said, 'You'll be fine,' and hurried away to begin supervision of the meal.

'A toast to Galen, my son,' Hugh said and raised his glass as he fixed Galen with the full force of his stare.

'To Galen,' the men in the hall bellowed in unison.

Galen stared at them in horror, He'd never been so firmly the centre of attention before. He took the glass that his sister poured for him, but his hand was shaking so hard that he feared he'd spill. He hastily added his second hand and, still trembling like a leaf, brought the cup to his lips.

His father watched him all the way, then tossed back his drink in a single gulp. Galen tried to do the same but the intense vapour of the mead caught in the back of his nose and his throat and he landed up coughing most of it up.

His father laughed and gave him a hearty slap to his back that sent him lurching forward.

Hugh grabbed his arm, stopping him mid flight and murmured, 'Easy now,' as he guided him to sit.

It was the sign everyone else was waiting for and they also sat down, but it was unusually quiet as everyone kept watching Galen and Hugh.

'What is this? A funeral? My son has returned, we are here for a feast.' Hugh said, waited till his glass was filled again and downed his drink, watching Galen again with a smile that felt perfunctory.

The men cheered, raised their glasses and followed suit. It broke the spell over the company and conversations started up again.

Galen felt like he owed his father an apology, while being equally certain his father would be

enraged if he offered one. It would feel awkward to do it, knowing Fulk would overhear too.

Then another, rather important fact occurred to him.

‘Father Pifus isn’t here?’

‘That misery guts?’ Hugh snapped, and he looked angrier that Galen would have expected from his question. ‘He wasn’t invited.’

‘But someone needs to bless the meal.’

‘You do it then,’ Hugh said, and it sounded like a challenge.

Galen was appalled, and he was about to say that Alcuin could do it when he stopped himself. It wouldn’t be right to request that of a guest. It also wouldn’t be right to skip the blessing so he took a deep, unsteady breath and, using the table for support, he pushed himself onto his feet. He looked out at the crowd of feasting men and the women standing ready with food filled trays, and wondered whether he should wait for silence or just go ahead with the blessing while everyone was still talking.

A look that said he hadn’t expected this of Galen but he wasn’t displeased by it either, crossed Hugh’s face and he stood up bellowing, ‘Silence for the blessing.’

The hush that fell was as abrupt as it was astonished. Galen wondered whether it offended them that he, a sinner, had the temerity to bless the company and he looked anxiously over at Alcuin.

Alcuin gave him a reassuring smile, so Galen raised his right hand. It shook visibly.

‘May...’ Galen started and his throat closed up. He cleared it and tried again, ‘May the Lord our God bless this food and the people of the burh. My you always welcome friend and stranger alike and prosper under our Lord’s benevolent grace.’

‘Nicely done,’ Hugh said as he clapped a heavy hand onto Galen’s shoulder.

It probably wasn’t Hugh’s intention, but the force of the blow knocked what little strength Galen had left out of his legs and he dropped into his seat, dizzy from the exertion and the strain of what he’d just done. Fortunately, at that moment the women stepped forward with their vast platters piled high with boiled meat, bread, sausages, and jugs overflowing with mead with which they topped up the men’s drinking cups.

Mead was reserved for important occasions and high-ranking guests. It surprised Galen that it was being served tonight. Galen prayed he wouldn’t be required to talk to Hugh while also wishing that he could and that he wasn’t so intimidated that he became tongue tied.

Hugh, though, turned to Alcuin and said, ‘Tell me about Yarmwick. Do you like it?’

How foolish of him to think his father would want to speak to him, Galen thought. He was aware that an embarrassed flush was spreading across his face to be so dismissed. He glanced up from his plate to see whether it had been noticed. His father’s people were watching him, no doubt wondering about him and his life.

He was being stared at like he’d never been stared at before and if he caught somebody’s eye they turned away or whispered something to their neighbour. Their attention and what was surely the subject of their conversation made Galen feel so sick it was all he could do to mechanically pick up the food from his plate and shove it into his mouth.

‘They’ll get over their surprise and curiosity soon enough,’ Bretana murmured as she appeared before him and gave him a helping of bread. ‘After dinner you and I can have a good long gossip.’

‘That will be nice.’ Galen murmured.

‘Now you eat up. Your father had a pig killed specially for this feast and I want you to be a fat young monk. You’re giving the ascetics a bad name, looking the way you do now.’

Galen smiled at the mild jest and made a determined attack on his food, more so that his mother wouldn’t worry than because he wanted it. He should have felt more honoured than he did to hear about the pig. His father only did something that extravagant when he wanted to impress somebody.

What felt like hours later but probably wasn’t, Galen was wishing he could have his anonymity back. By this point in the evening, when he was a boy, he’d already have slipped away. Now, sitting at his father’s right-hand side, he was too prominent to be able to leave without causing offence. Although he wondered whether his father would mind. So far he’d spent most of his time talking to Alcuin, only glancing now and then at Galen. Fulk had pointedly turned his back on him too and was talking to Alduini, one of Hugh’s oldest and most experienced thanes.

The only one who looked like she was enjoying the feast less than Galen was Cwengyth. Because she was heavily pregnant, she wasn’t expected to help all the other women serve the men. She was sitting at the far end of his father’s table, nearest the ladies’ room. Galen looked to Fulk, who was deep in conversation. They were debating the quality and consistency of their newly made spears. It wasn’t something Galen could or was interested in talking about, even if his brother had invited him to join their conversation.

Galen wondered why Fulk wasn’t paying his wife any attention. Most men became more attentive of their women when they were expecting a child. In fact, Cwengyth was being ignored by everybody. She sat still and silent, picking at her food.

Galen remembered when she’d first visited Thorpe Parva, with her father, to initiate wedding talks. She’d been frosty and distant even then. Her father was a local reeve but a neighbour to Hugh and therefore a useful ally. All the men were in agreement that alliances hardly mattered when Cwengyth was the most beautiful girl any of them had ever laid eyes on.

‘I’ll wager she’s the most beautiful woman in all of Engla-Lond,’ Willnoth had said with a smug smile.

Galen thought his brother was probably right. And while the rest would have been satisfied merely to marry such beauty, Galen knew it was her ancestry that made her acceptable to his father. For, although they were no longer as much of a power in the land, Cwengyth numbered a king amongst her forebears.

Galen watched her for a while, and the more he did, the more worried he became. He recognised all the signs. Cwengyth was ostracised, just as he had been at Yarmwick. It made him feel physically ill to see somebody else suffering the way he had. He wished he could help her, but throughout the interminable feast he couldn’t think of anything that would make a difference.

‘I think I will take Galen to bed now,’ Bretana said as she stopped before her husband.

‘Already?’ Hugh said and his voice was heavy with irritation.

‘He had a long and tiring journey.’

‘Fine,’ Hugh snapped and dropped the bone he’d been chewing on, ‘you know what’s best for him.’

That familiar feeling that he'd disappointed his father rose. Galen wondered whether he should just tough it out and stay, only it was equally clear his mother was determined he should leave. It accorded with his wishes, so he rose and followed her out without looking up to see whether anyone noticed. They couldn't have failed to, but he was past caring.

Bretana took hold of his arm the moment they were back in the ladies' room and supported him to his bed.

'Sit, my dear,' she murmured, drawing Galen down onto the sheepskins beside her. 'And tell me all about it.'

'I can't,' Galen whispered.

'Please, my darling. The hurt I see in your eyes fills me with grief. It makes me regret bitterly that I never wrote to you. I read in your silence a wish to start a new life and not have the old one intrude. It was dreadfully foolish of me and I beg your forgiveness.'

His mother's words cut Galen to his heart. He'd thought he could be brave, that he was grown up and able to bear his suffering on his own. But her words broke the barrier he'd put up around his heart. His face crinkled up as tears started to his eyes. He bound his arms tightly about her, and he buried his face in her shoulder.

'It hurts... it hurts so much and it never goes away!'

'I know my darling, tell mother,' Bretana said and gently stroked his arms.

Galen's story tumbled out, and the years peeled away. He was back to being the desolate five-year-old who'd been treated roughly by his brothers or, after one terrible incident, when he'd got in his father's way. Hugh had flung him across the hall and Galen had landed on his back, winded and horrified, in the middle of a crowd of thanes. Every face had turned to stare at him, and he'd fled.

And here he was again, and his tale was worse than any he'd brought to his mother before. They'd both seen the monastic life as an escape for Galen, a place he could go where he wouldn't be unfavourably compared to his warrior brothers and constantly reminded that he didn't live up to his exacting father's standards. Instead, all he could tell his mother was how the holy men had ostracised him. In his greatest pain and need, they had turned their backs on him. He hadn't realised how much it troubled him till now, when he had somebody he could confess to fully.

'I'm so sorry, my dear, I shouldn't have sent you there,' Bretana said.

'You couldn't do anything else,' Galen said as he reluctantly let her go and wiped his eyes, trying to regain control over his emotions.

'If only your father had taken the time to get to know you. I'll never be able to forgive him for how he treated you!'

'In the end he made it right,' Galen said softly and took his mother's hand.

'He was a blind fool for too long but I suppose you are right. I only wish it had been sooner.'

'It made things better at the abbey. They don't treat me like a criminal anymore.'

'And you have made a friend.'

'Alcuin,' Galen said with a smile as he wiped at his eyes. 'He's a good man.'

'I believe you are right. And with the look of a thane. I wouldn't have believed you'd be drawn to such a one as him.'

'His illuminations are beautiful and he befriended me before my name was cleared. I value

him for that more than anything else.'

Despite his exhaustion, or possibly because of it, Galen had a restless night. Maybe it was the strange mix of comfort, familiarity and unease that was brought back to him now that he was home. Either way, he'd rolled from his left side to his right and to his left so many times he felt like a frustrated spinning top. His bed was an uncomfortable mass of twisted skins, and his robes were bunched up uncomfortably under him. It was only once the pale light of dawn pricked its way through the imperfectly closed shutter that Galen drifted into deeper, dream filled sleep. In his dream he was still awake and desperate for sleep, which further enhanced his need for rest.

'Galen,' a voice whispered. Its insistence penetrated into his befogged brain. 'Don't get up. We will be outside if you need us. Just sleep for now.'

'Mother,' Galen muttered, then sleep closed in once more.

When he opened his eyes again, the quality of the light informed him it was midmorning. Galen lay on his back, listening. The chatter of sparrows filled the room and a more distant murmuring of voices came from the hall and the courtyard outside. In the distance he could hear the rhythmic bang, bang, bang of a hammer against metal. Wuffa, the blacksmith, was hard at work.

Galen sat up and looked around. Alcuin had left his robe behind. It was folded and placed at the head of the bed. It looked like he had used it as a pillow. Galen had been so tired he hadn't even removed his robe when he'd gone to bed. Now it felt too hot. He shrugged out of it and left it where it fell.

A groan nearby surprised Galen, he'd thought he was the only one in the room. Then a lump moved on the pallet nearest the outside door, followed by another groan. It was Cwengyth. Was she still asleep?

Galen crept closer to find that her eyes were closed, and she was lying in a mass of twisted blankets. She rolled over, but it seemed she couldn't get comfortable. She also looked very pale. Galen worried she was ill, if not physically, then disturbed in her soul.

He wanted to put his hand on her shoulder and comfort her the way his mother comforted him. But it wasn't his place, and Cwengyth wouldn't thank him even if he tried.

So he hobbled over to the pile of belongings Alcuin had brought in from their cart and rifled through it till he found his notebook. It was a simple book with a plain leather cover that his mother had given to him when he'd started his studies. He tucked it under his arm and went to check the hall by peering through the gap in the curtain.

A trio of thanes were deep in conversation at the far end of the hall. Two thralls, Eba and

Tatae, were cleaning the hall after the feast. One was sweeping, the other was folding away the tables. Galen knew all these people, he'd grown up with them, but he had no wish to speak to them today. So he kept to the shadows as he made his way to the door that led outside. It was in the middle of the hall, and bright warm sunshine was streaming through it. He placed each foot down as gently as possible, as always to prevent the pain that jolted through him. But after having been shaken about for three days on the cart, each reluctant step made him wince.

Galen stepped outside and made for a long bench that had been pulled up against the wall in a spot that provided shade from the overhanging thatched roof. It was hotter outside than in the hall, but he didn't mind. It was just pleasant to be out.

Galen leaned back against the rough plaster of the hall walls and gazed up at the towering fluffy white clouds that dotted the deep blue sky. He took a couple of contented breaths and just listened. These were the sounds of home. In addition to the sparrows every now and then he'd hear the loud honking of a raven. Those great black beasts seemed to be a feature of every human settlement. Probably because of the scraps the birds could scavenge.

There was the sound of chopping coming from the kitchen. His grandfather had built it and the hall. He'd insisted on a separate kitchen to ensure no careless cook burned down his new hall.

Wuffa was still hammering away at his iron, and Galen could also hear the clang and clatter from Brinley's mint and the roar of the fire that Eadbald needed for making his glass. Galen didn't have to open his eyes to know that those three craftsmen lived and worked in the row of houses that stood across the road from the long hall.

Now, it was time for him to work too, so Galen opened his notebook and leafed through it. He didn't have a pen and ink handy, so he decided to just entertain himself with some riddles. He dropped his book as Fulk sat down beside him, rocking the bench with the violence of his arrival that sent an equal spasm of pain and fear through Galen.

'What's that?' Fulk said, as he picked the book up off the ground and frowned over the letters. 'Is this some secret code?'

'It's Old Norse,' Galen said and tilted his head to examine his brother and work out why he was talking to him. In the years before he'd left home, the only interaction he had with Fulk was when he wanted to make fun of him. So he held his breath now.

'It's Old Norse? Well, that explains it,' Fulk said and tossed the book back to Galen. 'What does it say?'

'It's a riddle,' Galen said and hoped that might divert Fulk. Everybody liked riddles.

The spark in Fulk's eye showed that he was interested. 'Let's hear it then.'

'I'll have to translate, so it might not have the best rhyme.'

'That doesn't bother me,' Fulk said.

'Alright then,' Galen said and translated from the Old Norse into English.

*'Sport with the wind do I, supple and wild,*

*Wracked by storm, wreathed in wonder,*

*Troubled by fire, eager, I flee,*

*A burning bough from a blooming grove.'*

'Hmm, interesting,' Fulk said and scratched at his beard as he considered. 'It's something that burns.'

‘Yes,’ Galen said and wondered whether he should have told Fulk about his riddles years ago. He had hundreds in his book and many more memorised.

‘I think it’s a tree.’

‘Yes,’ Galen said. Was this the time to offer his brother another riddle?

‘So you’re a monk,’ Fulk said and looked him up and down.

‘Yes,’ Galen said and this time he glanced towards the kitchen. His mother and sisters were probably working there, but it would be cowardly to call for them even if he needed help.

‘What’s that like then? Being a monk?’ Fulk said.

Galen blinked in surprise and said cautiously, ‘It suits me well enough.’

‘But no women.’

‘I have taken a vow of celibacy,’ Galen said and wondered whether this was what Fulk was after to begin his teasing.

‘And you stick to it?’

‘I do.’

‘But not very tightly.’

‘What do you mean?’ Galen’s anxiety was rising. Was Fulk looking to find fault?

‘I thought you were supposed to avoid touching all women including members of your own family.’

Galen flushed and looked away from Fulk’s disconcertingly hard eyes. So this was it. ‘I should, of course.’

‘Can’t, hmm?’ Fulk said as if pleased by the discovery. ‘It isn’t the only rule you’re breaking either, is it?’

‘What other rule am I breaking?’ Galen asked, even though he should have been trying to divert Fulk and get him away from this dangerous topic.

Fulk grabbed Galen’s arm and reached into the tunic sleeve to pull out a knife. ‘I thought monks weren’t supposed to draw blood.’

‘We aren’t.’ Galen eased his arm out of Fulk’s grip and tucked his penknife back into its hiding place. ‘But this is a tool of my trade.’

‘What trade, how can such a little knife be useful?’

‘I’m a scribe,’ Galen said, growing breathless as his anxiety mounted. ‘I use this knife to sharpen my pens.’

‘By what our father told us, it’s not the only use you put it to.’

‘No,’ Galen said and wondered whether he might need to use his knife in self defence again.

‘Mmm,’ Fulk murmured and sank into thought.

That was unexpected and Galen didn’t move lest it annoy his brother and incited him to violence.

Fulk looked up so suddenly that it made Galen jump.

‘Did you want to become a monk?’

‘It was why I learned to read and write in English, Latin and Old Norse.’ Galen was thoroughly confused now. This was not the way his interactions usually went with Fulk.

‘You learned that here?’ Fulk said in surprise.

‘Father Pifus taught me.’

‘That old misery guts? He beat the reading and writing into me, but it still makes my head

hurt to try it and at least that was in English.'

'He was never very understanding.' Galen's own hands had felt the snap of Father Pifus' ruler all too frequently when he'd got something wrong.

'So you really wanted to be a monk?' Fulk said, and the amazement was clear in his voice.

'What else was there for me to be?' Galen said and started to feel that his brother was here for something other than a bit of mindless sport.

'But the women!'

'The women?' This conversation was getting stranger by the minute. 'They take no notice of me.'

'That's no reason to swear yourself to celibacy.'

'Perhaps I would prefer it if that rule didn't exist, but it does. It's a price worth paying to enable me to devote my life to study somewhere I don't have to keep justifying my existence.'

'So it's like that is it?' Fulk said and his eyes flashed with that dangerous look he'd had whenever he was dreaming up a torment for Galen.

Galen gave a quick nod, his eyes slipping from his brother's hard gaze and said, 'It is.'

'Well, we all get things we don't want,' Fulk said with a sigh.

Galen was surprised again, looked up and said, 'We do?'

'God's Blood, Galen, do you think I wanted to become the ealdorman? I never dreamed that Willnoth would go and get himself killed. Least of all did I think I'd marry Cwengyth. We were both disappointed by that I can tell you.'

'You... you didn't wish to marry her?' Galen's surprise was deepening. How could any man not wish to marry Cwengyth?

'I'd liefer marry an icicle.'

'But, she is carrying your child... Isn't she?'

'Oh yes, it's mine alright. I doubt she'd sleep with any other man, for her ladyship doesn't like to be bedded. She has far too much pride for that, and she treats me like some filthy churl. She makes it all too plain that she is merely doing her wifely duty by me. It's a damned ordeal!'

'Oh,' Galen said, flushing deep red, his eyes glued to the ground in embarrassment. This kind of conversation was the one that discomfited him most. To be having it with Fulk about a woman he idolised was even worse.

'There's a wench in the burh, though, now she really enjoys herself,' Fulk said with a grin. 'I've spent some fine times with her.'

'Now? Even though you're married to Cwengyth?' Galen said shocked but also not really surprised. He knew what a band of wandering beasts men were, and Fulk was the least likely to be an exception.

'I have to get my amusement somewhere.'

'Does Cwengyth know?'

'She might, much she'd care.'

It saddened Galen to hear his brother speak that way, for Cwengyth and for the people Fulk would one day lead.

'But you said she's proud, Fulk. How can you suppose she could tolerate such a situation as you put her in?'

'How would I know?'

‘Well, think...’ Galen said, fear of talking to his brother in this way making a knot in his chest, but he couldn’t stop himself. ‘How could she yield to you knowing you prefer another woman? Her pride would never let her show you how much your actions hurt her!’

‘Pride is a sin.’

‘So is gluttony,’ Galen snapped, then held his breath. Fulk wouldn’t take that well.

Fulk’s eyes widened in momentary surprise, and then he burst out laughing.

‘Aye, you have me there.’

Galen smiled in a bemused way and wondered, yet again, why Fulk had come to talk to him. It made no sense at all. But maybe it gave him an opportunity.

‘Fulk... do you ever think—’ Galen stopped uncertain of how he could put this but as his brother was looking impatient, he pressed on. ‘Do you ever worry that Cwengyth is ostracised?’

‘What do you know of that? You’ve only just got back.’

‘All the same, it seems to me she’s unhappy.’

‘If she is, it’s her own fault.’

Galen nodded. Maybe Fulk was right about that, which made the situation even more difficult.

‘Is it because she is beautiful that you care about her?’ Fulk asked. ‘Or do you worry this way about all people?’

‘Hardly anyone spoke to me for three years in Yarmwick, you have no idea how lonely that is.’

Fulk examined him in the same weighing up way Galen was used to getting from his father, and for the first time he thought maybe his brother did have what it took to be the ealdorman.

‘I don’t suppose I do know what that’s like. I’ll think on it.’

This answer so surprised Galen that he was lost for words. It seemed his brother had grown up in the time Galen had been away as well.

Fulk sighed and said, ‘You won’t divulge our conversation, will you?’

‘No, of course not.’

‘No,’ Fulk said as he stood up and examined Galen. ‘I’m damned if I know why, but this place isn’t the same without you,’ he said and strolled away.

Galen gazed at the point where he’d been till he was certain he was alone again. How strange of Fulk to speak to him, and of such personal matters too. Galen turned the mystery around and around in his mind but could come up with no acceptable reason to account for it, so he tried to dismiss his curiosity and return to his reading. It wasn’t easy. He was distracted and worrying about Cwengyth. Her life seemed to be as miserable as his own. She was an outsider in this burh, just like he’d been in the abbey. He wished he could do something for her, but he couldn’t see what that might be.

His ostracism had been because people suspected him of being a catamite. For that reason, they’d locked him out of their community. Cwengyth’s isolation was more perplexing. It seemed that it was self imposed.

‘Deep in contemplation are you?’ Alcuin said.

Galen looked up, relief spreading through him to see his friend again.

‘How was your morning?’

‘Very interesting,’ Alcuin said as he settled where Fulk had been only moments before, his

sketchbook clasped loosely in both hands that rested on his lap. 'Your father's lands are vast and well tended.'

'Do you think so?'

'Don't you?'

'I don't know. I've never seen anyone else's lands to compare them with.'

'Well, they are impressive and, believe me, my father's lands are also well tended. And the range of commerce in this burh is greater than most. I was particularly struck by the opulence of the mint. I suspect he churns out coins at an impressive rate.'

Galen gave an accepting nod and glanced across to the mint where Brinley produced the coin that kept the kingdom going. The stamp Brinley used to make all his silver coins was supplied by the king to ensure that all coins across the realm were identical on one side at least. Brinley put his makers mark and name on the other side.

Having a mint conferred special status on the burh and was a source of pride for all the residents and a source of power for his father. The smoke rising in a thin grey plume from the chimney indicated that Brinley was as busy as ever. Galen wasn't really interested in pursuing the way his father ran things today, though.

Alcuin must have picked up on that because he said, 'How are you feeling?'

'Much better for not having to spend a day being bumped along the road. I'll try going for a walk tomorrow.'

'Your father informed the king that our journey will take a long time. We aren't expected to get there quickly. Besides, your father thinks the king is on a tour of the south at the moment, so there's nobody in Lundenburh to be kept waiting.'

'That's a relief to hear.'

'How long do you think you need to rest?'

'I suppose if I'm alright to walk about tomorrow then we could leave the next day.'

Galen knew he was pushing himself but, despite Alcuin's words, he worried about arriving in Lundenburh too late.

'No,' Alcuin said. 'You still look far too pale.'

Galen gave a slight helpless smile and said, 'So when should we leave?'

'We can give it a week.'

'A week! Alcuin we can't stay here that long.'

Alcuin cocked his head in surprise, then leaned closer and said, 'Is there some reason you don't want to stay a little while?'

'Honestly... in some ways I never want to leave and at other times I feel so different, so out of place that I want to leave immediately.' This was the root of his dilemma. It was good to be home, but it was more uncomfortable than it had been before as well.

'We'll give it a week,' Alcuin said with a tone in his voice that made it clear he wouldn't budge.

'But what will you do in that time? You'll be bored stiff,' Galen said, and noticed that it relieved him to hear the decision. It took responsibility away from him, which made him chide himself over his willingness to allow other people to make decisions for him.

'I don't get bored. I'll spend my days exploring the burh, all its people and the surrounding lands. It will provide inspiration for our new manuscript. In fact, I've already got an idea for

some marginalia after I saw a grey and white speckled cat and her kittens this morning,' Alcuin said as he leafed through his book and held out an image he'd sketched of the cat with her kittens. 'I thought I might produce some grotesques with cat's legs and human bodies to weave around the text.'

Galen was always amazed at Alcuin's skill, and now as he gazed down at the drawing it impressed him that Alcuin could use just a few lines to so precisely capture the essence of a cat.

'You don't normally do grotesques.'

'I know, but it's becoming fashionable and it might be fun. At my last monastery there was a fellow that created a fusion of a fish with a man. The creature had the head and body of a fish, but with a man's legs. He even gave him a fine pair of pointy red shoes.'

'It sounds ridiculous.'

'That's the whole point. It's to shake people out of their complacency.'

'It makes a mockery of what we do.'

'It teaches us to take ourselves less seriously.'

'Alcuin,' Galen said, taking hold of his friend's arm. 'You can't make a joke out of God.'

'I'm not making a joke out of God. I'd be mocking man's weaknesses, our pride and our vanity.'

'We were made in God's image. If you mock us, you mock God.'

'If the grotesques we see in the margins of so many of our codices were a mockery of God, the church would have banned them.'

'I suppose so. It's just... everything else you draw is so beautiful,' Galen said wistfully as he handed Alcuin's pattern book back to him.

Alcuin laughed and said, 'If you don't like it, I won't do it.'

'Really?'

Galen was surprised that anything he could say would sway anybody, least of all a determined man like Alcuin.

'Why not? It isn't such an important matter to me.'

'Thank you, Alcuin.'

'Think nothing of it,' Alcuin said. 'I must say, I'm surprised by your strength of feeling about the grotesque.'

'Are you? Why?'

'I don't know, maybe because you've been flouting the Benedictine rules here. But mainly because you've suffered more than any religious man should. I mean, somebody whose life had been as hard as yours could reasonably be expected to doubt or spurn God. Yet you have a deeper faith than someone like me who's always had things so easy.'

'Really?' Galen said, blinking up at Alcuin, as surprised as his friend to discover that they differed on this point. 'Do you not believe?'

'I do, of course I do. It's just... I'm used to talking about religion. I grew up in a devout household and then the monastery. I've been thoroughly schooled in theology and can easily converse with my fellow brothers on the topic, but it doesn't touch my heart.'

'I see,' Galen said, turning the idea around and around in his head. 'Maybe it has to do with a test of faith.'

'Like Job, you mean?' Alcuin said and his laugh sounded like he was embarrassed.

Galen could understand that, an examination of one's faith could be a painful thing.

'Many saints have often suffered privations, and Jesus himself went into the desert to fast for forty days. Maybe when everything else you have is stripped away, you can see what is truly important.'

'You should write that down in your book,' Alcuin said. 'It sounds like something a learned man would say.'

Galen wondered whether he was right. He'd just spoken from the heart. Maybe there was some value in his suffering after all. But it would not stop him from praying to God to lift that burden from him.

Galen's chin touched his chest, and he jerked it up again. The warmth, the familiar surroundings and his exhaustion after their journey had the effect of making him sleepy. The feast the night before that had gone on late into the night and his inability to properly fall asleep after that added to the heavy feeling of not being entirely awake.

Galen forced his eyes open and blinked vaguely at the scene before him. A pig had decided the space beside the bench was pleasantly warm and was deep in sleep, snoring gently. A couple of women walked past carrying water, two buckets each and barely a drop slopping over the edge. They glanced in his direction, then whispered to each other as they hurried past. At least people had gone back to their daily business and weren't clustered around watching him like yesterday.

Galen's eyes drifted shut and his head slowly tilted downward. He lifted it again with considerable effort. This couldn't go on. He needed a walk. That would invigorate him and help wake him up.

A shadow flicked past him that drew Galen's attention. Cwengyth had emerged from the long hall and was making her slow way, in that awkward rolling gait of the heavily pregnant, towards the church. Maybe he should follow her and try to talk to her.

Galen's innards clenched uncomfortably. Father Pifus would be at the church. He'd been a hard and unfriendly taskmaster when he'd been his teacher. Galen was also wondering why he'd been banned from the feast. It didn't do for an ealdorman and his religious guide to fall out.

Galen couldn't help contrasting the priest with the lives of the saints they discussed in the abbey chapter house. Most of those men and women were intent on spreading the word of God. Many had been martyred for their efforts. Saint Cuthbert had actively sought out heathens and worked through word, deed, and miracles, to bring them into the fold. Father Pifus was the opposite. He was more likely to bar his church doors firmly against heathens than welcome them in. It had often felt to Galen like Father Pifus was trying to drive all but a select band of people out of the church.

Still, he was his teacher. Galen had learned a lot from him. He felt sure that Alcuin would encourage him to see the old man. Besides, the church wasn't far, and that would constitute a walk.

It felt good to have decided, even if he was nervous about speaking to both Father Pifus and Cwengyth. Everything ached on his first step. Was it a good idea to move? Maybe it would be better to go to bed.

No, he had to force himself. This was only a stop along his journey to the king. He had to build up his strength and really; the church was only a hundred paces away. What had he come to if he couldn't walk such a short distance?

Galen stopped as he reached the crossroads and took a couple of measured breaths. They weren't only needed because he was already tired. They would also fortify him for what was to come.

He looked up at the church tower. It was four stories high and made from stone. It was his father's proudest achievement. He had built it a few years before Galen was born, after the old church burned down. Hugh blamed Father Pifus for the fire every time the priest annoyed him.

An excited shout drew Galen's attention as an enthusiastic band of children came trotting down the path. The oldest was a girl of no more than nine who was trying to marshal the group into semi-order. This was complicated by the trio of dogs who were jumping and yapping around the group in as much excitement as the children.

A tan dog with a white patch over its eye had grabbed onto one of the boy's belts and squeals of laughter were accompanying his attempt to break free. The dog held fast, growling through clenched teeth, shaking its head as if trying to break the back of the beast it had captured while its tail wagged so fast it was a blur.

'Look!' one of the boys cried and pointed at Galen. His blue eyes were almost staring from his sockets in surprise.

The children all turned to face him, and Galen's breath caught in his chest. What was the meaning of this?

'Are you Brother Galen?' a little girl asked, turning her sunburned and dirt-smudged face up to examine him.

'I am,' Galen said, chiding himself for being intimidated by a group of children.

They were so fascinated by him that even the dogs noticed. The one with the white patch dropped the belt he'd been hanging onto so fiercely. All three approached Galen with their ears pricked up in that alert, but curious expression dogs had when determining whether you were friend or foe.

A boy dressed in a green tunic that was a little too big for him and hung to below his knees, reached out and poked his finger into Galen's robes as if checking that he was real.

'My dad said they never thought to see you here again.'

'My mum said it was a miracle you lived,' another little girl with a fringe of curly blonde hair said as she peeped thoughtfully up at him. 'Are you a saint?'

'What?' Galen said, startled by the questions.

'Only saints can perform miracles,' the curly-haired girl said with absolute certainty.

'Well... I didn't perform a miracle.'

It wasn't the first time someone had made that observation. Considering Septimus's size and strength, Galen sometimes wondered himself how he had survived the attack. But the injuries he'd sustained made him dismiss the assumption that it was a miracle. Surely a miracle would have been if he'd got away without injury or, failing that, been completely healed.

'My mom didn't let me go to the execution,' the sunburned little girl said.

'Septimus cried,' a tall dark boy of around seven said. 'My dad said he was a broken man before they even cut him up. He said good riddance.'

Galen recognised this boy, although he couldn't remember his name. He was the blacksmith's son. He shuddered to consider a boy of his age attending an execution. Then again, he'd sat through a few when he was even younger.

'Are you cold?' the oldest girl, who'd been marshalling the others, asked.

'No, I'm fine,' Galen said, relieved they'd changed topic.

'Where are you going?'

'To the church,' Galen said, and pointed unnecessarily across the road at it.

'Oh, the church,' the boy in the green tunic said in a tone of voice that showed it was his least favourite place. 'Father Pifus won't like that.'

'I don't suppose he will.'

'He beat me last Sunday because I burped in the church,' a pot bellied, serious looking boy said. 'I mean, you can't help burping, can you?'

'You're always burping,' the sunburned girl said.

'And farting,' the tall dark boy said and blew an expressive raspberry that made the whole group burst out laughing.

Galen wondered what to do next. He had a feeling that this little gathering would happily keep chatting to him for as long as he was willing to stay. His cowardly side would do that. It meant not going into the church, or having to deal with the awkwardness of trying to dismiss the children.

Really, he needed to develop more backbone. How could he allow himself to be pushed around by children?

'I have to go now,' Galen said and gave the children what he hoped was a friendly smile as he walked off.

Their fear of Father Pifus meant they didn't follow him. So at least the priest had one use.

The interior of the church was cool, and after the bright summer sun outside, so dark that Galen had to stop for a while to allow his eyes to adjust. The church was a simple one. Large enough to fit all the residents of the burh, but no more than that.

The stone walls were covered in white plaster and painted with scenes from the bible and saint's lives. Galen had spent many an hour gazing up at those pictures, the crucifixion over the altar, the baptism of John the Baptist by the font, the martyrdom of Saint Alban on the west wall, and a picture of Saint Aelfleada healing the sick on the east wall. The last picture had more meaning for him now, as he'd learned that Saint Aelfleada had once dined with Saint Cuthbert when she visited him at Lindisfarn.

Cwengyth was kneeling at the front of the church, deep in prayer. Galen hesitated. He wasn't good at forcing himself into anybody else's notice, least of all when they were occupied. But people who'd shut themselves off from others wouldn't easily open up. He'd learned from Alcuin that it was down to the rest to reach out a hand and pull them back in.

So, difficult as it was, he lowered himself to the floor to Cwengyth's left. Far enough not to intrude, but close enough to provide company. To anyone arriving at the church now, they would look like they were praying together. Galen offered up a prayer to God to ask for His help in reaching Cwengyth.

'What are you doing?' Cwengyth murmured.

Galen opened his eyes and blinked at her. 'I'm praying, like you.'

‘Here?’ Cwengyth said and pushed herself back onto her feet by putting both hands on the floor and pushing herself upright.

Galen realised he’d have to do the same. Usually he used the side of a bed or a bench to get himself back up, but here there was nothing else he could use.

‘No wait,’ he said as Cwengyth turned to leave.

‘Why should I?’ Cwengyth said, looking Galen up and down.

She made him feel insignificant and helpless. She was taller than him and elegant. Even when she was looking down at somebody, she did it with grace.

‘I just... I thought you might want to talk.’

‘To you?’

‘To anyone. You... you don’t seem to have any friends.’

‘Why does that matter to you?’ Cwengyth said and her eyes flashed impatiently around the church. ‘Besides, the last person I’d want to get involved with is you. Father Pifus warned everyone to stay away from you in his sermon last Sunday.’

‘He did?’

‘He said you were unclean and should be shunned,’ Cwengyth said examining Galen with a speculative eye waiting to see his reaction.

It shocked Galen to hear how far Father Pifus had gone. They had never agreed on anything, but to warn everyone to stay away from him was cruel, unforgiving and unbecoming in a clergyman.

‘Your father got so annoyed he started shouting at Father Pifus in the middle of his sermon. He said that he was a damned idiot and a useless excuse for a priest.’

‘Language I’ll thank you not to repeat,’ Father Pifus snapped from the little door that led from outside directly to the chancel.

Galen gave a start at the priest’s sudden appearance and found himself frozen to the spot as he took in the familiar ruddy, acne-scarred, stubbled face. He was gripping his walking stick so tightly that his knuckles were white. Galen knew he didn’t really need the stick to aid his walking, he merely used it as an effective cudgel.

‘This is my church and you aren’t welcome,’ Father Pifus said, glaring at Galen. ‘Your father and the abbot of Yarmwick may see fit to have someone like you in their midst, but I won’t stand for it.’

Cwengyth took this opportunity to leave and walked off with a cursory nod to the priest and no acknowledgement to Galen. He wished with all his heart she had stayed, because now he had to face Father Pifus alone.

‘Get out,’ the priest said, banging his walking stick on the floor for emphasis. ‘Before I throw you out.’

Galen took a step backwards, stunned at the venom in the priest’s voice. How could he do this to someone he knew? Especially when he was aware of Septimus’s role in the entire affair.

‘Now!’ Father Pifus roared, slammed his stick so hard into the floor that the crash reverberated around the stone walls. ‘And never darken my door again.’

Galen turned and hurried away. He filled with shame that he’d run and renewed shame over what everyone thought of him. The whole burh would have been at mass on Sunday. They would all have heard the sermon.

What did they make of it? Especially as they'd turned out for the feast in his father's hall as well. One consolation was that his father had stood up for him during the sermon. He'd also prepared a lavish feast in his honour. What would he make of his son fleeing at such slight provocation, though?

## 8

Alcuin was up just before dawn, woken by Fulk who took a hold of his foot and gave it a firm shake. Fulk stood, fully dressed, grinning down at him.

‘Ready?’

‘Just give me a second to do my ablutions,’ Alcuin said as he slid off the end of the dais and ran for the privy.

Hugh had invited Alcuin to go hunting, and he was eager to do so. He’d always enjoyed falconry, but it wasn’t something he got to do in his life as a monk.

So as not to disturb Galen, Alcuin had slept in the hall with the other men. Galen hadn’t looked thrilled by his decision. Alcuin guessed because he got a measure of security to have him nearby. Still, he’d not said a word against it.

Alcuin would have told Galen that was what made him brave. Even though he had good reason to fear sleeping in his father’s hall after what had happened to him there, he didn’t ask Alcuin to stay at his side. Even though the townsfolk whispered and stared, Galen went about his business without getting Alcuin to keep him company. He didn’t bother saying anything to Galen about this because he knew Galen wouldn’t believe him.

Besides, something was preoccupying Galen. He’d hardly said two words at dinner and gone to bed shortly after that with a distracted farewell. Whatever was bothering him, he’d come to his own solution eventually, so Alcuin left him to ruminate.

Now, he finished the vigorous wash he was giving his face by rubbing it dry with a linen towel. He was ready. He hurried to the courtyard before the long hall where the rest of the men were gathered beside their horses.

‘Ah, Brother Alcuin, now we are all here,’ Hugh said.

He had an impressive peregrine falcon perched on one leather gloved arm. It was hooded to keep it calm, but the small bells attached to its leg jingled as it shifted about on the glove. His sons, Fulk, Octa and Tonbert were also holding falcons and the other thanes were clustered about discussing their finer points. A group of churls were marshalling a small pack of excited dogs that would sniff out any downed prey the birds didn’t bring back.

Goat, the mule he’d ridden to Thorpe Parva, was being held steady by a thrall and Alcuin guessed that was to be his mount which pleased him.

‘Right, let’s go, if we take much longer the birds will all be in bed.’

‘No pigeon pie for us then,’ Fulk said with a laugh as he leapt up onto his horse and took back his hawk from the waiting churl he’d handed it to.

Alcuin wished he could mount as easily, but had to accept that he could never match men

who spent their lives in battle. At least he had some skill and could look forward to an entertaining morning as he trotted out after the ealdorman and his entourage.

‘Stop! Stop now,’ Father Pifus said as he came charging out of his church, brandishing his walking stick like a club and blocked the road his arms spread out wide.

‘What now?’ Hugh snapped.

‘My lord,’ Father Pifus said as he planted his walking stick in the ground and bent over it, catching his breath. ‘I must repeat my entreaties to you. You cannot allow Galen to remain here. The word of God is clear, no man is allowed to lie with another. If they do, they are both unclean and must be put to death.’

‘Again? You would bother me with this again?’ Hugh shouted. ‘After I have relayed the message from the Abbot of Yarmwick, that a victim is not to be considered a sinner!’

‘He is mistaken. On this point he is wrong,’ Father Pifus shouted just as loudly. He was so worked up his face was red.

Alcuin held his breath as he watched the exchange. He was aware from the odd overheard comment and uneasy glance thrown Galen’s way that the priest was not alone in his view. It would take very little to sway public opinion in this burh, especially when the men in Galen’s family held him in such low regard.

‘Get out of my way,’ Hugh shouted and kicked his horse into motion.

As he cantered past the priest Hugh put his foot out, caught Father Pifus on his shoulder and sent him sprawling into the road raising a cloud of dust.

The men who followed after the ealdorman cheered and laughed. Alcuin wasn’t so sure it had been a good move, as he passed the priest lying on his back. He had a look of such venom on his face that it severely alarmed Alcuin.

Since the Ealdorman was in a hurry to get to their chosen hunting ground, the men urged their horses into a trot. They needed to put some distance between themselves and all human habitation, so they had to get past the collection of houses outside the burh wall. The inhabitants were already up, as shown by the wisps of smoke coming up through the thatch of their roofs and the occasional churl making his way to his fields.

Hugh looked back to Alcuin and with a gesture of his head indicated for him to come closer. So Alcuin urged Goat forward till he was riding abreast of the ealdorman.

‘You wanted a word?’

‘Mmm, it’s that damned priest,’ Hugh said and glanced over his shoulder to make sure the rest of the men weren’t paying them too much attention.

‘I didn’t realise he was so opposed to Galen. Although I wondered about his absence at the feast.’

‘He’s been like a tick with his idea, hanging on no matter what I do. He’s adamant Galen should be put to death, and not a quick and easy one either.’

‘I thought you were content with the abbot’s opinion.’

‘I am, but such passionate entreaties make me doubt myself. What is your opinion?’

‘I’m Galen’s friend, would you expect me to be unbiased?’

‘I was Septimus’ friend but in the end I put him to death,’ Hugh said scowling into the distance.

‘he was also a murderer. You did the right thing. Galen’s situation is completely different,

and I'm afraid I'm not the one you should ask about deep theological things. I draw well, that is my one and only talent. If you really want to get to the bottom of this question, I would usually tell you to speak to Galen.'

'Really? Why?'

'Unlike me, he is a deep thinker and very well read.'

Alcuin decided this was the best opportunity he'd have to get the ealdorman to see his son in a better light. It disappointed him that the two men had yet to have a proper conversation.

'Galen is well read?' Hugh said and looked genuinely surprised.

'More than that, he understands what he reads and he can take it apart and reason his way through things that leave me quite baffled.'

The falcon on Hugh's wrist shifted, tinkling the bells, as if picking up on his master's disquiet. 'Do you think Galen has an opinion on what his fate should be?'

'Without a doubt, and he'd tell you too, even if it results in harm to him.'

'He would do that?'

Alcuin gave a laugh he hoped hid his exasperation as he said, 'He's braver than you give him credit for.'

'So it seems.'

'If I might give you a hint though, my lord,' Alcuin said and waited for a nod from Hugh before he continued. 'If you are going to speak to Galen, and I hope you do, wait till you are alone with him. If you are surrounded by his brothers and your entourage of thanes, Galen will simply shut down and hurry away.'

'As he has always done.'

'I thought, when I first met him, that it was a consequence of being ostracised at the abbey that made Galen shy away from people. I have since learned that he has always had difficulties with crowds. But I swear to you, he really is a braver man than you believe.'

Ealdorman Hugh gave a noncommittal shrug that Alcuin had to accept. As they had now been riding for a while and put a suitable distance between themselves, the burh and the surrounding houses they were most likely approaching their hunting grounds. The dawn chorus was in full swing and it sounded to Alcuin like the world was filled with birds chirping and calling.

'We'll stop here,' Hugh said as he came to a halt at a broad meadow in a valley with woodland flanking the low hills to either side.

It was the perfect place from which to flush the birds and give the falcons room to manoeuvre and grab their prey.

Galen spent his second morning in bed drifting in and out of sleep, listening to the quiet murmur of his mother and sisters at work and luxuriating. The monastic life had much to recommend it. He liked the order of their days, the prayers and chanting in the church and the work with the manuscripts. He'd have liked to spend more time on translating and less on pure copying, but still it had a structure to it that his life before had lacked.

Being home made him think back to days spent curled up in secret corners reading, sitting with his mother and sisters in the ladies' room or just roaming about the countryside unnoticed. He couldn't roam anymore. He didn't have the strength for it and the pain was too

dreadful to contemplate walking for very long, but he worried about his inactivity.

He felt his strength ebbing away with his immobility, which was why he had to get up and walk, distasteful as he found the idea.

‘You’re awake,’ his mother said as Galen slowly pushed himself upright.

‘I have been for a while but I was just enjoying listening to you all. Has Alcuin returned yet?’

‘Do you miss him?’ his mother asked with a slight smile. ‘He and the rest of the men have returned with a fine collection of pigeons and grouse which we woman will turn into pies for dinner.’

‘So he’s in the hall?’

‘I believe he set off for a walk. The last I saw of him he had his book under his arm and he was heading out of the burh.’

It disappointed Galen that he’d missed Alcuin. He felt that he should be a better host to his friend, even though he knew he was being looked after perfectly well by his family. He’d also been excited to be invited to go hunting. Still, that gave Galen an excuse to spend more time with his mother and sisters.

‘What are you working on now?’

Bretana held up a small dress for inspection. It was bright green with a nearly complete border of pretty white flowers, ‘I am rushing to finish a dress for Tova, Emma’s youngest. I’m hoping you will carry this one and the other I made for her sister Nerienda when you set off for Lundenburh.’

‘I will be happy to do so.’ Galen was looking forward to seeing his eldest sister again. She was a bright woman and full of fun. ‘Is her marriage to Eni prospering?’

Bretana let out a long sigh as she bowed her head and went back to her embroidery.

‘I’m afraid he’s a disappointment. He is derided at court for being a coward.’

‘Not everyone can be brave,’ Galen said, aware he sounded defensive.

‘No,’ Bretana said looking up to give him a warm smile, ‘but bravery comes in many shapes. You are braver than you realise. Eni, on the other hand, pretends to be brave. He struts and shows off his fine arms and armour but the moment he is called upon to fight he comes up with some pitiful excuse and always manages to avoid the battlefield.’

‘I’m surprised father thought him acceptable.’

‘Eni is a close relative of the king and fabulously wealthy. That was what made him a useful ally, and what prevents the king from reprimanding him for his cowardice.’

‘I see.’

Galen would most likely meet Eni himself in Lundenburh and then he could make up his own mind about him.

His mother always seemed able to read his mind and smiled at him for keeping his own counsel.

‘Unfortunately for Emma, she has only born Eni two daughters, so he can complain to your father about that whenever he tries to encourage the man to show more backbone.’

‘That must be uncomfortable for both my father and Emma.’

‘And that is why I am sending her these little gifts. I hope it will cheer her up. Daughters are every bit as valuable as sons. It saddens me that men don’t see this.’

Galen agreed, and knew it was unnecessary to tell his mother so. He’d lived more with her

and his sisters than he had with the men of the family. He knew more of their lives than most men did. He felt it gave him a privileged insight seldom afforded to warriors. Not that the warriors would care.

‘Shouldn’t you be making clothes for Cwengyth’s firstborn instead?’ Galen asked and noted the look that his sisters exchanged when he brought up their sister-in-law. It seemed to say, here we go again, yet another infatuated man.

‘Cwengyth has a full supply of clothes already made up. Some from the baby clothes you and your brothers and sisters wore, and a few new. Her child is imminent and we wouldn’t leave it so late to start sewing for her,’ Bretana said.

‘I see, I should have realised. I didn’t know the birth was so near.’

‘We are in daily expectation of welcoming the child into the world.’

Galen nodded, then lowered his voice so that only his mother would hear properly. ‘She isn’t fitting in, is she?’

‘I’m afraid not,’ Bretana said, tied a knot in the thread she was working and snipped it off. ‘I have tried to make her comfortable, but she is struggling.’

‘She’s a snob,’ Hild said. ‘She never wants to speak to anyone.’

‘I don’t know why,’ Cenna said without looking up from her own embroidery. ‘Her family is no better than ours. I suppose it is what comes from being so beautiful and having men prostrate themselves before you night and day. We’ve tried to make friends with her, honestly we have, but she just goes off on her own all the time.’

Galen wasn’t sure what he could do about the situation, but to see his sisters set against Cwengyth already was a concern. He had to at least try to help, even if Cwengyth was in agreement with Father Pifus that he should be shunned. Galen wondered whether she was using that as a reason to keep him at arm’s length or whether she truly believed it.

‘Where is Cwengyth now?’

His mother gave him her knowing smile and said, ‘She is fond of my garden.’

Galen nodded and pushed himself onto his feet. He needed to do a bit more walking, anyway.

‘Galen, don’t,’ Hild said. ‘She won’t thank you for it. She likes men even less than she likes us women.’

‘All the same,’ Galen murmured and headed for the door that led from the family room into his mother’s garden.

His mother had told him the garden was the first thing she’d made when she’d married Hugh and come to Thorpe Parva. It was a fenced off section of land at the back of the long hall. The fence was made from split hazel rods woven to ensure privacy. It was filled with a vast variety of plants, including apple trees festooned with tiny green fruits, a vast rambling pink rose and lilies.

As he walked across the flowery mead dotted about with deep purple violets, yellow dandelions and the bright red dots of wild strawberries, the restful scent of chamomile wafted up on the warm air. He rounded what looked like a pile of roses taller than a man and looked into the hollow space below that had been turned into a cool bower.

Cwengyth was sitting on the woven wicker chair that filled the space but appeared not to notice the flowers all around her. Her eyes were filled with tears and as she dabbed at them

with her crumpled hanky still more tumbled forth.

‘Oh, I beg your pardon,’ Galen said and started to back away. ‘I didn’t mean to intrude.’

Cwengyth sniffed defiantly, arched an eyebrow and gave him a haughty look.

On any other day, it would have been sufficient to drive Galen off. But today her tears made him worry all the more for her and gave him the courage to stand his ground.

He leaned down to examine Cwengyth’s face and said, ‘Are you alright, my lady?’

‘Yes, I’m fine, why wouldn’t I be?’ Cwengyth snapped.

‘You look a little pale,’ Galen said cautiously. He needed to help Cwengyth, not allow her to drive him off. ‘Maybe I can be of service. I have several herbal remedies to help overcome pain and nausea.’

‘I don’t need any herbal remedies from you. Lady Bretana has provided me with all that I need.’

‘Yes,’ Galen said. So far this wasn’t going well. ‘My uncle has some stronger medicines. They take away all pain and even still the mind.’

‘Still the mind?’

‘It’s a bit... like sinking into twilight. Nothing matters anymore. You can’t move and you can’t think and you don’t care.’

‘That sounds wonderful,’ Cwengyth said wistfully.

‘No! Oh, my lady, no.’ It horrified Galen that she might feel that way. He sat down on the chair on the furthest edge from her even as he made a gesture to reach out to her. ‘Don’t say that. The only time I’ve wanted to feel that way was when I was in the greatest despair of the soul. How can you be in such a terrible condition?’

‘You don’t think I could suffer?’ Cwengyth said, and her face flushed with emotion.

‘You shouldn’t have to. Not here where so many people love you.’

‘Nobody loves me!’

‘That can’t be true,’ Galen said and prayed that it wasn’t. He felt sure that if only Cwengyth would open up a bit, she would be able to make friends. After all, she was an honoured member of his family without a stain to her name.

‘You’re a man. You are as foolish as the rest of them,’ Cwengyth said, her lips twisting in disgust. ‘You see my face and you fall in love and then all you can think of is possessing me. Yes, and some men don’t even need to give voice to the disgusting things they whisper to me when I walk past. I see the lust in their eyes. I see the way they imagine my body stripped of all clothes, at their mercy. Men are pigs, all of them. You should know that better than most!’

Galen gasped and made a gesture to ward off what she was saying. How could she be hurting so much that she would be so cruel?

‘Cwengyth, Fulk doesn’t... he doesn’t use you harshly, does he?’ Galen whispered and felt sick over what he might hear.

‘He doesn’t, but there is no kindness nor regard in his touch either.’

Galen gave her a troubled look and said, ‘Did you like Willnoth better? Is that why you are so unhappy with Fulk?’

‘No,’ Cwengyth said, sighed and examined Galen again.

He waited, willing her to speak. It might be hurtful and tell him things he didn’t want to hear about his family, but he knew how important it was for someone just to listen.

‘My father and yours wanted an alliance between our families,’ Cwengyth said and twisted a rose free. ‘Who I married was of no consequence, be it Willnoth or Fulk. And looking the way I look, as you may not believe, is a curse. All my life I have had to fend men off. I have to protect myself and my virtue in every way I can for yours is a devious and violent sex.’

‘You keep everyone away by being aloof... I understand,’ Galen said, for it was becoming clear to him.

‘Do you?’ Cwengyth said as she started plucking the pink petals from the flower and allowing them to fall one by one at her feet.

Galen gave a faint smile and said, ‘I keep everyone away by being insignificant.’

‘Otherwise they torment you?’

‘Yes.’

‘I remember.’

‘I didn’t think you noticed me,’ Galen said in genuine surprise.

‘You used to watch me too, but you always just looked stunned as if by a wonder. I never saw lust in your eyes.’

‘There would be no point,’ Galen said guiltily aware that on occasion he had imagined himself married to Cwengyth. But those were long ago, childish fantasies. ‘I never stood a chance with anyone as perfect as you.’

‘I sometimes wish I’d contracted the pox or something which made me ugly in men’s eyes so they would cease their hounding of me,’ Cwengyth said on a deep sigh.

‘Oh no, that would be terrible,’ Galen said, the words wrenched from him in involuntary surprise.

‘I doubt it would worry your brother. His burh wench has pock marks, and it doesn’t put him off her.’

So Cwengyth also knew about Fulk’s lover. Galen should have known that she would. It was impossible to keep secrets in the burh.

Now he spoke slowly, weighing every word, praying he didn’t say anything to offend Cwengyth.

‘Maybe if you didn’t keep him at a distance, he would lose interest in the other woman.’

‘What you mean is, I should squeal like a pig just like she does when he takes her? No! I will do my duty as a wife, but I won’t cry out in pleasure.’

‘Some people think the bible prohibits enjoyment of the matrimonial act,’ Galen said, cautiously. He was aware of how very unqualified he was to broach this subject. ‘But it doesn’t. It says husbands and wives have a duty to procreate, but it doesn’t say that it must not be pleasurable. Although... I don’t think squealing is required either.’

Cwengyth gave him an astonished look, and then laughed, which added to Galen’s embarrassment. He was certain, by the prickling of his skin, that his face had turned bright red.

‘Are you trying to give me advice?’

‘Forgive me. It was presumptuous,’ Galen said, his embarrassment making it hard to speak. ‘I am not the best one to talk to you of such things. Perhaps my mother—’

‘No,’ Cwengyth said flatly, all the amusement dying out of her eyes.

‘Don’t... don’t you like her?’

‘She is kind enough to me, but you, all of you, are her children. She won’t hear anything said

against you.'

'That can't be true,' Galen said. 'Many was the time I'd pour my woes into her ears about my brothers. She would listen and give kind advice, but she never loved them less for hearing what they did and only sometimes would she intervene. She can help you. She knows you are alone, far from your family. She will take you under her wing if you will only let her.'

'Oh Galen you are so—' Cwengyth stopped with a gasp of pain. Then she said, her voice strained, 'It's the baby. I think the baby is coming, go and get help.'

Galen gave her a horrified look, then a quick nod, heaved himself up from the chair, said, 'I won't be long,' and hurried away.

## 9

Alcuin was lying on his belly in the field, watching the ants scurrying about amongst the stalks of grass. He had his sketchbook out and the lead plummet in his hand, which he used to make his preliminary sketches. Ants were ideal for marginalia, their size, shape and colour worked well running along the edge of a page. They were also a symbol of industriousness, of which the church approved. The little colony he was watching now lived up to that description as they returned to the ant heap, each laden with a useful crumb.

A pair of feet came to rest inches from his face, blocking out the sun, and Alcuin squinted up to see who had disrupted his ant kingdom.

‘Fulk, what can I do for you?’

‘What are you doing?’

‘Watching ants,’ Alcuin said with a smile, knowing the answer would only drive Fulk to deeper curiosity.

‘God’s Blood! Do all damned clergy talk in riddles?’ Fulk said with an answering grin.

‘You know lots of clergy do you?’ Alcuin said as he stood up and dusted off his habit.

‘I know enough of them. It’s still difficult to believe my brother is one.’

‘A good one too, not someone given to answering a question by turning it aside.’

‘He is pretty direct. Not that I’ve given it much thought till he came back. Actually, I don’t really recall talking to him at all before.’

‘Was he always so quiet?’

‘Insignificant, small and shy. Since my father found him irritating, he kept away.’

‘None of the rest of you are like that. You’re all hale and hearty, big men. Why is Galen so small?’

‘He was an early baby and, as I recall, for the first few years of his life he wasn’t expected to live. My mother had just lost another son, the one before Galen, and she wasn’t going to allow that to happen again. She kept him beside her day and night for years till it became clear he would live. But he ever hid behind her skirts from that time on. He always looked frightened,’ Fulk said with a puzzled shake of his head.

He dismissed the thought and said, ‘Do you fancy a drink? We have a passable beer back at the hall.’

‘Certainly, but I feel you want more than to just share a drink?’ Alcuin said as he tucked his book under his arm and took a last look around the sunny field he’d been exploring.

‘I want a chat,’ Fulk said as he set off to the hall. ‘I think I should, since I will succeed to my father’s honours one day.’

‘I don’t see why that would make you want to see me.’

‘You’re from the family of Maccus.’

‘Ah, things begin to be clearer. But I’m the youngest son, you know. There isn’t much I can do by way of interceding,’ Alcuin said and fell into step with Fulk as they headed up the path to the burh. It felt strange to be walking with this man. In so many ways similar to Galen in appearance and yet, such a different personality.

‘I wouldn’t expect you to intercede,’ Fulk said looking back at Alcuin. ‘I just want to know... Do you think there is any likelihood that your father would call off the feud between our two families if I paid the wergeld?’

Alcuin cast him a rueful glance and said, ‘I wish you hadn’t asked me that.’

‘Why?’

‘Because I don’t think you’ll like the answer.’

‘He’ll hold to the feud?’ Fulk said as he gave a casual salute to the man standing guard at the burh’s entrance. Then they were through and strolling past the homes and workplaces that clustered around the long hall. Everyone they passed bowed to Fulk.

‘He is the wronged party, and I have to say, it may be too late to offer reparation.’

‘He isn’t entirely the wronged party.’

‘It was his eldest sister, my aunt, who was poisoned.’

‘My family has never admitted to doing it. Besides, we had strong provocation.’

‘Such as?’

‘Your damned family were trying to undermine our position with the king. Your aunt was feeding lies to him about our loyalty.’

Alcuin shrugged and said, ‘I know nothing about the matter. As the youngest son, I wasn’t privy to my father’s thoughts on that or anything else to do with how he makes his alliances.’

‘Damnation, there must be something we can do!’

‘I don’t know. But my father will be at court, and if you like, I can seek him out and tell him you want an end to the feud.’

‘Yes...’ Fulk said as he glanced around the long hall they’d just entered. ‘That would be useful.’

Alcuin looked around too and noted Galen’s other brothers playing dice on one end of a long table and, pretty well at the furthest point away from them, was Galen, his hood pulled up, poring over a book. At least that was what it looked like. Alcuin, attuned to Galen’s moods as he was, thought he looked distracted.

Octa looked up from his dice game and said, ‘Well, well, look who’s arrived, the father to be.’

Tonbert sniggered and held up his mug of beer in greeting.

‘What are you talking about?’ Fulk snapped.

‘Your wife, the fair Cwengyth, has been closeted in the ladies’ room for the better part of the morning working on squeezing your brat out,’ Octa said with a grin.

Galen’s head slowly lifted from his book to watch this exchange amongst his brothers, and Alcuin detected a flicker of disgust.

‘She’s in labour?’ Fulk said.

‘She is,’ Tonbert said and a scream ending in a groan that came from the ladies’ room confirmed his words. ‘Galen came running in with the news and to beg for help. For some

reason, he was in the garden with her when her waters broke.’

‘Is this true?’ Fulk said across the hall to Galen.

‘It is.’

Fulk closed the space between them and muttered, ‘What were you doing in the garden with my wife?’

‘I went for a walk, that’s all,’ Galen said softly.

Alcuin didn’t like the angry look in Fulk’s eye, so despite it being obvious he wanted a private word with Galen, Alcuin followed Fulk. He stopped where he felt he was close enough to intervene should it be necessary, but still look like he wasn’t eavesdropping.

Fulk dropped his voice, but he was still loud enough to be heard by Alcuin as he said, ‘Did you say anything to her of our conversation?’ He sounded half defensive and half angry.

‘I didn’t,’ Galen said, watching his brother with a worried frown before he cast a hasty look towards Alcuin.

Alcuin interpreted it as Galen asking for him to stay close.

‘Fulk... do you want this child?’ Galen said, switching his attention back to his brother.

‘What a bloody stupid question! Of course I want it.’

‘Even if it’s a girl?’

‘It won’t be.’

‘You can’t know that for certain.’

‘If it’s a girl, I’ll just get Cwengyth pregnant again till I have a son.’

Galen gave a slight nod, and his gaze dropped to the floor. Alcuin held his breath. He could tell that Galen disapproved. Damn him for being so easily readable. Fulk didn’t like it either, and he clenched his fists.

‘Devil take you, what have I said now?’ Fulk snapped.

Galen looked slowly back up at his brother and said, ‘You should be kinder to Cwengyth. Whether she gives birth to a son or a daughter, you should tell her you are pleased.’

‘I don’t want a daughter.’

‘Why not?’

‘What use are they? They can’t inherit and they can’t fight.’

Galen gave him a slight, amused smile and said, ‘What a strange world it would be if there were no women.’

‘Your world,’ Fulk said with a crack of laughter.

Alcuin breathed a silent, and thankful sigh of relief that Galen had managed to break the tension. Others might think that was Galen managing the situation and his brother’s temper, but Alcuin knew Galen better. He didn’t think about how you controlled people or situations, he merely spoke and reacted in whichever way his heart guided him.

‘Even in my world there are women.’ Galen laid his hand over his brother’s arm in a light clasp and said, ‘Fulk, she needs to be protected. She needs you more than you know.’

‘Not her! Not the proud Cwengyth.’

‘She isn’t so proud. When I came upon her in the garden, she was crying.’

‘Well, that would be a first,’ Fulk said, suddenly not at all certain of his ground.

‘How would you know?’ Galen said. ‘She knows about your burh wench too.’

‘You swore you wouldn’t tell.’

‘I didn’t. I didn’t know your woman has pock marks, nor that she squeals in the height of her passion. All of that Cwengyth told me.’

‘She didn’t, damn you!’ Fulk said and his words were nearly drowned out by another cry from the ladies’ room.

‘Fulk!’ Galen said, ‘she’s more vulnerable than you realise. If you treat her well now... treat her with consideration and honesty so she learns to trust you, then... then you might just be happy with each other. If you don’t change, then there is nothing but misery for both of you.’

‘Why should you care about that?’

‘You know me, Fulk,’ Galen said with a slight, self-deprecating laugh, ‘I was ever a soft-hearted freak.’

Fulk gave him a fearsome frown and banged his fist meditatively on the table. Alcuin held his breath, hoping the man would calm down. He was being told some tough home truths. Things no man would want to hear and that from a younger brother.

‘You’re all right,’ Fulk muttered, much to Alcuin’s surprise.

‘It doesn’t matter what I am,’ Galen said. ‘All that matters is that you do what you can to make things right between you and Cwengyth before it’s too late.’

‘Has the baby arrived?’ Hugh said as he stepped into the hall and looked around.

‘Not yet,’ Alcuin said, because he was the nearest to Hugh.

‘Mmm, it will be my heir’s first child and, if God is good, a boy who will continue my line.’

‘An important moment,’ Alcuin said, aware that the ealdorman was only giving him half his attention.

Hugh’s gaze swept from his two sons playing dice on one side to Galen and Fulk on the other, and his eyebrows rose.

‘What are those two up to? I don’t remember a time when I’ve seen them together before. They looked to be having a serious conversation and a none too comfortable one for Fulk, if I’m any judge.’

Alcuin shrugged, it wasn’t his place to divulge the contents of the conversation, least of all to Galen’s father. He was looking more puzzled by the minute, though.

‘Galen looking serious, I can understand,’ Hugh muttered. ‘But Fulk... what’s wrong with Fulk? He looks discomforted, chastened even. How is it possible that Galen can reduce his brother to this state? And apparently without trying because Galen looks as on edge as ever. He can’t even hold Fulk’s gaze.’

Alcuin was about to say that if the ealdorman really wanted his answers, he’d have to get them himself, but at that moment there was a new and high-pitched cry from the ladies’ room.

Moments later Lady Bretana emerged from the family quarters and said, ‘It’s a boy! You are a father, Fulk.’

‘A son!’ Fulk said, leaped to his feet, and went to meet his child.

## 10

The birth of a grandson and heir prompted another feast. It relieved Galen that this one revolved around Fulk so he could retire to his old seat near the end of the table. Alcuin, too, was free to decide where to sit and settled beside Galen.

‘Your father’s burh is having quite an eventful time, isn’t it?’ Alcuin said, and he had to shout to be heard over the roar of voices in the hall.

Every now and then one of the thanes would shout for quiet, get up and propose a toast. So now everyone was on the warm and friendly side of drunkenness.

‘My grandson,’ Hugh said as he launched to his feet and bellowed at the top of his voice. ‘Where is my grandson? Bring him out here.’

A cheer rose in the hall as Lady Bretana pushed back the curtain of the ladies’ room and emerged cradling a bundle wrapped in swaddling.

‘Hush now,’ she murmured. ‘The poor child needs his rest, as does his mother.’

‘This evening is a night of celebration. Hold the boy up so we may all drink to his health,’ Hugh said.

Galen noted the resigned sigh his mother gave as she held her grandson up, being careful to support his head as she did so.

‘To Alfred!’ Hugh shouted.

‘Alfred!’ The rest of the hall shouted as they raised their glasses.

The sudden shout gave the baby a fright, and he let out a high-pitched wail. So Bretana gathered him to her chest, nodded to the assembly, and slipped back out of sight.

‘Poor boy,’ Galen murmured.

‘He’ll be fine,’ Alcuin said. ‘He looks to be a healthy boy. He’s certainly got good lungs.’

‘I just wish—’ Galen stopped.

It was futile wishing his father would change and show more consideration to those weaker than himself.

‘The boy will become a thane,’ Alcuin said, ‘like his grandfather and father. Losing a bit of sleep on his first night will be as nothing to the things he will grow up to endure.’

‘You’re right, of course,’ Galen said. As the ealdorman, Hugh held his land and position through force of arms and of his own will. It had shaped him as much as his own shyness had shaped Galen, and he supposed you were never too young to begin that training. ‘I’m just tired and it’s making me overly sensitive.’

‘Do you want help?’

Galen shook his head. He would have been greatly relieved to have Alcuin’s support to get

down from the dais and to the ladies' room, but he was determined not to show weakness in his father's hall. He supposed, as he left the feast, he needed to put on a show too.

The noise from the hall was hardly lessened in the ladies' room as the dividing wall was a thin wattle screen. But there was a greater feeling of peace here, and it was considerably darker. Aside from the shapes of the beds, all Galen could make out was his mother sitting beside Cwengyth and the baby. She was lit by a flickering lamp that made her a silhouette, and she appeared to be lost in thought.

'May I join you?' Galen whispered.

'Of course,' Bretana said and indicated for him to sit beside her.

Galen examined Cwengyth, who was lying curled up on her side. Her blonde hair was loose, still damp, and pasted about her pale face.

'Is she alright?' Galen said as he eased himself down onto the edge of the pallet. It came as a relief to sit, but his insides ached even now.

'She had a difficult labour,' Bretana murmured. 'As is common for any woman with their first child. But she is young and healthy and already on the mend. She looks to be in a natural sleep with no sign of fever, but I will keep my eye on her for a while yet.'

'That is a relief.'

It was in Galen's nature to fear for people, and whenever a woman went into labour in the burh, Galen worried for her. The feeling was magnified tenfold for a member of his family, especially for Cwengyth. His mother gave him a knowing smile that made Galen blush. To hide it, Galen leaned forward and examined the wrinkled, tiny face of his new nephew, peeping out of the swaddling, fast asleep beside his mother.

'So they've named him Alfred.'

'It's a good name.'

'It will please the king. It's close to his,' Galen said and rested his hand gently on his nephew's head. It felt so small and fragile. 'Is that why they chose it?'

'It is one reason. There was some talk of calling him Willnoth, but I didn't think I could face that.'

'His death hit you hard, didn't it?' Galen said, aware that so far he'd shied away from speaking to his mother of Willnoth.

'As does the death of any of my children, but yes, it hit me harder than I'd expected. Willnoth always seemed so invincible.'

'To me too. It shook me when my father gave me that news.'

'You shouldn't be up,' Bretana said, recalled to a sense of Galen's needs. 'You should be resting.'

'I can be no more tired than you, a lot less in fact,' Galen said and wondered if his mother really did want him to rest or merely wanted to change the subject. Part of him wouldn't have resisted going to bed, he was still dog tired from his journey and yet another long day in the burh. 'You've spent the entire day overseeing a lying in.'

'It's something I'm used to,' Bretana said. 'And after our magnificent feast I'm still a little too excited to go to sleep.'

Galen nodded and paused to listen to the noise next door. It had scarcely diminished. He wouldn't be surprised if they kept going till dawn.

Bretana put out her hand to caress Galen's arm, and he twisted away out of her reach.

'Galen, what's the matter?'

Galen flushed and said, 'It's been brought to my attention that I'm breaking a Benedictine rule by allowing you to touch me.'

'Of course,' Bretana said.

Despite his words, she ran her fingers gently along the top of Galen's tonsure, the mark and permanent reminder of what he had become. Since Galen hadn't shaved it since they set out on their journey, the stubble above had grown thick, but it hadn't obliterated that circle of longer hair below.

'I'm sorry. I should have been mindful of that.'

'I don't think... I don't think I had the strength of will to repulse you before. It was a great comfort to feel your embrace,' Galen said as tears welled up in his eyes and he resolutely blinked them away. Now was not the time for a show of emotion. Now his mother had to look after Cwengyth and the baby.

'Then, despite the rules that govern your life, I'm glad I did it. And really, I am your mother, I should be able to comfort any of my children when they need it.'

'I shouldn't have to need it anymore,' Galen said embarrassed to bring it up. 'I'm a grown man now.'

'No,' Bretana said, 'you are far more grown up than when you left here, but you are still young. You may not believe me now, but one day you will understand. And you have no need to apologise for being the man you are. You are a good, kind man. No mother could ask for more from their son.'

'What about a father?' Galen said with a slight, wistful smile as he tilted his head towards the hall where yet another cheer went up. He'd hoped that, after their talk in Yarmwick, he'd be able to speak to his father more easily. But now that he was back home, he felt as helpless and tongue-tied as ever whenever he saw Hugh. His mind became a blank and he could think of nothing to say. Not that his father gave him much opportunity, anyway. He'd gone back to ignoring him.

'You will have to ask him that.'

'No, that I can't do.'

The very idea of trying to broach the subject with his father left Galen feeling shaky.

'He's had a change of heart about you.'

'Perhaps, but the change is most profound when I'm not around. When he sees me I remind him of all the reasons he came to despise me. He feels guilt, but no warmth.'

'He needs time.'

Galen wasn't convinced, but his feelings were too complex to understand himself, let alone explain to his mother. She was as patient as ever and merely folded her hands in her lap and watched him.

'You, more than any of my children, are the easiest to read,' Bretana said. 'I see your face flicker through every emotion as you considered first one problem and then the next. Now tell me, what are you thinking?'

'I have been considering the time I've spent back here, some things have changed.'

'That was to be expected.'

‘Fulk and I talked. We never talked before, and it seemed to me he was asking for my advice. Before everyone always seemed to think they knew better than me and yet now Cwengyth and even Fulk... It makes no sense.’

‘You had a chat with Cwengyth too?’

‘Twice,’ Galen said, looking down as Cwengyth murmured in her sleep. ‘Before... before I left home I wouldn’t have done it. I’d have hurried away if I’d come upon her. But she looked so sad that I couldn’t leave her alone, and after a little while... we talked.’

‘Did she tell you much?’

Galen nodded, his gaze resting in the middle distance, still deep in thought.

‘That’s impressive, Galen. I have yet to get Cwengyth to confide anything in me.’

‘She was so upset her defences were lowered. She would have spoken to you too.’

‘I’m not so sure she would have. I think, my child, you have changed far more than you realise. You were always a kind boy and everyone must have known it, but you were too young to confide in so people left you alone. Now you are grown up, and wisdom has been added to your kindness. People know instinctively they can trust you. So they will confide in you.’

‘You wouldn’t say that if you heard what Fulk said to me whilst Cwengyth was in labour.’

‘Whatever that may have been, I suspect you allayed his suspicions.’

‘Perhaps,’ Galen said and clenched his fists as a spasm of pain passed through him and he had to focus on staying upright and not letting it show. Fortunately, his mother was distracted by another murmur from Cwengyth.

‘I begin to think it was your intervention that made Fulk behave in such a gratifying way to Cwengyth when he came to meet his son,’ Bretana said.

‘Did he?’

‘He told her he was proud of her.’

‘That’s good,’ Galen said, relieved that Fulk had actually done anything he’d suggested.

‘You are a good man,’ Bretana said warmly, ‘another man might have gloated about this change you’ve wrought over your brother.’

‘He wasn’t being intentionally horrible to Cwengyth,’ Galen said and double checked that Cwengyth was still sleeping.

‘No, he was merely thoughtless,’ Bretana said. ‘You know better than most how hurtful that can be.’

Galen’s eyes flicked to his mother’s and held them for a moment. ‘Yes, it is hard to bear,’ he said softly. ‘But despite all you have said, it doesn’t explain people talking to me.’

‘You have something else about you now that you didn’t have before, aside from experience of how black life can be. You are a monk. People tend to confide in religious people.’

‘Yes,’ Galen said, considering the matter. ‘That might explain it.’

Bretana gave a brief chuckle and said, ‘At the risk of making you big-headed, my son, it has more to do with the kind of person you are than you being a monk. They haven’t confided in Brother Alcuin, although he is a charming man. And before you say that’s because he’s a stranger, neither Fulk nor Cwengyth have confided in Father Pifus either and Fulk, at least, has known him all his life.’

‘Nobody confides in Father Pifus,’ Galen said and had to speak louder due to yet another congratulatory cheer coming from the hall.

‘He is a curmudgeonly old soul, but he’s the only one we have when you aren’t around.’

‘I wish I could stay,’ Galen said, suddenly overwhelmed with a desire never to leave.

‘Do you really?’ Bretana said, searching his face.

‘Yes! No... oh I don’t know. It is home and while the stares and whispers of the thralls and my father’s people are hard to bear, it is still more comfortable than the abbey.’

‘But?’

‘I do like all the books I work with, mother, and the fact that nobody there is looking me up and down and deciding I’m not worth bothering about because I’m not a warrior.’

‘A great deal is made of warriors and we have much to be thankful to them for, but in the end I believe it will be the men of learning who will make this world a better place in which to live. You keep the light of knowledge burning and when the millennium comes with all the uncertainty that brings, it will be men like you and Alcuin who will be the most important, even if the warriors never acknowledge it.’

‘There is a great deal of talk at Yarmwick about the coming millennium and what it means to all of us. People fear the second coming and long for it in equal measure. I even heard some whispers that what happened to me was a sign of the instability the world is entering into.’

‘Do you believe that?’

‘I don’t know,’ Galen said and looked away again, watching the flickering pattern of light thrown onto the walls as he considered the question. ‘Lawlessness is increasing, there are growing bands of men and women roaming the land perpetrating every form of depravity in the belief that the end is nigh. I don’t know if that is a sign of the coming end or a reaction to the belief that the end is nigh.’

‘What of the Vikings? Surely they are a sign too?’

‘Like wolves sweeping down upon the flock,’ Galen murmured. ‘We had news in Yarmwick of a monastery that was burned to the ground by raiders and every brother there horribly killed.’

‘They have no love of God, those men. Some say they worship devils.’

‘I think, perhaps, only different gods. But it makes them hate our church all the more.’

‘You don’t think they are the hordes of the apocalypse then?’

Galen smiled at his mother and said, ‘No, not that. They are just men who see our fair land and want it for themselves.’

‘You relieve my mind.’

Galen gave her a puzzled smile and followed it with an accepting nod, happy to have been able to allay some of his mother’s fears.

Alcuin sat at a table in the long hall with his sketchbook open before him, just out of the line of a blinding ray of sunshine coming through a gap in the door. He was working on a sketch of a peregrine falcon. A multitude of images flooded his brain and he couldn't work out which to start with. Would it be the bird in full flight, its wings stretched out, as it reached forward with its fearsome talons to snatch a hapless prey out of midair, or the falcon placid, and resting after a morning of hunting.

They had given him a couple of turns with Octa's falcon. It impressed him that such a fierce creature, with such impressive muscles, and talons that gripped his arms so tight they made him wince, could weigh so little. If he closed his eyes he could scarcely believe he was holding a bird at all.

He decided to start with a drawing of the falcon in full flight. He had just drawn a couple of lines when he was distracted by a peal of laughter from the women gathered at the end of his table nearest the ladies' room. Alcuin had left Galen there, surrounded by his sisters.

They were working on some darning. Galen was ostensibly working too, but Alcuin suspected little productive was happening. That was fine. His friend needed this interlude in his life, and Galen's cheerful smile was all he wanted.

Through the open doorway, Alcuin could see Lady Bretana helping Cwengyth tend to her new son in the ladies' room, Fulk hovering beside them. It was a picture of domestic bliss.

Hugh stepped into the long hall, flooding it with light as he opened the doors and looked around. He had a disgruntled air. This was never good for the leader of a burh. Alcuin had learned to recognise that same look on his father's face and make himself scarce at those times. Alcuin wasn't sure if Hugh was feeling left out and, if he was, who he blamed for it, Galen or the new baby. Either way, he wasn't likely to put up with it.

'Octa, Tonbert,' Hugh bellowed at the pair who were at the opposite end of the hall to Alcuin, 'get off your backsides and come outside to train. And you, Fulk, you could use some sharpening up as well.'

Fulk gave him a surprised look, shrugged his shoulders, gave a slight, self-conscious smile to Cwengyth and hurried after his father who'd stomped off.

Alcuin noted the thoughtful look Lady Bretana gave her husband. Then she murmured something to Cwengyth, who nodded acceptance and went back to cooing over her son as Lady Bretana left. Alcuin checked on Galen, but he appeared oblivious to anything other than what his sisters were talking about. Since Alcuin had a strong streak of curiosity, and frequently had to chide himself for the enjoyment he got from gossip, he followed Lady Bretana out.

She made her leisurely way down the main street, past the church, the row of houses and the field inside the burh's walls and out through the main gate. A wide section of land before the battlement walls was always kept clear so that enemies couldn't sneak up unseen. They used this area of short grazed grass only for keeping livestock and as a space to train men for battle.

Hugh, his sons and thanes were already working hard. They were throwing spears at a target set at such a great distance Alcuin knew he could never hit it. Yet the men were throwing straight and true and their spears pegged with a satisfying thump into the straw bales, time and time again.

Lady Bretana settled herself on a tussock of grass beside a pile of equipment the fighters had brought with them. Alcuin sat down on the grass some distance away and took out his sketchbook. People ignored him if he looked to be absorbed in his drawings. There was plenty to inspire him too with the warriors sweating away, most stripped to their waists under a bright blue sky. The summer was turning out to be hot and dry, which after the wet winter, was a welcome relief.

It was at least a couple of hours later that Hugh had finally worked his frustrations out and shouted, 'Hold, that's enough.'

'About time,' Octa muttered rather too loudly.

'You wouldn't be struggling the way you were if you did this more often,' his father snapped and waved everyone away.

No further sign was necessary, and the men made haste to get away before Hugh could change his mind.

Alcuin thought he was unlikely to. Hugh was covered in sweat, his face was red from the combined heat and exertion, and even his hair was sodden and dripping. He made his way to the pile of equipment, picked up a bucket of water and emptied it over himself, gasping at the sudden cold. He followed that with a second bucket which he poured more slowly, tilting his head up so that the water washed over his face.

It was only then that he appeared to notice his wife.

'What do you want?' he said as he towelled himself off with his tunic.

'I thought we might talk,' Lady Bretana said.

Hugh eyed her suspiciously, but sat down beside his wife. Alcuin looked down at his book, his plummet poised and his body tensed in the effort to overhear the conversation.

'You have been out of sorts, my dear,' Bretana said as she arranged her skirts about her.

'Yes, well, we've had a bit of upheaval lately.'

'The baby.'

'And Septimus and Galen,' Hugh said with an abrupt wave of the hand as if to dismiss his troubles.

'You miss Septimus.'

'The devil I do!' Hugh growled and pulled on his tunic with more violence than was needed.

'It is natural that you should. He was closer to you even than a brother.'

'Of course he was, the damned unnatural fellow was in love with me!'

'You didn't know that and he was your right-hand man. You are bound to feel his loss and miss his counsel.'

‘I do, damn him to hell. I relied on him more than I ever relied on you. I confided in him more too. Maybe because under all that hair and muscle he was more like a woman than I realised. And knowing it, and knowing how much I needed him, and knowing how he betrayed me – Damn! Why are you bringing up such hurtful things, woman?’

‘Because you need to talk about them.’

‘No... I have no need of that. Anything but that. Best to leave well enough alone.’

‘Does that include your son?’

‘Galen?’ Hugh said and his eyes which had roved restlessly across the deserted practice grounds snapped back to Bretana’s face. ‘He avoids me as much as he ever did. He hasn’t come near me since he arrived, and even then he barely said two words.’

‘He doesn’t know how,’ Bretana said softly.

‘I took him back, I asked for his pardon. How can he think I still despise him?’

‘Don’t you?’

‘I put Septimus to death for what he did to Galen.’

‘Or for what he did to your pride.’

Hugh flinched and muttered, ‘For that too.’ Then he sank into silence.

Alcuin risked glancing up at the pair and saw the thoughts flicker across Hugh’s face. There was something Galen had inherited from his father, if nothing else.

‘Maybe I don’t know how to approach him either,’ Hugh said.

‘Well, you will have to make the first move, for Galen will never be able to do that,’ Bretana said as she looked away from her husband out to the fields beyond.

‘Why not?’ Hugh shouted, all his frustration coming out in that cry.

‘Think about it! Remember how you treated him as a boy and try to imagine what that kind of treatment would do to a gentle soul like Galen.’

Hugh scowled deeply as if searching his memory and shook his head, unable to understand.

Bretana sighed and said, ‘I don’t know if Galen is gentle because I kept him by my side for such a long time, or whether I kept him by me because he was so gentle. Either way, I could not have done it any other way. If I had pushed him away from me too he surely would have struggled even more, for your actions towards him always hurt him deeply.’

‘I shouldn’t have disowned him.’

‘No, but to be honest, you never owned him.’

‘What?’ Hugh gasped.

Alcuin held his breath, as surprised as the ealdorman to hear this from Lady Bretana.

‘Oh Hugh, you are a very fine man, big, handsome, strong and clever. You are the kind of man any boy would want as a father, and Galen was no different. But to you, looking at him from your perfect height, he was a nonentity and whenever he tried to claim some of your attention, some of your favour, you would lose patience with him and push him away. You humiliated him before his brothers and your men.’

‘No, I didn’t... when did I do that?’ Hugh said and wiped the gathering sweat away from his brow with his sleeve.

‘Always! Every time Galen tried to speak to you. His hesitancy and his shyness would put you out of temper. You’d bat him away, sometimes throw him bodily out of your path. The more often you did that, the worse Galen’s behaviour became before you and the less able he

was to look you in the eye and to stand up to your rough treatment.'

'I don't remember,' Hugh said with a troubled frown.

'That was half the problem,' Bretana said, turning back to him and leaning forward for emphasis. 'Then, when Galen turned seven, that was when he realised, once and for all, that he held no worth to you at all.'

'When he was seven?'

Bretana gave him a sad smile and said, 'When all the other boys turned seven you brought them here and started teaching them how to fight.'

'Of course, but Galen... he couldn't possibly be a warrior.'

'He didn't know that, and you never told him either. So on his seventh birthday he came here, and he waited, and he came back day after day for weeks hanging about the weapons hoping you'd spot him but you never did. So finally he gave up, and he went away, and he avoided you.'

'He was angry?'

'He was ashamed.'

'Ashamed?'

Hugh sounded surprised, but to Alcuin it made sense. Galen seldom spoke of his father, but when he did it was to reflect on his wisdom and his strength. He also knew Galen didn't get angry. He almost seemed incapable of it.

'He admired you,' Bretana said. 'He still does. The fact that you didn't value him made him believe that he wasn't worthy. That was why he could never look you in the eye.'

'I didn't realise.'

'No, his inability to look you in the eye was one of the things that annoyed you most about him. I knew then that it wouldn't do Galen good to keep him anywhere near your orbit. To be constantly spurned by one you admire isn't good for anyone, so I determined that he'd become a monk and I set him to learning.'

'When he was seven?'

'Yes, and that he excelled at. I sometimes thought I should send him away immediately. Youngest sons are often sent to the monastery at the age of seven and considering what happened to him, I curse myself for hanging onto him and for not wanting to let him go.'

'Mmm, perhaps we both let him down,' Hugh said as he placed both hands on his knees and his face wrinkled into thought. 'But what you did, you did out of love. I have no such excuse.'

'Do you see now why if you want to talk to Galen you have to approach him for he will never put himself so far forward as to approach you.'

'Yes, I understand.'

'If the two of you could talk and come to some sort of an understanding, it would make me very happy.'

'You never tried to reconcile me to Galen before, why now? Why didn't you talk to me when he was seven?'

'Would you have taken him for a warrior and trained him?'

'He was far too small and light. He always will be.'

'So would you have listened to my other representations, my pleas for you to acknowledge your little, fearful son?'

‘No,’ Hugh said flatly. ‘I don’t suppose I would have.’

Alcuin hastily looked back down at his book as Hugh stood up, stretched and looked around. It was the first time he appeared to notice Alcuin, and he gave him a wry smile before he nodded farewell to his wife and strode back to the burh.

Lady Bretana stayed where she was, looking across the training grounds to the fields of crops beyond. Alcuin wondered whether now would be the best time to leave, when she said, ‘Come and join me, Brother Alcuin.’

‘Ah, yes, thank you,’ Alcuin said and wondered what his reception would be like. At least it would allow him to stretch his legs.

He sat down a respectable distance from Lady Bretana, his ankles crossed in front of him, and said, ‘I’m sorry for listening in. Curiosity is a fault I am still struggling to overcome.’

Lady Bretana looked him over thoughtfully, and he was struck by the spark of amusement in her eye.

‘I suspect it’s your curiosity that allows you to produce your wonderful drawings.’

Alcuin found himself blushing at the compliment.

‘I also suspect that it was your curiosity that led you to befriend my son, isn’t that so?’

‘It was a part of the reason,’ Alcuin said. ‘But once I knew his story better, I felt the way they treated him was unfair.’

‘No doubt that is why Galen is so fond of you. I am tremendously pleased that Galen has a male friend. He has never had one before.’

‘Oh,’ Alcuin said, although a moment’s reflection made that obvious. ‘He didn’t get on with Father Pifus either, he told me that.’

‘Father Pifus is an older man, and a teacher. I had hoped he would also be a mentor, but I’m afraid he is bad tempered and it’s only getting worse with age.’

‘Maybe he should be replaced. He seems set on stirring up trouble.’

‘Until now that would have been difficult. Pifus’ father was a thane in Galen’s grandfather’s army. He died protecting Hugh the elder. In gratitude to him, Hugh the elder made sure all of his children were properly taken care of and educated. They sent Pifus to the local monastery where he trained to be a priest. He was in his early twenties when the current priest of Thorpe Parva died, so Hugh the elder called him back to be our priest. I’m afraid he has been causing trouble ever since.’

‘How so?’ Alcuin said.

‘He has a rigid and unyielding view of the word of God and how it should be enforced. Galen frequently disagreed with him, as did many other men. But the disagreements between Galen and Pifus were fiercest.’

‘Because Galen has strong views of his own,’ Alcuin said, jumping in.

‘He does, although you surprise me now. Galen usually keeps his thoughts to himself. Even with Father Pifus, he only raised a few objections.’

‘He may not say much,’ Alcuin said, grinning at Lady Bretana, ‘but I can read his face like a book.’

She laughed, apparently amused by how pleased Alcuin was with himself.

‘You are right, of course. That was also why I knew Galen disagreed with Father Pifus, and why Father Pifus disliked him even before...’ she trailed off and waved her hand, brushing the

memory away.

Galen stood at the entrance to the church and looked up at the tower looming over him. He had his arms clutched to his body as pain rippled through him, a reflection of his inner disquiet. It was early morning; the sky was streaked with pale yellow clouds and the air carried the scent of wood smoke and cool earth. It should have been restful. But his encounter with Father Pifus had disturbed him profoundly. The thought of confronting him again was equally terrifying.

Galen knew that Father Pifus was a creature of habit and would be praying in the church. Shortly after that he'd head off to his small kitchen garden where he grew sufficient food to keep himself fed in most years. He had the advantage over the other people of the burh that he didn't have to pay a tithe of his produce to Ealdorman Hugh. So Galen didn't have much time if he was to get his meeting.

He needed to talk to the priest and try to find out what his position was. No, that wasn't strictly correct. He knew Father Pifus was of the same opinion as many theologians on sodomy and those engaged in it, whether voluntarily or otherwise.

What he really wanted was just to talk to Father Pifus and at least reconcile him and his father. If he didn't know the man as well as he did, he'd hope to shift him onto friendlier ground about his own situation too. But hours spent in debate when he was a boy had taught Galen that Father Pifus would never budge. He had an absolute world view.

Galen looked at the weathered grey wooden door and the solid iron latch before him. With a single push he'd be in and on Father Pifus' home ground. Trying to gain some... He supposed he wanted to regain some dignity as well.

He'd never had much when he was a boy, but he felt he'd lost it all after he was attacked. Being taken back into the family had restored some of his self-esteem. Perhaps he wanted to reconcile with Father Pifus for the same reason. If not that, then to at least not be chased away, with his tail between his legs, by an old man with a stick.

He'd battled with Father Pifus all his life but, in the quiet of the church, when there was only the two of them, Galen had been able to dissent. He'd felt on firm ground about it too. He'd never doubted his mind the way he doubted his body and his fortitude. He was confident about his interpretations of theology, and therefore he'd voiced his concerns to Father Pifus. The priest had not liked that.

The church smelled musty at this hour and was darker than the last time Galen had visited but Father Pifus was where he expected to see him, lying on the floor his arms stretched out in supplication towards the altar. He was praying in his familiar muttered monotone where one

word blended rapidly and seamlessly into the next.

It wouldn't have mattered if a company of thanes had barged in at this moment and demanded that he stop on pain of death, Father Pifus would keep praying. Such was his level of devotion. Galen didn't doubt the priest's sincerity, but he had often wondered at the harshness of his interpretation of the word of God. In the priest's opinion there was a clear demarcation between right and wrong. His favourite verse of the bible was the line about plucking out your own eye if it led you to sin.

Being back in the priest's presence made Galen freeze, as he had done so many times when he angered Father Pifus. What he had disliked most in his student, was that he'd never been able to accept his teaching as absolute and correct. Which was precisely what Galen would do again.

Galen offered up a prayer of his own now, pleading via the face of Christ painted on the wall, to help him with this encounter.

Father Pifus' voice fell silent. He got to his feet with the aid of his stick and crossed himself three times.

'Father Pifus?'

Galen spoke so softly he was afraid he wasn't heard over the energetic dusting the priest was giving his robe with his free hand.

'Who's there?' Father Pifus said and spun round. 'You! I told you never to enter my church again!'

Galen, trembling so much he might fall over, half raised a shaky hand in greeting.

'How dare you? How dare you disobey me?' Father Pifus said and stepped forward.

His posture was so menacing, and his voice held so much rage that Galen took a step backwards. But he'd prepared his mind for this encounter and said, breathless as he was with fear, 'Would you deny me forgiveness?'

'I would,' the priest said and his jaw set stubbornly.

'Would you keep me from the church and the kingdom of heaven even though I beg for your mercy?'

'You committed a mortal sin. There can be no forgiveness for one such as you. Even your body tells you this, you remain twisted and in pain because you deserve it.'

'No,' Galen gasped. 'How can you be so cruel?'

'Because what is right is right and what is wrong is wrong. All you can look forward to is eternal punishment.'

'The Lord says if a man is truly repentant in his last hour, God will forgive him.'

'But you are not repentant,' Father Pifus said and stepped up so close to Galen that he could smell his sour breath as the priest looked deep into his eyes. 'You don't think you did anything wrong.'

'Septimus attacked me,' Galen said and took another step back. 'I fought with every ounce of my being. I resisted with every sinew, but I couldn't... I couldn't stop him.'

'Then you sinned,' Father Pifus said, 'and you must pay.'

'Please, Father, don't do this. Don't lock me out of this church and out of your heart.'

'My heart? You were a troublesome child. Your theology was always mistaken. I tried to teach you the way of the Lord and you resisted me. See where that has led you.'

‘Do you think I was so wrong I brought Septimus’ attack down upon myself? No, how can you be so nonsensical? Are you saying that the three men he murdered after me were even greater sinners than I was? Are you saying they deserved to die by the hands of a sodomite?’

‘You see?’ Father Pifus hissed and raised his walking stick threateningly. ‘There you go again, twisting my words.’

‘I’m not trying to twist them, I’m trying to understand,’ Galen said, took another step back and bumped into the wall of the church.

‘You never understood!’ Father Pifus said and his stick whistled down on Galen.

Galen twisted away too late and lost his footing as a powerful blow struck his temple. He slid down the wall, momentarily blinded by the pain.

‘I’ll show you,’ Father Pifus said, as he undid the knot of the rope he used as his belt and looped it about Galen’s neck.

‘No,’ Galen gasped, and he grabbed at the belt with both hands. It was a brown woollen rope with some give, so he managed to get his fingers under it as Father Pifus pulled it tight. ‘What are you doing?’

‘I’ll show you,’ Father Pifus said, and he turned, pulling the belt over his shoulder and forcing Galen to his feet as he frantically held on and pushed to get at what little air he could. ‘I’ll show that damned Ealdorman Hugh what he should have done.’

‘Please, Father Pifus,’ Galen said as he was dragged towards the stairs that led up the tower.

‘How dare he shout at me in my own church during my sermon,’ Father Pifus said as he pulled Galen up the stairs.

Galen struggled to break free but the blow to his head left him woozy and the fall and being dragged had wrenched at his guts and induced a pain so intense he feared he might throw up. All he could do was hang grimly onto the rope around his neck and prevent himself from being throttled as Father Pifus took a hold of it again and took step after step.

‘No,’ Galen gasped through the gap he maintained but which tightened every time the priest hauled himself up and loosened as Father Pifus stopped for breath before stepping up again, dragging Galen with him.

‘This is it,’ Father Pifus muttered as he reached the first landing. ‘I’ve had enough of you and your family taking the high ground.’

The rope was pulled so tight Galen could scarcely get any air. There was a drumming sound in his ears and the world faded in and out in disturbing black blotches.

‘God will understand,’ Father Pifus said, clearly not expecting a reply from Galen who was twisting about trying to get free.

Why couldn’t he get away from this old man? How could he have got so weak? Galen thought as he kicked out, trying to trip the priest.

And then they were out into the light. Galen glimpsed a cloud-streaked sky as he snatched a breath before he was hauled forward by the belt.

‘Now I will show them,’ Father Pifus said as he pushed Galen against the low wall that surrounded the church tower. ‘Look you!’ Father Pifus shouted to the burh below. ‘This is how you deal with a sinner.’

‘No, Father Pifus don’t!’ Galen gasped as the priest grabbed him by the front of his robe and heaved.

Galen twisted about frantically, trying to get away, and swung about in the priest's grip so that for a moment he was looking straight down the vertical drop of the tower. Time slowed and a detachment that had come over him when he'd been fighting Septimus washed over him again. In that moment, he noticed the people standing below, their heads flung back, their mouths all making that same o shape of surprise.

Then it was gone, and Galen flapped about with all his might to turn and face Father Pifus.

'Don't do this,' he gasped, and tried to pull the cord around his neck away. Father Pifus had lost his grip on it in his rush to push Galen over the wall.

'You must pay for what you did,' Father Pifus shouted, putting all his rage into his effort to hoist Galen's feet off the ground.

'Pifus, stop!' A mighty roar rose from below.

Galen recognised it as his father, but only in a detached part of his brain as he flailed about, trying to get a grip on Father Pifus so he wouldn't fall even if the priest managed to tip him over the edge. His fingertips brushed the man's face but got knocked away. The corner of the wall was digging into his back.

'Please God!' he cried and with every ounce of his remaining strength he reached forward again. This time his palm landed flat on the priest's head and Galen dug his fingers in. 'For the sake of your immortal soul, don't do this, please!' Galen cried.

Father Pifus let out a howl like an injured beast, let go of Galen, collapsed to the ground and curled up into a ball. Galen slid down the inside of the wall, gasping for air and trying his best not to let out a similar cry of pain.

Hugh bounded up the last few steps and, without slowing, aimed a mighty kick at the priest. He connected with his belly and the priest bounced with the force of the blow and rolled up against the wall, wheezing as Hugh prepared to kick him again.

'Don't,' Galen said, raising his hand in supplication. 'Please.'

'That bastard was going to throw you off my bloody tower,' Hugh roared. 'The least he deserves is to have the same happen to him.'

'He doesn't deserve that,' Galen said. The pain in his gut had grown so great he could barely speak, but he couldn't let his father murder a priest. 'Make him go away.'

'He'll be permanently gone if I toss him over the side,' Hugh snapped.

'Galen!' Alcuin cried as he appeared at the top of the steps, flanked by Fulk and Octa. 'Thank God! Are you alright?'

The sight of him made Galen feel infinitely better.

Alcuin hurried to his side, but Galen turned back to his father, fearing what he might do.

'Please, send him to a monastery,' Galen whispered. 'He's not good for the burh, nor is he a good priest, but he doesn't deserve to be put to death for doing what he believed was right.'

Hugh shook his head and turned to examine Father Pifus. He had his eyes shut tight, and his lips were moving in a silent prayer. To Galen he looked like a man in torment of the soul. He realised that only part of that was because of what had just happened. Father Pifus had never been comfortable with his role.

'Alright,' Hugh said. 'Fulk, Octa, see to the priest. I will help Brother Alcuin with Galen. After all, I've done it before.' He said the last with a grim smile.

'I'm sorry,' Galen whispered as Alcuin and Hugh slowly hoisted him to his feet. 'I have

caused yet more chaos for your people to gossip about.'

'At least this time I won't blame you,' Hugh said back to looking grave. Then he nodded to Alcuin that he was ready to begin the slow walk that would get Galen to the hall.

Galen wasn't sure how many days he'd spent in bed. Time had become as meaningless and insubstantial as mist. Reality was suffering the same fate as faces loomed up like full moons, burbled at him and then waned back into darkness.

For the first time in a comfortable and timeless eternity, Galen felt the solidity of the pallet beneath him. The room no longer looked misted up and filled in soft pastels, it was just the right variety of shades of brown. And the sunlight streaming through the garden door looked like sunlight, not sparkling elf dust.

Alcuin's face appeared, surprisingly suddenly, right in front of him and creased into a grin. 'How do you feel today?'

'I can understand you,' Galen said and a benevolent feeling like he'd achieved some wondrous miracle washed over him.

'Thank God for that! I fear I was rather overenthusiastic in dosing you with Brother Benesing's strong medicine. Although I wasn't sure if it was that or your injuries that left you blank and drooling. On top of that,' Alcuin said, dropping his voice to a whisper even though the room seemed to be empty, 'everyone is treating me like I'm a healer and asking for my advice on how to look after you. It's been quite a burden.'

'Poor Alcuin,' Galen said and meant it more sincerely than he ever meant anything. The medicine was clearly still clinging to the fringes of his mind.

'I deserve that pity,' Alcuin said as he took hold of Galen's shoulders and helped him to sit upright. 'I will hand you over to your mother and sisters to feed you and then I will be back with your book. Now that you have returned to us, you'll want something to keep your mind occupied.'

'Of course,' Galen said as he wistfully watched Alcuin hurry off.

It still felt like a dream when his food was brought to him, but at least he could talk to everyone as normal and slowly the detachment faded and he was fully back and present. At which time Alcuin reappeared and the two of them moved into the main part of the hall and spent a couple of hours discussing their forthcoming work for the king. Galen felt like Alcuin was doing this merely to distract him, rather than for any absolute need to prepare.

Alcuin glanced up from the page, spotted Hugh and said, 'Your father. You should speak to him.'

Before Galen could ask Alcuin to stay he rushed off again. Galen watched his father dubiously as he approached. His face was impossible to read, so Galen couldn't tell if he was angry about the latest incident.

He couldn't remain seated though, so slowly stood up and realised with a pang that he'd gone back to gazing at the table and his book, rather than making eye contact with his father. His father's heavy hand landed on his shoulder and made Galen jump. Hugh paused, his eyebrows raised in surprise at that reaction. Galen barely managed to keep his breathing even as he faced down his father. Hugh gave him a slight puzzled smile and squeezed his shoulder.

'Sit,' Hugh murmured and settled on the opposite bench so they had the table between them.

Galen nodded and sat back down, risking a glance at his father as he did.

'How do you feel?'

It was a neutral question and Galen could sense that his father had dipped his head to get a better view of his face, so Galen looked up again and made an attempt at a smile.

'I am fine, thank you. How... how is Father Pifus?'

'Gone,' Hugh said with a wave of his hand. 'I did as you asked and banished him to a monastery. We will have to make do without a priest for a while. I have sent a message to the bishop letting him know that we need a new one.'

'Is Father Pifus alright? He must be furious.'

Hugh shrugged and said, 'I don't know what you said to him before I got there, but he never said a word to me or any of the others after that. He appeared more broken than angry when he left.'

'He didn't say a word?'

'If I was to guess, I'd say he's taken a vow of silence. Not that I was interested in finding out. He has been a thorn in my side ever since I took over from your grandfather. It is a relief to see the back of him.'

Galen nodded, he had to admit he felt the same, although he also pitied Father Pifus and he knew his father didn't. Now he looked around and realised that the hall was empty aside from the two of them. He doubted he'd ever seen it that way before.

His father must have read his face because he said, 'I ordered them all out.'

'Why?'

'So we could talk in comfort.'

Galen blinked at his father. None of their conversations had ever been what he would describe as comfortable. But it was reassuring. Apparently he wasn't about to be scolded.

'Brother Alcuin said that if I want a proper conversation with you, it will have to be just the two of us.'

'Did he say that?'

'I was complaining that you had yet to approach me. On top of that, you are seldom alone. I had forgotten how much time you spent with the womenfolk, and how well you get on with them. And if it wasn't them, you were occupied with Brother Alcuin.'

'I see,' Galen said and wondered whether his father was after an apology. It didn't seem like that was his aim.

'Don't get me wrong, I'm glad you're enjoying yourself,' Hugh said. 'And I'm proud that you will be working on a codex for the king. It wasn't what I had in mind when I showed the king your book of hours. I was merely proud of the quality of the work. The king was impressed too. And whilst the king admired the beautiful illustrations produced by Brother Alcuin, I was

struck by how fine the text itself was. All those letters the same size and straight in their rows and easy to read. It was that which made me tell the king it was my son who had done all the lettering.'

'The abbot told us you'd shown the book of hours to the king,' Galen said, examining his father in wonder. He really did look proud, and his eyes had a warm glow. It was something Galen had never seen.

'Yes, well, my words made Aethelred prick up his ears and demand to know where the codex came from. It was a short step from there to arranging for you two monks to travel to his court to produce another such fine manuscript for the king himself,' Hugh said. 'Aethelred could never stand for any of his nobles to have finer possession than he has himself.'

Galen nodded, happy that his father was pleased.

Hugh's eyes fell upon Galen's book and he pulled it towards himself and flipped it around so he could see what was written in it.

'Is this a project for the abbey?' he said, jabbing the page with his finger.

'It's my workbook,' Galen said. 'Mother had it made for me a long time ago. I used it for my studies.'

'I see. I think you also used to scribble in the margins of my record books, not so?'

'I did sometimes write in your record books.'

'I thought it might be you. I come across jottings now and then. It's good of you to own up to it, not that it really matters,' Hugh said as he closed the book and rested his big hand on the cover. 'You're looking better, rested. I suspect you'll be leaving soon.'

'Yes,' Galen said as his eyes flicked briefly up to his father's face and then down to his book again. Would his father be relieved once he'd gone?

'Do you know when you're going?'

'Alcuin will decide.'

'Not you?'

Galen wished that on this occasion he could say he made the decisions. His father would doubtless prefer it.

'Alcuin won't budge till he thinks I've rested enough. He says I'll push myself to leave before I'm ready.'

'He's probably right. I hope it isn't me making you feel you should go?'

Galen shook his head in quick denial, but he wasn't sure his father believed him.

'You're still going by the name of Galen, nothing more though.'

'Does that anger you?' Galen said shocked sometimes at how he blurted out questions that might offend, just because of his unruly curiosity.

'I don't understand why. You could be Galen, son of Hugh again, after all.'

'I took my vows simply as Galen. It's the name people know me by nowadays.'

'And you won't change it,' Hugh said as a statement of fact.

Galen shrugged.

'I'm sorry, I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable. Searching my memory, I realise I've done this to you all your life,' Hugh said.

Galen looked up in surprise and searched for something, anything, to say.

Hugh gave a wry smile at his silence and said, 'You haven't asked me about Septimus's trial.'

'No,' Galen said, as dismay filled him. He really didn't want to talk about Septimus.

'Don't you want to know what happened to him?'

'You... you killed him, didn't you?'

'He was tried, I showed all the evidence of what he did to the world. Then he was emasculated, hung, drawn and quartered.'

Galen shuddered, despite what Septimus had done to him and the other men it was a humiliating and painful way to go.

'It must have been hard for you to sit through all of that.'

Hugh nodded, and his face took on a look of rueful introspection.

'I had my anger to drive me through. But it left me feeling as sick as a dog afterwards, yes. I see it brings you no gratification either.'

'I am relieved. I needn't fear him coming after me again. But... I was never good at watching torture.'

'I have little taste for it myself. I believe the householders of the burh and the families of the murdered men got some benefit from it. Although their eyes told me what their mouths could not. They hold me responsible for the deaths of their sons, too.'

Galen looked up into his father's eyes, trying to read something there, trying to say something, but it wouldn't come.

Hugh gave a twisted smile and said, 'You blame me too.'

Galen didn't. He blamed nobody but Septimus, although he doubted his father would believe that. His father would have held onto his anger if their roles had been reversed and people usually saw the world through their own lens.

'What's done is done. We can no more unravel time and retie it to suit ourselves than we can stop the sun from rising. Pray forgiveness from God, if you feel you need it, and move on.'

Hugh gave him a stunned look.

'That is such sensible advice. And so much more to the point than the platitudes and absolution Father Pifus mouthed. Thank you, Galen, that means a lot coming from you.'

'It does?'

'We have misunderstood each other for a long time, haven't we? No, that isn't fair. You probably have an accurate knowledge of me and my ways. Although, if your mother is to be believed, you were once filled with admiration for me, till I extinguished it.'

Galen flushed and muttered, 'You didn't extinguish it. You are a very great man.'

'Why? Because I roar and fight and manoeuvre my enemies in such a way that I stay ahead of them?'

'And you out think them.'

'If you have enough physical strength, an ounce of wit and a little training anyone can do what I've done. Fulk is a fair way towards that now, and Willnoth would have managed it too.' Galen gave a noncommittal nod, so Hugh said, 'Your mother tells me you think you lack value in my eyes.'

'Oh,' Galen said in a soft voice filled with dismay. He really didn't want to hear this from his father.

'Is she right?' Hugh asked.

Galen gave a quick uncomfortable shrug and said, 'You were ever good at taking a man's

measure. Many's the time when your pronouncements about people proved to be right. I thought... I thought you took my measure and found me wanting.'

'And by the evidence of your own experience that had to mean that you were of little worth?'

'Yes,' Galen murmured.

'In what way were you lacking?'

Galen gave him a half laugh, wondering why he had to enumerate the obvious, but he said, 'I'm not strong, I can't fight and I can't bring myself to speak up in a room full of men, the only thing I can... could do was run fast.'

'Could you?'

Galen flushed and gave a quick nod.

'I see,' Hugh said. 'It's impeccable logic, I suppose, and that's what theologians are good at. But in this instance I could never have been more mistaken in my assessment of you.'

'Really?'

'You are right, if I'd thought about it, and I'm afraid my cardinal sin was that I didn't think about it, I wouldn't have thought much of you. In that, I erred. You may not be big nor have physical strength, but I've come to realise that you are strong in your own way.'

'No. How can you say that?' Galen whispered. 'Please... you don't have to tell me lies to make me feel better. With any family there are favourite children and children their parents can't like.'

'And children their parents don't understand. Boy, you have a great deal of strength and I only realised it when I was facing Septimus in the court. He was a big man, powerful in every way, but once he was exposed as a sodomite and a murderer he fell apart. He could not keep his spirits up, nor his dignity. He collapsed.'

'He knew he was going to die.'

'That's true, but he showed me something important. He showed me that a man I admired for his towering strength, could not go through what you went through. The pain, the suffering and the rejection should have been enough to finish you. If anyone had asked me if you could weather such trials I would have said, unhesitatingly, no. Yet through it all you kept going and you kept your dignity. And now I even discover that you are observant and wise.'

Galen blinked in surprise at his father.

Hugh gave a bark of a laugh and said, 'I suspect we will always find it difficult to communicate, me the man of action and you a man of letters, but know this, I will never again spurn you and I respect what you have become.'

'You do?' Galen said and felt like he'd strayed back into the surreal world of the overmedicated.

'Oh yes, and I expect to see you go places, my boy, to see the world and produce some magnificent works.'

'I would rather not travel,' Galen said with a slight, embarrassed smile.

'Then stay in one place. Either way, the world will know you as a great scholar one day and they will shake their heads and wonder how it could be that the great Galen could have the mere Hugh for a father.'

'Now you're being absurd.'

'Perhaps, but I hope I have let you know, finally, that I believe you have the capacity for

greatness and that is all a father could wish for.'

Galen flushed with gratification and searched his mind frantically for something to say while Hugh watched him with benevolent amusement.

'So what have you been writing?' Hugh asked as he flipped Galen's book open to where it had been before.

'It's an acrostic.'

'What on earth is that?'

'It's a poem,' Galen said and pointed a trembling finger at the text. 'The first line sets the form of the poem, each next line has to start with the letters of the sentence of the first line.'

'It sounds complicated.'

'It's a challenge... a test for the brain.'

'Like a riddle.'

'Yes... a bit.'

'And you do these often, do you?'

'Not for a long time, not since... since I left home.'

'Why not?'

'My mind... my mind has been very unsettled,' Galen said, his eyes fixed on the page, unwilling to go further into a reason that was painfully obvious and upsetting for both of them.

'I expect they also kept you too busy for that at the abbey,' Hugh said

'Yes,' Galen said, thankful to be on safer ground.

'And you've been working on books of hours ever since, have you?'

'When I first arrived, they set me to copying out contracts and wills, records for nobles, two copies of each. But the abbot liked my lettering well enough to give me more interesting things to do, so after a while I went on to copying books. I've written out a life of Saint Cuthbert and some theological arguments, but one day I want—'

Galen cut himself off, aware that he was rattling on and embarrassed to be revealing so much to his father.

'What do you want?'

'I'd like to write a book of my own one day.'

'Really?' Hugh said and looked even more impressed. 'You could do that?'

'I think so.'

'What would you write about?'

'I don't know yet... maybe a complex acrostic, or a history like the Venerable Bede's.'

'Now that would be impressive.'

Galen looked up and smiled fleetingly at his father. 'I need to study a bit longer before I'll be allowed to attempt such a thing, but I hope... I hope one day I'll be considered able for such a task.'

'I have no doubts on the matter,' Hugh said and grinned at Galen. 'The more I hear the more I am convinced that you, my strangest son, will achieve more in the world to be remembered for than either I or your more warrior like brothers ever will.'

Galen sat opposite Alcuin, who had his head bowed over his book and an expression of intense concentration on his face. It was rare that he had an opportunity to observe Alcuin so closely. At the abbey they sat further apart and Galen had his own work to do. But without Brother Ranig glaring down at his scribes to ensure they kept working, Galen had the leisure to watch a master at his craft. Alcuin would laugh to hear himself described that way, but it was true.

Alcuin often came across as happy-go-lucky. He didn't worry about every little detail as Galen did. But when it came to his illustrating, he gained an intensity that Galen saw nowhere else. He could also focus for hours at a time, lost in his world of designs and colours. It was impossible for Galen. His mind flickered all over the place, and he would often be distracted from one thought as his mind alighted on something else.

It was a surprise therefore when Alcuin looked up and examined Galen with his usual friendly, open gaze.

'You're looking a lot better. You even have some colour.'

'I've been outside more here than we manage at the abbey.'

'That's true. And they've fed you well and you've had plenty of time to spend with your family.'

'I should have spent more time with you. I'm sorry that I left you to your own devices so much here.'

Alcuin laughed and said, 'I've been perfectly content. What has pleased me most is how well you've fitted back in. As it turns out, your current position could not be better. You look happier and more relaxed than I've ever seen you.'

A sense of resignation settled over Galen. He knew what was coming next.

'I am fully rested now. It's true.'

'And you've had a good long time with your family.'

'I have. It has put my fears to rest for both my heart and my mind,' Galen said, and watched Alcuin grapple with what he must say next. Galen couldn't help him, he couldn't be the one to say it.

'I think it's time we resume our journey,' Alcuin said.

Galen practically squirmed under Alcuin's serious examination. His friend knew how much of a blow his pronouncement was, and he was checking to see how worried Galen was by it.

To reassure him, Galen nodded and forced a smile. 'Of course, we mustn't keep the king waiting.'

‘You have shown great restraint in not hurrying us off already,’ Alcuin said with a laugh.

‘I do worry about what the king must think of us, but it has been good to be home,’ Galen said and this time his smile held genuine warmth.

Alcuin was apparently reassured, closed his book and said, ‘I’d best find your father and get the cart made ready. We can leave tomorrow morning.’

The suddenness of the decision almost made Galen cry out and beg to stay. But he said nothing as he watched Alcuin head outside. It was good to be back, but it wasn’t home anymore. His family was, thankfully, still here and still welcoming, but his life and his home were elsewhere. He’d been a guest. A more welcome one than he’d expected, but a guest nonetheless.

Now, he had to make his own preparations to leave, and part of that included some unfinished business. As had been his habit growing up, Galen knew exactly where all the womenfolk were. His mother and sisters were in the kitchen. Cwengyth was in the garden with little baby Alfred.

It seemed to him that Cwengyth was happier now that she had given birth to a son. She spent more time with the other women than she had before, and Galen had even seen her smile once at Fulk. It gave him hope.

He pushed himself to his feet, using the table for support, and decided that he’d go and see Cwengyth and find out exactly how she was doing. If he could further aid her integration into the family, he would try his best to do so.

Galen hadn’t had much chance to get near Cwengyth since the birth of her son, partly because she’d kept to her bed and partly because there was a permanent cluster of well-wishers about her, but since they were about to leave, he had to make his approach now.

So Galen stepped out into the scented and flower filled garden and looked around. He spotted Alfred’s wicker basket set on the grass under the dappled shade of an apple tree beside the rose bower and headed towards it.

Cwengyth was inside on the bench feeding Alfred as Galen approached. She looked like the image of idealised motherhood, surrounded as she was by an arch of pink roses, with a sky blue dress and a blond little baby held in her arms. Galen wished Alcuin could see this. It was the perfect embodiment of the madonna and child. Cwengyth smiled as she saw Galen, which added to the angelic vision.

‘How is little Alfred?’ Galen said.

‘Hungry as ever,’ Cwengyth said and patted the space beside her. ‘You can hold him if you like.’

‘Oh no,’ Galen said as he settled somewhat more distantly from Cwengyth than she’d indicated. ‘I might drop him.’

‘Everyone fears that at first. I did too.’

‘I just don’t have much strength,’ Galen said, flushing with embarrassment.

As her son had stopped suckling and was smacking his lips contentedly, Cwengyth tightened the swaddling about Alfred, placed him in his basket and pulled it to be between the two of them. Then she shifted a little closer to Galen, gently took hold of his left arm and straightened it out. She worked her way down to his fist, encased in its glove, and eased open his fingers.

‘You shouldn’t hold your arm so, else one day it will freeze there and you will lose the use of it.’

Galen couldn’t tell her about the pain that shot through his body as Cwengyth pulled his arm outwards, but it was all he could do not to wrench it out of her hands and curl it back against his body.

‘You’re probably right,’ he said tightly and reflected that he’d remind her he shouldn’t touch women if she tried again.

‘I’m sorry if I hurt you,’ Cwengyth said and let go of his arm. ‘It wasn’t my intention, especially as I owe you a great deal.’

Galen shook his head, but couldn’t suppress the flush that rose to his cheeks, embarrassed to be thanked by the beautiful Cwengyth.

‘You spoke to Fulk, didn’t you?’ Cwengyth said.

‘He spoke to me first.’

‘Did he tell you he didn’t like me?’

‘Not like that,’ Galen said. ‘But you have worked so long to keep men away that you did the same to him.’

‘He has been as kind as he can be since Alfred’s birth and I have never liked him more than I do now.’

‘I hope it will last.’

‘I dare say it won’t, he’s over the moon about Alfred, but I’m sure I’ll do something to annoy him and drive him back to his wench’s arms at some point.’

‘What will you do then?’ Galen said, surprised by how calmly Cwengyth spoke of her husband’s infidelity.

‘I’ll work to bring him back. Your mother has given me some excellent advice on that head.’

‘You spoke to my mother?’

‘She took me in hand,’ Cwengyth said, a smile playing about her lips. ‘She really is very wise.’

Galen gave a relieved sigh and said, ‘Now that I know my mother has taken you under her wing I can rest easy that all will be well.’

Cwengyth’s smile broadened, and she said, ‘You have a great deal of faith in her.’

‘She has proven herself to me year after year. You wait and see, everything will be better for you from now on.’

‘I believe it will be,’ Cwengyth said.

Galen felt certain he was grinning like an idiot because he was so relieved that she was finally settling in. He tried to fix this image in his mind of Cwengyth with the pink roses behind her like a floral halo. He never wanted to forget her or this moment.

‘Now I have yet another favour to ask of you,’ Cwengyth said. She lifted her son out of his basket, shifted closer to Galen and placed the baby on his lap, but kept her hands around him for support. ‘I would be glad if you blessed your little nephew.’

‘Me!?’ Galen said, so surprised that his thoughts were momentarily suspended.

‘Of course. You are his holy uncle, after all.’

‘Not so holy,’ Galen said with an embarrassed laugh.

‘Do you not think so? The whole burh is convinced you performed a miracle when you were

on the tower with Father Pifus.'

This came as news to Galen and he said, 'What miracle?'

'You were moments from being thrown off the tower. Everyone watching from below was certain there was no stopping him when suddenly... He gave that scream, and the two of you vanished.'

'You saw that?'

'All of us women heard the commotion and came out of the kitchen to see what was happening. So yes, we saw him hoist you into the air, and we saw you place your hand on his head. And after that silence, and Father Pifus never spoke again.'

'That wasn't because of me,' Galen said.

'Well, then it was the judgement of God on Father Pifus,' Cwengyth said. 'And we are all relieved. There was some talk even of asking your father to make you our parish priest.'

'He wouldn't want that,' Galen said, but it made him wonder whether he'd like to be a local priest to his family.

'Your father said you were destined for greater things,' Cwengyth said.

That surprised Galen all over again, despite the conversation he'd had with his father along similar lines.

'So,' Cwengyth said, watching him more closely than she'd watched him before, 'I would be grateful if you blessed Alfred.'

Galen looked uncertainly from Cwengyth to the little baby she held on his lap. There was no reason he shouldn't bless the child, after all.

So he put his hand gently on Alfred's warm fuzzy head and said, 'May God's eye be upon you and ensure that you are loved, happy, healthy and strong all your life.'

'Thank you,' Cwengyth said as she lifted Alfred to her chest and stroked her son's back. 'That means a lot to me.'

Galen blinked in astonishment.

'Nobody has ever asked me to perform a blessing before.'

'I believe that will change. I have a feeling many more people will ask you from now on, there's something about you.'

Galen took a deep breath as he approached the cart. It had grown in hideousness in his mind and he really didn't want to get back into it. It represented the vehicle that would take him away from his family and to Lundenburh. The royal court was taking on nightmarish proportions. He chided himself over this. Surely it wouldn't be such a dreadful place as he was imagining, although the tales he'd heard growing up had peopled it with sinister assassins and deadly political intrigue which he didn't feel up to. Still, he couldn't turn back. Now that he'd been rehabilitated in his family's eyes he couldn't show his trepidation, not when they all seemed to admire him far more than he'd realised.

There were also the rest of the burh's residents to be considered. A surprisingly large number of them had gathered to see him off. They stood in a wide semi-circle around the cart, watching. Their children were there too, clinging to their mother's skirts or standing in little knots at the front of the crowd with wide, curious eyes. Even the dogs were lounging about as if waiting for some remarkable event. Galen couldn't read the townsfolk's emotions. He couldn't

tell if they were sorry to see him go or glad.

‘Are you ready?’ Hugh said.

‘Oh yes,’ Galen said with a quick nod.

‘Would you like some help into the cart?’

Galen looked uncertainly up at his father, he’d spoken kindly, but Galen wondered whether or not he should turn down the offer and which would get him the most respect. He stopped himself on that thought. He shouldn’t be trying to win favour in either way.

‘Alcuin will help me up, sir, he knows how to do it.’

‘Without shaking you about, hey?’ Hugh said. ‘Very well, you know what’s best for you.’

Galen wondered whether he did, but he just gave his father a slight smile and a quick nod.

‘Well,’ Hugh said and took Galen’s right hand in a firm grasp, ‘God speed, my son. I have no doubt you will do well at court. Fulk and I will be there in the winter, so I look forward to seeing how the king’s book of hours is shaping up.’

‘You’re going to court?’

‘As I do most winters.’

‘Oh! Well, I will be glad to see you there.’

‘I hope so,’ Hugh said with a grin. ‘Now as your mother is waiting to say her farewells I’ll get out of the way.’

Bretana stepped up to Galen, murmured, ‘I know I’m not supposed to touch you, but allow me one final chaste salute,’ as she kissed his cheek.

‘Mother,’ Galen sighed.

‘I will miss you, my dear, but I believe you will do well in your life and once you are safely back at the abbey, I will pay you a visit.’

‘He’ll also come back this way on his return,’ Hugh said. ‘I’ll send the cart for you.’

‘I look forward to it,’ Galen said and his heart grew lighter knowing he’d be coming back one day in the not too distant future. Then he turned and said farewell to his brothers, his sisters and Cwengyth.

Then, as he turned, it was to look up into Alcuin’s sympathetic eyes and he couldn’t delay any longer.

‘It’s a good farewell,’ Alcuin murmured.

‘Yes,’ Galen said and allowed Alcuin to take him by the elbow and help him into the cart.

He still walked us upright as he could so that the townsfolk couldn’t see his pain. It wasn’t just physical anymore.

‘Here you go, sir,’ Niclas said as he removed the backboard to the cart.

Galen climbed in slowly, mainly so he didn’t hurt himself but also a reflection of his reluctance. He felt like he was back to being a five-year-old ordered to do something he didn’t wish to do.

‘Are you comfortable?’ Alcuin asked as he watched Galen settle on the cushions he’d laid out for him.

‘I’m fine,’ Galen murmured and this time he avoided looking up towards the long hall and his family clustered about the entrance.

Hugh gave Alcuin’s hand a warm shake and followed that up with a solid, friendly thump to the back.

'God speed to you both,' Hugh said.

Then Alcuin mounted his mule, and the equipage was off, rolling slowly down the path that would take them away from Thorpe Parva. The children ran after them out of the town and down the road, and Galen hung part of the way out of the cart and waved till the children gave up following and everyone was out of sight.