

Arthur

Knights of Normandy, Book Two

By

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Chapter One

Saxon Rebellion

Isle of Ely, East Anglia, England 1071

Sir Arthur de Clairvoy reined in his horse and surveyed the carnage of the battlefield. Many Normans lay wounded; others would never fight again, their eyes closed to this world forever. He cursed loudly.

"'Tis a grim sight, Arthur," Gerard stated, as he came alongside.

He looked at his eldest brother and shook his head. "Aye, brother. Hereward the Wake took advantage of these damned marshes and ambushed us."

"He must hath knowledge that we do not. The timber causeway we built proved useless – most of it sank with the weight of our horses and armour. Those marshes are a death trap!"

"Aye," Arthur spat. "There must be a safe way across them. How else did Hereward's men travel there?"

"I know not." Gerard lifted his helmet and rubbed his forehead, puzzled as to how the enemy had gained the upper hand on such dangerous ground.

"We must regroup and form another plan of attack. Where is Belasius?"

"Over yonder, with Renaud."

Arthur looked to where Gerard pointed and saw their appointed leader giving out orders to his other brother, Renaud, along with men-at-arms and knights who had survived the ambush. Between them, they were sifting through the bodies, locating the few survivors that lay trapped beneath others and aiding the wounded as best they could.

"Come, we shall assist them." Arthur rode over to Belasius, who looked at him grimly upon his approach. He was a large man in his late forties. A most trusted knight, who King William had rewarded by making him master of his forces.

"'Tis a dark day, Arthur," he responded. "Dark indeed. King William will not be pleased."

"Nay, my lord. Hereward the Wake cannot be allowed to wage war on us. He must be

defeated!"

"Agreed. I hath a plan but 'twill need further thought. Assist the others; we must attend to the wounded and see how much of an army we hath left."

Ely Abbey, Isle of Ely...

Elvina, Hereward the Wake's daughter, paced the small room in the lower abbey as she listened to the abbot's advice.

"My lady, thee must escape this place. Thy father is obsessed in his quest to overthrow King William. 'Tis madness!" Abbot Thurstan pleaded, clasping his hands together.

She stared back at him, confused. "I thought thee were behind him in this?"

"Aye, at first, but King William's army is mighty, and I fear for the safety of my abbey, my lady. We hath already lost many men. I would rather not lose any more."

"What is the alternative? Give in to the Norman bastards?"

Abbot Thurstan blinked rapidly. "Prithee, my lady, thy language!"

Elvina turned her back on him and rolled her eyes. "I beg thy pardon, Abbot. I am a little vexed, under the circumstances."

"Aye, 'tis understandable." He walked to her and, placing a hand on her shoulder, gently turned her to face him. "My lady, I will seek to dissuade thy father of further combat and urge him to make peace with the Normans. 'Tis the only way forward."

"I like it not, Abbot."

"I know. None of us wanted these Normans as our leaders but 'twould seem we hath little choice. They already own a fair part of England. 'Tis only time afore they take the rest, be it by fair means or foul!"

"And thee think I shall be safe, away from here?" Elvina queried.

Abbot Thurstan nodded. "Aye, my lady. 'Tis for the best."

"But where shall I go?"

"Hath thee no kin nearby?"

Elvina thought hard. Her father never spoke much of his kinfolk. The Normans had taken his lands whilst he was in exile in France. When he had returned, he had nothing – even his brother, her uncle, had died in battle. She had grown up with as much hatred of the Normans as

her father.

Now the abbot was telling her to leave the safety of the abbey, as he was certain Hereward would be defeated if he did not offer his surrender first.

"How can thee be so certain of my father's defeat, Abbot? Hath he not just held a whole army of Norman invaders away from this Isle?"

"Aye, my lady, but..." He hesitated, and she pressed him to continue. "They will never retreat. I fear thy father is doomed to failure. 'Tis wherefore I shall urge him to surrender."

Sighing heavily, she walked over to the narrow window and peered out across the marshes. In the distance, she could see King William's men reforming. It would not be long before they attempted another attack.

Her father had placed her in the safety of the abbey and she had not seen him for nigh on a week. He was stationed in the garrison with the rest of his army, along with Earl Morcar, another Saxon who had rebelled against the Normans.

She turned to Abbot Thurstan. "Surely the Normans would never invade these abbey walls, even if my father was captured?"

"Aye, they wouldst, my lady. I implore thee to leave this very evening afore it gets dark. Thee can go to Blackfriar's Priory. 'Tis not far from here, and Prioress Edith will keep thee safe until thy father can come to claim thee."

"I will take my maid, Hegwin, with me. I cannot go alone."

"Thee must, my lady. I will give thee a monk's robe to wear, and, travelling alone, thee will not raise suspicion. Keep thy head lowered and no one will accost thee."

Elvina licked her lips. She was nervous but he seemed certain of her father's defeat, and if she stayed in the Abbey, the Normans could easily take her hostage, or worse.

Abbot Thurstan was staring at her, awaiting her decision.

She swallowed hard and asked, "Willst thee tell my father I hath gone?"

"Aye, my lady. He will be relieved to know thou art safe in the priory, away from this madness. I fear the battle is lasting longer than he thought. Come, I will draw thee a map. Once outside Ely, the route is quite direct."

"But what about the marsh? How will I cross it?"

"There is but one safe route. I willst show thee when thou art ready to depart. For now, I will arrange thy robes and food for the journey. Worry not, my lady, all will be well."

She watched him leave the room and tried to calm her nerves. Was she doing the right thing?

* * *

Abbot Thurstan left the room and rubbed his forehead. Telling Elvina to leave the abbey was not an easy thing to do, but at least if he knew she would be safe, his conscience would be clear.

Without anyone's knowledge, he had secretly met with the Norman leader, Belasius and, in exchange for a hefty sum, had betrayed Hereward.

Fearing for the future of his abbey, he had made the grim decision to reveal the secret route to the Isle of Ely. The Normans would invade at nightfall; hence the reason he wanted Elvina gone. Belasius had promised he would not be harmed but he could not vouch for a daughter of Hereward's.

Quickly, he ran down to the kitchens and organised food, drink and clothes for Elvina.

* * *

Belasius rubbed his hands, confident of the conquest to come. His army was depleted but there were still enough men to make a good frontal assault, once they crossed the marshes. Now he knew the safest route, revealed to him by Abbot Thurstan, victory was most certainly his. Hereward the Wake would soon be captured and his rebel uprising vanquished. William would be pleased!

Whilst Belasius was contemplating certain victory, Arthur was pacing the camp, his body tense as he waited for the battle to begin. Renaud, sitting by the fire, nudged Gerard with his foot and nodded his head in Arthur's direction. "Methinks young Arthur is keen to commence battle. I fear he will wear a hole in the ground if he continues his pacing."

Gerard chuckled. "Aye, brother." He called over to Arthur, "Come join us! Pacing will not make the battle start any earlier. We hath to wait until nightfall and take Hereward by surprise."

Arthur sighed loudly. "I detest waiting."

"Aye, as do we all. Come sit by the fire and drink some ale. The battle will commence soon enough and then thee will wish thee were back here by the fire." He held a cup of ale out to him.

Arthur walked over and took it off him. Taking a deep draught, he smacked his lips appreciatively. "'Tis a fine ale."

Belasius joined them. "One for me, Renaud." Renaud handed him a cup filled to the brim, and he drank it down in one draught. "Ahh, 'twill put fire in thy belly for the battle ahead. Arthur, I need thee to scout the area up yonder." He pointed along the marsh. "Renaud, thee can take the left ridge, and Gerard, make certain thy men art ready. As soon as darkness descends, we will launch our attack."

The brothers mounted their destriers and went off in different directions as instructed, adrenalin filling their bodies as they readied themselves for the oncoming battle.

It was nearly twilight and the last vestiges of daylight were fading fast. Arthur's eyes adjusted quickly as his horse trotted along the small path running between the marshland and the forest. The further away he rode, the quieter it became, apart from the occasional call of the native birds.

He looked across to the Isle of Ely and, even in the prevailing light, he could make out the guards and several fires burning brightly. He narrowed his eyes. They would regret their previous ambush. Victory would be William's!

Suddenly, a movement caught his eye to the left. A robed figure was steadily making its way across the marshland towards the path ahead of him. Intrigued, he watched the slow progress for a while before urging his horse forward at a slightly faster gait.

Someone was escaping the confines of Ely...but who? Could it be Hereward himself? Had Abbot Thurstan warned him of his betrayal and allowed him to escape or was it just a monk off to visit one of the nearby villages? Arthur frowned. Why would a monk leave at nightfall? Especially when Ely was under siege? It made no sense.

As he got closer to the figure, he dismounted and tied his destrier to a low branch. Cautiously, he placed a hand on his sword before moving swiftly forward.

* * *

Elvina cursed loudly as her foot slipped down yet again into the boggy marsh. Either she had taken the wrong route, or this was the safe route and the rest was even worse! She grimaced as she held one of her slippered feet up to the fast-fading light. It was caked in mud.

"Eugh!" she muttered, "I must be addle-brained."

She looked around her. She'd made it halfway across the swampy land but if she didn't hurry, darkness would descend and she wouldn't be able to make out where she was going. The forest ahead was her destination. In there, she could take shelter until the morning.

Determined, she carried on as best she could. By the time she reached the end of the marsh and her feet touched more solid ground, she was quite exhausted.

"Halt!"

She nearly jumped out of her skin at the sudden command and froze for a moment.

"Who goes there?" the voice demanded. It was spoken in English but with an obvious Norman accent. Oh, God! She'd walked straight into the path of a Norman!

Swallowing hard, she tried to calm her nerves and, keeping her head down, replied in as deep a voice as she could manage, "I am a Monk from Ely Abbey."

"Wherefore dost thee travel at night?"

Elvina raised her head ever so slightly and looking out from beneath her hood, could just make out a pair of booted feet standing right in her path. It seemed he was on his own. She stepped to her left a little, ready to run, should he discover her identity.

"I go to visit the sick in Stretham."

"At this hour?" His voice hinted at disbelief.

"Aye, people make no preference for what hour they become ill!" She couldn't help the hint of annoyance that crept into her voice.

For a moment, there was silence and then the Norman commanded the one thing she had dreaded. "Remove thy hood."

"I cannot...'tis against my religion."

He cursed and reached forward. Pre-empting him, she quickly stepped to the side and ran for all she was worth. But it was no good. The Norman, with lightning speed, gave chase. She felt his strong hand close around her upper arm and, try as she might, she could not shrug him off. He dragged her, kicking and struggling, to the ground, where he pinned her down.

She stared up at him angrily to find him staring back, a look of surprise on his face. She then realised that during the struggle, her hood had slipped back, revealing her femininity.

His eyes roamed down her form, taking in her curves. "Thou art akin to no monk I hath come across, lady!"

Elvina curled her lip back and narrowed her eyes with hatred. "Norman pig! Unhand me!"

* * *

Arthur stared back at the blonde-haired, Saxon wench beneath his thighs. She was the most gorgeous creature he had ever seen. That was, until she opened her mouth, uttering expletives against his Norman heritage.

"Still thy tongue, wench!"

"Nay, Norman dog!"

His eyes darkened angrily, and he leaned his face near to hers. "Thee will learn some manners or I will teach thee some!"

For a moment, she went quiet and then whispered something. Unable to hear, he leaned closer. "What didst thee say?"

"Come hither and I will tell thee." Her voice grew softer still and he strained to listen. She raised her head and then, with a low snarl, sank her teeth into his bottom lip. He shouted out in pain and released one of her wrists to try and prise her away from his mouth. She quickly let go and started hitting him with all her strength.

"Desist, vixen!" He recaptured her hand and thrust it back down onto the earth. She looked at him; her face full of hatred, his full of outrage. "Thou art untamed! Only an animal wouldst bite!" he exclaimed.

"Only an animal wouldst capture a woman," she spat. "Let me go!"

"Nay, wench. Tell me thy name and why thou art in disguise."

"'Tis none of thy concern. Let me continue on my travels. I am no use to thee."

"I will make that decision. Thee will tell me thy name, else I warn thee, I will get it by other means!"

"What wouldst thee do? Thou art a lowly Norman scoundrel, intruding where thou art not

welcome. Take thy demands elsewhere; I do not want them!" Her eyes sparked fire at him, and he realised that her stubborn nature would not be tamed easily. Yet, he had a good way of taming women, one that both his brothers used when needed, a good firm hand.

Quickly, he lifted himself off her and, before she could escape, he pulled her errant form over to the forest. Settling himself on an old tree stump, he removed his gauntlets and pulled her over his lap.

"What dost thou do?" she cried. "I willst not submit to such a – oh!"

Raising her robe and skirts, he began to smack her bare bottom, ignoring her pleas to be set free.

* * *

Elvina shrieked as the man's iron hand fell onto her soft backside. Norman swine! Who did he think he was? Before long, her backside began to heat up, the pain becoming almost unbearable.

"Aow, desist! Thee cannot treat me this way!" she complained, trying to wriggle off his broad lap. His arm held her tight, and she soon realised there was no escape.

"'Tis thine own fault, wench," the Norman growled, smacking her again. "All I ask is thy name!"

She refused to answer him and shrieked her outrage when his large hand continued to make contact with her bottom. She closed her eyes as the pain intensified. It was awful. She was eighteen, and, in all her years, had never been spanked. She hated him with a passion, the Norman beast.

Smack! Smack! Smack!

Her cries grew hoarse as he continued the assault on her posterior but, still, her stubborn nature refused to submit. She would never tell him her name. She was stronger than that.

"Aow!" she wailed as his hand bit into her sit spot. It stung fiercely, and she kicked her legs out in protest. He quickly smacked the tops of her thighs. She sucked in a breath before shrieking out loudly, "Ouch...oh!"

She soon realised that the Norman wasn't going to stop until she gave him what he wanted. She would never give him her true name; it was too dangerous. The only thing she could

do was lie. Gritting her teeth, she ground out, "Prithee, cease. I will tell thee!"

He stopped and laid his hand on her backside. "Speak no falsehood, lady."

She panted, trying to get her breath back before replying, "My name is Hegwin."

* * *

Instinct told him she was lying. "Why didst thee conceal thyself beneath the robe?"

She hesitated, and he landed a hard smack against both buttocks. She shrieked and quickly responded, "'Tis unsafe for a woman to cross the marshes alone. As a monk, I would hath been safe...or should hath been!" she corrected herself. "I am but a simple maid, my lord. I beg thee to release me."

He was just about to reply when he heard the sound of hoof beats. He looked up to find Belasius approaching. The leader reined in his horse and stared down at Arthur and his captive, a look of surprise on his face. "I wondered where thee had gone to, Arthur. I see now why thou art delayed. Wherefore doth thou spank a monk?"

Arthur smirked. "'Tis not a monk. 'Tis a simple wench from Ely. And this..." He pointed to his bruised lip. "Is where she bit me!" He pulled her up and, keeping a firm hold of her, showed her face to Belasius.

"A simple wench, thee say." Belasius dismounted and walked towards Elvina, capturing her chin in one of his calloused hands. "This is no simple wench, Arthur... This is Hereward the Wake's daughter. Is that not so, Elvina?"

Arthur watched as she wrenched her face away from Belasius angrily. "How doth thou know me?" she demanded.

"I saw thee, when I went to bribe Abbot Thurstan, this morn. He hath betrayed thy father, Elvina. Ely will be ours this night."

Elvina gasped. "Abbot Thurstan would never betray my father! Thou speaks false!"

Belasius shook his head. "Nay, and now, thanks be to Arthur, I hath a wondrous bargaining tool, should he fail to surrender." He turned to Arthur and clapped him on the back. "King William will reward thee well for this, Arthur. Come, bring the wench back to camp. We attack within the hour!"

* * *

Two hours later, Ely fell. Belasius, triumphant at his victory, was nevertheless disappointed that, somehow, Hereward the Wake had avoided capture. Word had it that he had escaped with some of his followers into the surrounding fens. The land was wild, and Belasius decided against pursuing him any further. His men were tired and needed rest. Taking them into the fens would be madness.

No, he would report back to the king and await word of Hereward's whereabouts. A man of his determination would attack again; of that, there was no doubt. At least, he had Earl Morcar captured and even better, Elvina, Hereward's daughter.

Back at Winchester Castle, King William was elated at the news. "'Tis a wondrous victory, Belasius! Thy reward will be great."

"Sire, I thank thee."

"Where is Sir Arthur de Clairvoy?" The king looked toward the group of people assembled in his great hall.

Arthur stepped forward. "Sire?"

"Come hither, Arthur."

Arthur did as he was bid and the king praised him for his actions during the battle. "Thy capture of Hereward's daughter is highly commendable and will also be rewarded. I note thee hath no lands of thy own?"

It was more of a question than a statement. "Nay, Sire, I do not."

"Then I shall award thee lands near to thy brothers, for they also hath been of great service to me over the years. I will discuss it with my advisors. Come to me on the morrow, and I will hand thee the deeds."

Arthur bowed and thanked him before moving back.

"Now, where is this Saxon girl?"

* * *

Elvina was being held captive in one of the castle towers, attended by one maid and two

guards, who were stationed outside her room.

She angrily paced the carpet. "Wherefore must I be held captive?" she demanded.

The little maid stared back at her with big eyes. "I know not, my lady. 'Tis not my place to question such decisions."

Elvina rolled her eyes and continued pacing. Suddenly, the door opened, and Arthur de Clairvoy appeared. Without his helmet, he looked totally different. He had dark, shoulder-length, wavy hair, a neatly clipped beard, and despite their differences, she couldn't help but notice how handsome he was. Annoyed with herself, she looked at him with loathing. "What doth thou want?"

"A better greeting could be given, my lady." He bowed graciously. "I come to take thee to the king. He wishes to see thee."

"I do not wish to see him!" She crossed her arms and presented her back to Arthur.

"Thou doth not get a choice." She heard him walk across the room towards her and then he was by her side, his large hand on her upper arm, his tall form making her feel a little intimidated. "Come, my lady. We must not keep the king waiting." She could tell by his tone that he was beginning to get impatient.

Elvina tried to pull her arm away from him but he wouldn't release her, so she kicked him. Arthur immediately lifted her skirts and smacked her bottom.

She gasped at the sudden pain and tried to shy away from him.

"Behave, wench. Thou art to be presented to the king!"

"I care not! He is not my king. He is a Norman interloper, same as thee."

She tried to extricate herself from Arthur's grip by shoving him. This earned her another sharp smack. "Desist! Carry on in this manner and I shall wallop thy backside properly!"

"Oh, fie on thee! Show thyself for the devil thou art." She attempted to stamp on his boot but it made no impact, except to make him angrier than he already was.

"Last warning!" he growled, pulling her towards the door.

Her strong-willed nature challenged his authority over her and, almost of its own accord, her elbow went crashing into his side. His sharp intake of breath meant that she'd made an impact. Her triumphant smile, however, didn't last long.

Arthur stopped walking and quickly upended her over one knee. She felt a rush of air as her skirts were thrown over her head and then a sharp sting, when his hand descended in rapid

succession on her unprotected backside.

She hardly had time to draw a breath as he smacked her buttocks relentlessly. The noise reverberated around the small chamber and it was soon joined by her sharp cries. When she was hopping from one foot to the other, Arthur finally let her up. Her face was crinkled up with pain, and she was on the verge of tears.

"Thou art a troublesome wench, Elvina. Thy future now remains in the hands of a Norman king and I suggest, for thine own safety, thee submit to him." This time, when Arthur pulled her, she didn't struggle.

* * *

"So, thou art Elvina?" The king noted, looking her up and down. "Thou art young. What is thine age?"

When she didn't answer, Arthur prodded her. She scowled but it seemed to work, as she replied, "Eighteen, Sire."

"Thou art married?"

"Nay, Sire."

"Thou hath a suitor?"

"Nay, Sire."

The king rubbed his chin in thought. "What think thee of thy father's uprising against me?"

"Dost thou want the truth or a falsehood?"

King William raised an eyebrow. "Thou art outspoken – mayhap a trait inherited from thy father."

"My father is a good man!" said Elvina heatedly.

"I beg to disagree." When she went to say more, he waved his hand at her, silencing her. "I will hear no more about thy father. I wouldst hear where thy loyalty lies – Norman or Saxon?"

"Then I will answer thee plain, Sire. I am of true Anglo-Saxon birth and, for most of my life, hath grown up under Saxon rule. 'Tis therefore hard for me to accept Norman rule."

"It may be hard to accept, Elvina, but 'tis something thee will hath to adhere to. I rule these lands now and the way of life thee knew before hath disappeared."

He looked over to a guard. "Take her back to her quarters, and I would ask everyone to leave now."

The guard took hold of Elvina and escorted her from the room. As others began to file out after him, the king beckoned to Arthur. "Arthur, a word."

When the room was empty, King William studied his subject. "I wouldst ask something of thee, Arthur. 'Tis not an easy thing to ask but 'twould be beneficial to all of us."

Arthur felt a sinking feeling in his stomach and he felt certain it had something to do with Elvina.

"What wouldst thee hath me do, Sire?"

"Marry the Saxon wench, Elvina."

"Marry, Sire?" Arthur exclaimed, wondering why he had been chosen above others to take Elvina to wife.

"Aye, I know it is much that I ask but, with a Norman husband, she will hath to obey our rules, added to which, Hereward may think twice afore mounting any further uprisings."

Arthur was in a state of shock. Marry Elvina? Aye, she was a desirable wench but she was also fiery and troublesome. He had thought to take a wife more demure than that wild vixen.

But hadn't his brother taken a wife with the same temperament? He had tamed her well and now they loved each other as a man and wife should. Mayhap, Elvina would turn out the same – and bedding her would certainly not be a chore.

The king sensed that Arthur was beginning to capitulate. "I shall give thee lands along the coast near to thy brother, Renaud. Marry the wench on the morrow and take her with thee to Dunster Castle, thy brother's abode. Build a stone fortress on thy land as soon as possible. It will mark out yet more Norman territory and show these Saxons we are here to stay."

Arthur nodded. "Aye, Sire. I had no plans to marry, but Elvina will make a handsome wife. I fear she will be hard to tame but I am willing to give it a try."

"Thou possess a true warrior's heart, Arthur. I will arrange for the wedding to take place on the morrow at matins."

Realising their conversation was over, Arthur bowed and went in search of Renaud. If he was ever in more need of his elder brother's advice, it was now!