

Droit de Seigneur: The Ace of Swords
By Laney Cairo

Accolon hung back at the entrance to the Great Hall, giving Queen Guinevere and her ladies plenty of room to walk ahead of him, making sure he didn't stand on anyone's trailing robes. It didn't work, and he had to breathe in as Lady Felicity pushed up against him on her way past.

"Apologies, my lady," Accolon said.

"Lord Accolon," Lady Felicity said, her eyelashes lowered briefly. "You so rarely favor us with your company at court. I need to speak with you."

Accolon hesitated, and Lady Felicity stayed holding his arm, her breasts pressed absurdly against his chest. The bonds and ties of friendship and love within the court were treacherous, and Accolon had no idea who Lady Felicity owed her allegiance to, political or personal. A rejection could see him facing a blade, as could an invitation.

"With me? Why?" Accolon said. "Perhaps later, in the Great Hall. I must check my horses first."

"Your horses," Lady Felicity said, sounding dispirited. "It's always the horses."

Accolon nodded. "It is."

Lady Felicity drifted after the other ladies, with Lady Morgan bringing up the rear, and Accolon stayed where he was, while the court shuffled into the Great Hall or made its way to the stables or bedrooms.

Derryn, Accolon's new squire, wandered up to Accolon and handed him a jug of small beer.

"Where were you during the meal?" Accolon asked Derryn, taking the jug gratefully.

"Horses," Derryn said. "Putting your pack in your room. Finding out what you need to know, like that old Lord Brunor has got Lady Felicity with child. You going to take her? She'd be safe."

Accolon looked down at Derryn, who was leering at him. "No, she doesn't charm me. You should try. You've never been to Arthur's court before, so the ladies will want to test you."

Derryn lowered his lashes, in exactly the same movement that Lady Felicity had used, then grinned at Accolon. "Do they like Welsh squires here?"

Accolon drained his jug and handed it to Derryn, taking in Derryn's light hair and gray eyes. He caught Derryn's arm, so Derryn's sleeve fell back, showing a slender wrist and pale skin. "They'll either like you or be jealous of you."

When Derryn pulled his wrist free, Accolon let it go without resisting. There were dangerous eddies between him and Derryn, and Accolon was intrigued by the hints of darkness in Derryn. He understood all about darkness.

When Accolon had checked the horses had been stabled and groomed, and his room had been prepared adequately, he slipped into the back of the Great Hall, where the court was gathered.

King Arthur and Queen Guinevere sat on a dais, in front of the main fire, with the central court gathered around them. Lord Accolon had a place there, by blood and honor, if he wished to claim it. He could sit beside Arthur, and laugh at the man's jokes, and smile at Gawain, and pretend that Percival was not a fool.

Or he could stand in the shadows, away from the heat of the fire.

Gareth, on his way back from relieving himself, stood beside Accolon. "You're still too shy to join the court," Gareth said, hand on Accolon's shoulder. "You should marry, then the ladies would leave you alone, and you would feel easier at these gatherings."

"A heavy price to pay," Accolon said. "Better to stand at the back and have no wife."

Gareth laughed. "Not so shy you sleep alone then? I saw Lady Felicity hunt you earlier. You should get your squire to bolt your door tonight, unless your Welsh boy will take care of her for you. Where did you find that boy?"

"A monastery near Caernarvon," Accolon said. "He followed me. He cooks and sews, and reads."

"Marry him instead," Gareth said. "He'd be better than most wives, even without the other. Though, with most wives, you don't get the other anyway."

"That's what other people's wives are for?" Accolon asked, making sure he phrased it as a question. He'd never touched Gareth's wife, which would make dying for a misunderstanding so much more stupid.

Gareth laughed, loudly and suddenly. "You're not shy at all, are you? Whose wife are you lying with?"

"Not yours," Accolon said, truthfully. He rarely took a woman to his bed, because he rarely found a woman who pleased him. The idea that a married woman was worth risking a sword for puzzled him. Better to dodge the irate fathers of the maidens, who at least wouldn't kill him.

Derryn was waiting to take Gareth's place, when Gareth went back to the fire and the Court.

"What was he laughing at?" Derryn asked.

Accolon leaned down, so his mouth was close to Derryn's ear, close enough to smell the spicy seeds Derryn had been chewing. "We were discussing wives. He said I should marry you, instead."

"Are you in your cups?" Derryn asked, not moving away when Accolon brushed his face against Derryn's.

"The wine here is always good," Accolon said.

"Why aren't you with the knights and the ladies?" Derryn asked. "I asked the other squires, and you're of Arthur's blood line. They said you always stand here, at the back, behind everyone else. Don't you want to take your place?"

Accolon swung his arm around Derryn's shoulders, so he could whisper in Derryn's ear. "Don't tell anyone, but I don't like very many of them."

Derryn chuckled. "You have had too much wine. You shouldn't tell me that."

"The women are hungry animals, and will tear you apart," Accolon said. "Avoid them, Derryn."

"The men?" Derryn asked. "What about them?"

Accolon's breath caught in his throat, and Derryn's eyes glimmered in the torchlight.

"Now who's had too much wine?" Accolon said, his voice struggling to escape his throat.

"Everything about the King's Court has unsettled me," Derryn said. "I am overcome in the face of such nobility and majesty."

"You're also very rude," Accolon said. "And will get yourself into trouble."

Derryn smiled widely. "Do you like me anyway?"

"I brought you here, you wretch," Accolon said.

Accolon wasn't sure what was happening, but his arm was still around Derryn, and Derryn's laughter was echoing through his body, warming him more than Arthur's wine.

Percival pushed through the peons, toward Accolon, and Derryn stepped away so that Accolon's arm dropped from his shoulders. "Lord Accolon," Percival said, "the King requests your presence, if you can put aside your shyness."

"A direct request from King Arthur cannot be refused," Accolon said.

Behind him, as he followed Percival toward the court, he heard Derryn mutter, "Shyness?"

Accolon's room in the keep was small and overlooked the stables, but it had a door, and a garderobe nearby. After living on the road for months, he'd settle for anywhere that had a roof.

When Accolon pushed the door open, candle held in front of him, Derryn was asleep on a pile of straw in the corner, under a blanket.

"What?" Derryn asked, sleepily. "Who?"

"It's me," Accolon said. "Go back to sleep, I can undress by myself."

Derryn rolled out from his blanket. "All the other squires will tease me," he said, taking the candle from Accolon and standing it on the sconce.

Accolon stood, trying not to laugh, while Derryn rubbed at his eyes and hitched his own britches up with one hand. He unlaced Accolon's gambeson and shirt with his other hand.

Derryn took Accolon's gambeson and shirt, folding and draping them, while Accolon pulled down the blankets on his own bed and climbed between his bedding.

Darkness fluttered over the room when Derryn blew out the candle, then the straw of Accolon's bed rustled and Accolon could just make out the shape of Derryn kneeling over him in the gloom.

"They think you're shy? They really think you're shy?" Derryn asked. "Are they fools?"

"Apparently," Accolon said.

Derryn stayed where he was, his breathing masked by the wind that whistled through every crack in the masonry, but when Accolon reached out his hand, he found Derryn's forearm, bare and warm.

"Did you bolt the door?" Accolon asked, because he was suddenly dizzy with the understanding of why Derryn was kneeling over his bed.

"Yes," Derryn said. "Lady Felicity won't be able to sneak into your bed uninvited."

Accolon let go of Derryn's wrist and lifted the blankets, the wool crinkling in the darkness.

"What if I invited you?"

"I would lie with you," Derryn said. "Because you are strong and beautiful, and you make me ache."

Derryn's body was suddenly against Accolon's, knees and elbows in the darkness. Derryn's mouth found Accolon's, his weight pressing Accolon down into the straw, knee sliding between Accolon's thighs.

"Please," Derryn whispered between the brushes of his lips, his hands in Accolon's hair, his body covering Accolon's.

The feel of Derryn's tongue, flickering against his own, made Accolon kiss back, meeting Derryn's boldness, running his hands over Derryn's back, touching where he could. Derryn moaned, against Accolon's mouth, and when Derryn moved, Accolon could feel the hard ridge of Derryn's cock through his shirt.

It made Accolon bold, to feel Derryn's cock rubbing through his clothes, and Accolon let his hand drift lower, so it rested over Derryn's arse. Accolon cupped the flesh and squeezed, and Derryn bucked against him, moaning and pulling on Accolon's hair.

"Do you want to make me spill?" Derryn asked, his mouth pressed against Accolon's ear, his hand working between their bellies, to find the ties of Accolon's hose.

Derryn's fingers rubbed the edge of Accolon's cock, through his tunic, and Accolon gasped. "As long as I can touch you."

Derryn lifted himself up, and Accolon tugged on the ties of Derryn's hose, pulling them undone then pushing them down. Derryn's belly was smooth and flat, with a line of hair heading downward. Accolon's hands cupped Derryn's cock, sliding the skin forward, then touched his balls, feeling the weight.

"Oh, please," Derryn whispered, falling onto his side on the straw. "More."

Accolon only knew how to touch himself, so he curled his fingers around Derryn's cock the same way, rubbing the thumb of his other hand over the head to catch the drops welling up, and leaned forward to kiss the sounds that Derryn was making.

Derryn kissed him back, moving his cock urgently into Accolon's hands, pushing harder and harder, and it was the most impossibly beautiful thing that had ever happened to Accolon, to have Derryn falling apart in his hands.

Derryn's seed slipped between Accolon's fingers and trickled down his hands, and Derryn twisted on the straw, panting and sweating.

It felt exhilarating, dangerous and secret, and Accolon thought he might scream from the tightness inside. Nothing had felt like what they were doing, and he'd never imagined anything like Derryn grabbing his hand in the dark and licking the wetness off it.

Then Derryn pulled Accolon's hose open and pushed them down, and Accolon had to clap both hands over his own mouth to keep quiet when Derryn's lips slid down his cock. It was so wet and

hot, Derryn's lips and tongue everywhere, and then Derryn started sucking and Accolon thought he would die, from the way his body felt.

His breath was still rasping, raw and heavy, when Derryn crawled back up his body and settled down, his head beside Accolon's.

Accolon's heart was slowing, no longer trying to tear its way out of his chest. "I've never done that before."

"I have."

The thought of Derryn's mouth, and what it had done, made Accolon close his eyes briefly, even in the darkness. Derryn's bare legs rubbed against Accolon's, under the blankets, his skin firm under Accolon's hand, when Accolon ran a hand down his hip and thigh.

"Are you going to go back to your bed?" Accolon asked, rubbing his nose against Derryn's neck, where the hair curled damply.

"I don't want to," Derryn said.

"Then don't."

Derryn's arm was snug around Accolon's chest, when he wrapped himself against Accolon's back.

"Tell me about the court here," Derryn said. "The truth. Why do you lie to them?"

Accolon smiled to himself. "This way I don't have to be polite to them, and play their stupid courtly games, and I still get to be part of the court and receive my stipend."

"Don't you want more? Don't you want to be free of all this?"

Accolon was silent, and Derryn's hand drifted across his chest, touching his nipple, making little sparks jump through Accolon's body.

"There is no way of being free, unless I leave the knighthood and become a monk."

Derryn's hand moved lower, dragging fingernails across Accolon's belly, making Accolon gasp, then Derryn's hand found Accolon's cock.

"Or you could be king," Derryn said, his fingers around Accolon's cock, stroking him.

Behind Accolon, Derryn was rubbing up against him, cock sliding up against Accolon's arse, and the feeling made Accolon half-terrified, half-ecstatic.

"I'm never going to be."

Derryn was moving against Accolon, driving against him, and all Accolon could think of was what would happen if Derryn pushed inside him, and the feel of Derryn's fingers, rubbing him faster and faster.

"I want to," Derryn whispered, his cock sliding against Accolon's arse, then Derryn was moaning against Accolon's ear and something hot and wet was spreading across his skin, making Derryn's cock so slippery.

Accolon jerked forward, pushing his cock into Derryn's hand, and it felt so sweet and good, having Derryn's hand on him, and being held.

Afterward, with the blankets pulled over them, Accolon fell asleep with Derryn warm beside him.

He woke during the night, when someone rattled at their bolted door. Derryn woke, too, muttering in Welsh beside him, but the person went away before Derryn found a boot to throw at the door.

"Damned women," Derryn said, burrowing down under the blankets again. "What did your last squire do to keep them away?"

"I made him sleep in my room alone," Accolon said. "And I slept in the stables."

Derryn was silent for a moment. "That's why the other squires called me a lucky shit then?"

"I don't know."

Derryn's fingers rubbed down, across Accolon's arse. "I think I'm luckier than he was."

Accolon held as still as he could, until Derryn moved his fingers away. "Not here," Derryn said. "We need to be somewhere without other people around."

"Like all of Wales?"

Derryn sighed. "This has occurred to me. We spend months wandering in solitary splendor, and as soon as we're somewhere other people can see, you decide to be bold and adventurous. You could have done this weeks ago, where there was only sheep to see or hear us."

"It was you who was bold," Accolon said. "I did nothing."

"Because you're so shy."

Accolon chuckled. "Go to sleep."

Accolon's horse faltered, stumbling to a halt on the edge of a bog, and Accolon clung on, keen not to be pitched into the muck.

Somewhere to his left, the rest of the boar hunt was plunging through the forest, hounds baying and men shouting, but Accolon's horse was weary, and Accolon had had enough. Time to make his way back to the castle -- he'd met his obligations and participated. Hopefully enough other people had lamed their horses or been injured already that his return would not be noticed.

A horse and rider crashed into the clearing behind Accolon, as Accolon coaxed his horse backward, out of the filth.

"My Lord," Accolon said, bowing to King Arthur.

Arthur slapped his chest in acknowledgment and raised his eyebrows at the state of Accolon's horse.

"You're withdrawing from the hunt, Accolon?"

"My horse is, my Lord," Accolon said. "I'll hunt on, on foot, if you'll permit."

Arthur laughed, and Accolon allowed himself a small smile of relief.

"Ride with me, back toward the hunt," Arthur said. "We'll find you another horse."

Accolon urged his reluctant horse up, beside Arthur's, and followed Arthur between the oaks, toward the roar of the hunt.

"The Queen mentioned your name to me today. I don't like it when problems at Court are brought to me," Arthur said.

Accolon ducked his head to dodge a branch.

"My name, my Lord? Why? Has someone complained about my behavior?"

"Someone has," King Arthur said. "About your bedroom activities."

Accolon's stomach twisted, and he thought he was going to spew. He'd had one night of Derryn's kisses, and someone had told the King?

"I can explain," Accolon began, but Arthur held up his gloved hand.

"Don't. I don't care about Lady Felicity, and all the other Ladies you're supposed to have bedded, though I can't see how someone like you could possibly have done everything they say you have. Just don't go putting your seed into another man's wife and getting her with child. You'll have to resolve this matter of honor with Lord Brunor."

"The child's not mine," Accolon said. "I don't know who put it there, but it wasn't me."

His former squire? His former squire had got Lady Felicity with child?

King Arthur stared at Accolon, his eyes flat and disinterested. "Resolve this."

Arthur rode off, through the oaks, and Accolon swore at the trees and sky. Now he had to fight.

Lord Brunor was an old man, his body broken from fighting beside Uther Pendragon, Arthur's father. Accolon stayed in his room, rather than watch the cart carrying Brunor roll into the stables.

Derryn sat on the straw beside Accolon. "So your last squire got Lady Felicity with child, and she's told everyone it was you. And now you're going to have to fight her husband, or rather, her husband's champion?"

"Unless Arthur puts a stop to this nonsense," Accolon said. "Which he should. Brunor is so old and frail, and his wife is at court without him. Anyone could have had her."

"Why is she naming you?"

"Who else is there? Gawain is so pure, no one would believe her. Everyone else is already married, has no lands, or is too young."

Derryn's gaze was speculative. "And you're in line for the throne."

"I'm a long way down the succession, ninth."

"You're only one good plague away from being second or third in line," Derryn said. "That's close."

"There are no good plagues," Accolon said. "Not even when it comes to succession planning."

"What are you going to do?" Derryn asked.

"Sharpen my sword," Accolon said. "Win. Then leave the court."

Derryn leaned forward and pressed his lips against Accolon's. "Now I know why you hate them all."

The invitation was written on a sliver of parchment, crumbling in Accolon's hand as he showed it to Derryn.

"Lady Morgan?" Derryn asked in a whisper. "Why would she ask to see you? Are you going?"

Accolon shrugged. King Arthur's bastard half-sister was an outsider at court, like himself, floating at the edges of conversations and standing in the shadows. They were kin -- she was his cousin through several removes -- but Accolon had rarely spoken with her, even when he'd encountered her in the cloisters or maze.

"I can hardly refuse the summons," Accolon said. "Get my clean clothes ready."

Morgan's rooms were separate from the main keep, beyond the stables, and Accolon was grateful that the walkways around the keep were deserted in the late afternoon, allowing him to knock on Morgan's door unobserved.

Morgan's lady-in-waiting let Accolon in, and showed him to the inner chamber, where Morgan held her hand out for Accolon to kiss.

"Cousin," Lady Morgan said, claiming kinship.

"Lady Morgan," Accolon said. "You wished to speak with me."

Morgan gestured at a bench, and sat down herself, on a low chair.

"You have a problem, with Lady Felicity," Morgan said.

"The child is not mine," Accolon said.

"I know that. Everyone does. I want to help you, so you don't have to fight whoever Lord Brunor decides should be his champion."

Accolon said, "Oh. Thank you."

Lady Morgan leaned forward. "I know you hate many people at Court. Do you also have ambitions toward the throne?"

"You're speaking of treason, Lady Morgan," Accolon said. "At the King's court."

Lady Morgan smiled, showing just her upper teeth. "I think treasonous thoughts often. I've watched you, standing at the back of the Hall, laughing at the fools and their stupid games. I laugh at them, too."

Accolon kept his mouth closed, and stayed silent.

"See? A man as cautious as you would never have touched Lady Felicity, not unless she was already with child. If I make your problem go away, will you help Mordred to the throne? Lord Mordred will remember your assistance, and you will find great favor at his Court."

Accolon looked around the room suspiciously, expecting the tapestries to move, and someone to step out, holding a blade, ready to denounce him.

"I can't play these games, Lady," Accolon said. "Your jests do not amuse me."

Morgan clapped her hands, and the room was plunged into darkness.

Accolon gasped, reaching out his hands, but it was as dark as a winter's night.

"Do not doubt me!" she hissed, through the blackness. "I am Morgan le Fay."

Daylight came back, sunlight shining around the tapestries hanging at Morgan's windows, and Accolon could hear children playing outside Morgan's rooms.

Lady Morgan smiled at Accolon, but it was the same smile Arthur had given him. "Do we have an agreement, or would you rather fight for your life?"

"I'll fight," Accolon said. "Thank you."

The giant stood taller than an oak tree, and wore whole bolts of cloth for his rags.

Derryn, who was standing behind Accolon with Accolon's swords and knives in his hands, whispered, "Would you like me to saddle the horses, my Lord? We could leave now. I'm sure there's a monastery we could go to."

King Arthur looked up at the giant, then across the tourney ground at Accolon. "Lord Brunor's champion, the Giant of Cork, has challenged you, Lord Accolon. By the rules of this Court, and the requirements of honor, toumey is tomorrow."

Accolon nodded his acknowledgement, then whispered back to Derryn, "Please send a message to Lady Morgan, saying I wish to speak with her."

Morgan met Accolon in the cloisters, during the quiet hour before the evening meal.

"You have a large problem," Morgan said. "I heard."

"Very large," Accolon said. "Before I decide between banishment from Court and an arrangement with you, I want to know what I'd be agreeing to."

Morgan pushed back the hood of her cloak, and the gray hairs at her temples shone silver in the last of the afternoon sunshine.

"I save you, and your position in this Court. You kill Arthur."

Accolon stared at Morgan in disbelief.

"You want me to murder my king? My own kin?"

"He's my king and kin, too," Morgan said. "And I'm not concerned by this. I will provide you with the tools to do the task, but I cannot get close enough to him to carry it out."

"Why would I kill the king?" Accolon asked, keeping his voice a whisper.

"Because you hate him," Morgan said. "Because you know he is a fool. And because you will owe me everything once I have made Lady Felicity's swollen belly flat once again."

"I've heard he is protected, that Merlin left enchantments upon Arthur so that he cannot be harmed."

Morgan smiled, and Accolon knew he'd just given assent.

"No ordinary blade can touch him. I will send you a message, with directions."

Accolon watched Lady Morgan sweep down the cloisters, to where her lady-in-waiting stood in the distance. At the other end of the cloisters, Derryn was waiting for him, shifting anxiously from foot to foot.

Lady Felicity was taken ill during the entertainments at the Great Hall, and had to be helped from the Hall to her room. Lady Morgan nodded at Accolon, across the Hall, as the ladies bustled around, reseating themselves after the disruption.

Accolon left the Hall, Derryn racing to catch up with him.

"Are we leaving Court?" Derryn asked, as Accolon kicked the door of their room closed, then bolted it shut.

"I don't think we can," Accolon said. "I have to wait for the challenge to be withdrawn, or I'm in breach of the rules of tourney. Once that is done, let us go home."

Derryn untied Accolon's gambeson, and pulled the sleeves down. "When we reach your Hall...?"

The underside of Derryn's beard was silky, when Accolon mouthed the skin. "Sleep in my bed, Derryn?"

Derryn's cock was stirring, inside his tunic, when Accolon rubbed at the fabric, and the knock on the door made them both jump.

"Who is it?" Derryn called out, pulling his tunic down to hide his cock.

Accolon quickly pulled down his shirt, so it hung over his hose.

"Message for Lord Accolon," a young voice said.

Accolon nodded, and Derryn undid the bolt, his hand on his knife.

The boy at the door said, "By the wishes of King Arthur, tomorrow's tourney has been cancelled. Lord Accolon is freed by the rules of tourney and the requirements of honor, my Lord."

Derryn closed the door and turned to stare at Accolon. "Did she do that?"

Accolon nodded.

"Are you going to tell me what it cost you?"

"No," Accolon said.

Accolon kept his shirt and hose on that night, and his knife and sword within reach. Derryn curled up beside him, on the straw and blankets.

"When are we leaving?" Derryn asked, his hand under Accolon's shirt, touching the skin of Accolon's belly.

"Not tonight, in the dark. Not tomorrow, when there will be a giant traveling. And not the day after, because Lady Felicity will probably be well enough to travel by then."

"Assuming Lord Brunor takes her home."

Accolon looked down at Derryn. "If he doesn't, we'll have to ride out at night."

The tip of Derryn's tongue touched the bare skin of Accolon's belly, lingering long enough to make Accolon suck his breath in.

"Blow the candle out," Derryn said, his fingers pulling at the ties on Accolon's shirt.

"You'd do that to someone with his hand on a knife?" Accolon asked, reaching for the candle.

"Let go of the knife," Derryn said.

This time Accolon could concentrate on what Derryn was doing to him, on the way Derryn could make his mouth go all the way down Accolon's cock, so that all Accolon could feel was the slipperiness of Derryn's spit. Then, when Derryn pulled back up, Derryn's teeth dragged across Accolon's skin, just hard enough to make Accolon squirm and want to push his cock back into Derryn's mouth.

Derryn could suck, too, so that Accolon couldn't breathe, making Accolon hard enough to sharpen a blade on.

Then Derryn pushed his fingers down, wet with spit, behind Accolon's balls, to touch Accolon's arse, and it made Accolon think of dangerous things that he'd only heard jokes of.

"I don't know..." Accolon whispered.

Derryn lifted his mouth off Accolon's cock, and whispered, "Hush, just let me touch you."

Accolon nodded, even though Derryn wouldn't be able to see him, and Derryn circled one finger around Accolon's arse, and licked the head of Accolon's cock.

It felt wrong, pushing into him, then it began to feel hot inside, and Accolon kicked his legs out, not sure what to do to make the heat stop.

Derryn sucked his cock again, all the way down, and Accolon could hear himself making noises, gasps and grunts, but he couldn't stop. He couldn't stop himself from pushing up, into Derryn's mouth, suddenly, because the heat had turned into tightness, and he was going to spill, any moment, right into Derryn's throat.

The finger in his arse twisted, and something happened inside Accolon, sending fire rushing through his body, so intense that when he'd finished spilling, he could barely move.

Derryn crawled up, kissing him, whispering in the dark. "Please? Will you? For me?"

Then Derryn was kneeling over Accolon, pulling his shirt open. The head of his cock nudged against Accolon's lips, and Accolon and Derryn moaned in unison as Accolon opened his mouth.

"Oh," Derryn whispered, as Accolon ran his tongue over the head of Derryn's cock, pulling back the skin, letting Derryn push further into his mouth.

Derryn grabbed Accolon's hair, holding Accolon's head steady, and began to rock the head of his cock into Accolon's mouth.

It was easy to let Derryn do this, and it made Accolon feel something strange inside his head and chest, that he didn't have words for or understand. Derryn was breathing hard, fingers twisting and tightening in Accolon's hair.

When Derryn jerked forward, spilling into Accolon's mouth, Accolon choked and swallowed, wondering if he should be embarrassed that he was hard again already.

Derryn slid down the straw and did up both of their britches, his fingers lingering over Accolon's cock.

"Did you like that?" Derryn asked.

"You just touched me," Accolon said, wrapping one arm around Derryn and finding his knife with the other.

"I did," Derryn said, his hand sliding into the folds of Accolon's clothes again. "I think you are hungry for this."

Accolon thought of the tightness in his chest, and the way he felt when Derryn touched him. It was a hunger, like for sunshine at the end of a long winter, or for air when diving into deep water.

"I'm hungry for you."

Derryn's mouth found his in the dark, and he heard the clink of Derryn picking up a knife. "We'll stand watch together, in case Brunor decides that he really wants revenge."

They rode away from Winton through the mist, in the first light of morning. Derryn waited until they were past the last of the royal farms, then urged his horse up so he rode alongside Accolon's.

The forest crowded the road, hanging overhead, the trees dripping rain on their heads. Derryn whistled to himself, the sound not travelling far in the damp air, but Accolon didn't smile. Worry pressed on him, like the mist, and even Derryn couldn't distract him.

Midsummer, La Beale Regard.

Morgan's lady-in-waiting had delivered her message in person, while Derryn and Accolon had readied their horses that morning.

Derryn stopped whistling and went to speak, and Accolon cut him off, saying, "Don't ask questions, just this once."

"I was going to ask how many day's ride to your Hall," Derryn said, sounding aggrieved.

"Four," Accolon said.

"But, while I'm asking, what did Lady Morgan's lady-in-waiting mean? At the stables?"

When Accolon turned to glare at Derryn, Derryn was smiling at Accolon, and Accolon sighed and smiled back.

"I'll tell you when we are safely at my Hall, you imp."

Accolon's private rooms at his Hall had never seemed more like a sanctuary. He barred the door, and leaned back against the solid wood. The candles in the room gleamed, adding to the glow of the fire in the hearth.

Derryn poured the kettle of water into the tub, and refilled the kettle, pushing it back over the fire.

"A bath, a clean bed, and a secure room," Derryn said. "Your Hall is more hospitable than Winton."

"I treat my guests as badly as Winton does," Accolon said, pulling his gambeson undone. "I don't want to encourage them."

Derryn knelt down, to undo the lacings on Accolon's boots. "I'm glad I'm not a guest here then."

"What are you?" Accolon asked. "What is this called? Now, where no one is listening, can you tell me?"

Derryn shook his head. "Some things I know the words for, but not everything. And I don't know the words for each other."

"Who taught you these things?" Accolon asked, when Derryn stood up and pulled the laces undone on Accolon's shirt and undershirt.

"Different men," Derryn said. "I knew an apothecary, before I joined the monastery. He showed me how to make it good for the other man."

Derryn pulled the laces undone on Accolon's hose. "Your bath is ready, my Lord."

"If you are my squire, and bathe me, then afterward I will serve you," Accolon whispered, his lips pressed against Derryn's ear.

Derryn's fingernails left grazes on Accolon's back, as he pulled Accolon's undershirt off.

The water in the tub was blissfully warm when Accolon squatted in it. Derryn was quicker and gentler with the cloth than any other squire that Accolon had ever had. Accolon stepped out of the tub and stood dripping in front of the fire, feeling pink and clean.

Derryn handed him a peppermint-wood stick, to chew, and said, "If you'll excuse me, I'm going to bathe, too."

Accolon crouched down, beside the tub, and watched Derryn wash himself and dunk his head under the water.

"You're enjoying this," Derryn said, wiping the water out of his eyes.

"I am," Accolon admitted.

"You are the lord," Derryn said. "You can have baths whenever you want, every month even."

"I think I will."

Accolon carried the candles through to his bedchamber without bothering to dress. His bed was waiting, the blankets and sheets turned down to air, the drapes hanging open, and Accolon set the candles in the sconces and climbed onto the bed.

"Apologies," Derryn said, when he finally clambered up, beside Accolon. "I was looking for something to use."

"To use?" Accolon asked, and Derryn held up the bottle of oil that belonged beside the whetstone, with the swords.

"To use," Derryn said. "To ease the way, like when I sharpen a sword."

Accolon laid back, sinking back into goose feathers and ticking, closing his eyes in delight at the comfort of his own bed. Then Derryn straddled him, deliciously naked and clean, kissing him and pushing his hands above his head.

Accolon closed his eyes, so the candles glowed like sunset through his eyelids, and surrendered.

Afterward, while Derryn bathed quickly in the cooling bathwater in the dressing room, Accolon wondered if his household staff had heard, even though their quarters were at the other end of the Hall.

He shrugged and pulled the bedding over himself. If they hadn't heard that time, they would eventually, and they would make up stories about what their master did in his chambers at night.

Derryn carried two goblets of wine back into the bedchamber and handed one to Accolon.

"Good wine," Derryn said. "I approve."

"Better than at the monastery?"

"Everything is better than at the monastery," Derryn said, making himself comfortable beside

Accolon. "Now, I want to hear what it cost you not to fight the giant."

"Treason," Accolon said. "And murder."

Derryn's eyes went wide. "Are you going to do it?"

"I don't imagine that breaking terms with Lady Morgan is prudent," Accolon said. "I'll go to La Beale Regard, and look for a way to avoid doing this."

"You hate the King. Why don't you kill him?"

Accolon studied Derryn, with his tousled hair and flushed cheeks, and shook his head. "There's a chasm between hate and sliding a knife into the King. My hate's personal, based on petty Court politics, too many cold winters at Winton and a dislike for standing around in icy mud throwing rocks at the Picts. This is not the towering passion that topples thrones, and I'm not prepared to lose my head over it."

"You'll lose your head just for plotting with Morgan," Derryn said.

"I'm pretty sure I'd lose my head for being bugged by you," Accolon said. "And I almost lost it because my last squire had Lady Felicity, so I think the price for my head is not high at the moment. I'd still rather not lose it for knifing Arthur."

"I promise not to be like your last squire," Derryn said. "Whatever he was like."

Accolon ran a fingertip down Derryn's bare chest. "Oh, you're nothing like him."

The dagger, still warm from Lady Morgan's hand and a little oily from the whetstone, thrummed as though it was alive in Accolon's grasp, and he eyed it suspiciously.

"Do you doubt me?" Morgan asked, slipping the whetstone into her pocket.

"Yes, Lady Morgan," Accolon admitted, and behind him, Derryn spat noisily on the flagstones of the forge.

Morgan shook her head and wiped her hands on her apron. "Take the blade, but you must blood it first for the charm to work."

Accolon opened his mouth to protest, and Morgan held up an imperious hand.

"Silence," she said. "You agreed to do this for me."

Accolon watched her stalk out of the forge and across the courtyard, pushing her way past the cattle milling around a manger of hay; then he and Derryn both looked down at the blade he was

holding.

"Blood it?" Accolon said.

Derryn looked up again, at the archway across the courtyard where Morgan had disappeared. "Queynte."

Accolon smacked Derryn with his free hand. "Hush! We need distance between us and her, before she decides to blood the knife on you."

Their horses were tethered outside La Beale Regard, and none of her guards attempted to stop them from leaving, but Accolon didn't let out a sigh of relief until they were through the valley and out of sight of the keep.

A peasant looked up from grubbing turnips in a field and touched his forehead in respect, then went back to foraging in the dirt. Accolon waited until they were out of the peasant's sight, riding through the forest again, before he signalled with his hand for Derryn to ride alongside him.

Derryn leaned across and patted Accolon's knee, the touch a balm on Accolon's nerves. "You have the dagger," Derryn said, dropping the servility from his voice in the absence of witnesses. "I would ask you not to deal with that witch again."

Accolon nodded, his gaze lingering on Derryn. "I would choose not to."

"Where do we rest tonight?" Derryn asked. "Will we reach the Michelham Priory again?"

Accolon looked up, through the branches of the elms they rode beneath, at the darkening sky. It was dusk, and the moon would not rise for some hours.

"When the horses stumble in the dark, then we halt," he said. "No sooner. We sleep in the woods."

Derryn's mare tired first, under the burden of Accolon's weapons and armour, and the men dismounted and led the two horses deeper into the forest, away from the road.

In the darkness, Accolon forced a path into a thicket, and the two of them bullied and whipped the horses through the dense growth.

The beeches overhead cut out the faint starlight, leaving Accolon and Derryn in complete darkness in the middle of the thicket, while the horses stamped and huffed.

Accolon steadied his horse with a hand, keeping his feet away from where he guessed the horse's hooves were, while Derryn swore in the darkness, the sound of a flint bashing onto a knife blade interspersed with cursing.

A tiny flame flickered and caught on the oil-soaked cloth in Derryn's hand, and he squawked and

almost dropped the cloth.

The ground in the clearing was thick with dry leaves from the previous autumn, and the pair of them crouched over the burning cloth, feeding the leaves into the flame, then adding sticks, while trying not to be trampled by the horses.

Once the fire was burning, and the horses settled with their nosebags, Accolon crouched beside the fire and unsheathed the dagger Morgan had gifted him. It was a beautiful blade, long as his hand, sharp enough to slice flesh, runes cast into the handle. A blade fit to kill a king.

Derryn propped a pot amongst the flames, pottage of beans and turnips warming, then Accolon handed the blade across to him. "How are you going to blood the blade?" Derryn asked, sliding the knife across the palm of his hand without cutting himself.

Crouching by the fire, the golden light of the flames dancing off his pale hair and gentle eyes, Derryn was beautiful, and lust stirred inside Accolon, the second hunger along with his empty belly.

"What?" Derryn asked, handing the knife back, his sleeve sliding up his arm, showing delicate skin above the dirt, slender and secret.

"Take the pottage off the fire," Accolon said, reaching out and winding his fingers around Derryn's arm and pushing his sleeve back, showing more of his precious skin.

Derryn smiled for a moment, lowering his eyes, then lifted his gaze to meet Accolon's. "If it will please you."

The leaves behind Accolon crackled and prickled as they fell backward, and Derryn's mare shuffled her feet, moving away from them. Accolon's hands pulled at Derryn's clothing, loosing the belt, pushing the thick wool tunic up.

Derryn's hands found the lacings of Accolon's shirt, fastened by him that morning at Michelham Priory, and freed the ties. Accolon slid his hand across Derryn's belly, beneath his linen under-shirt, and in the firelight, Derryn smiled at him in a way that made Accolon's cock harden.

"So beautiful," Accolon murmured, pressing his mouth to Derryn's neck, kissing through his under-shirt.

Derryn's hands clawed at Accolon's back, so their bodies rubbed together, Derryn's cock long and hard when Accolon pressed his hand over the flesh.

Derryn moaned, loudly enough to startle his mare, who whickered at him, when Accolon crawled down his body and undid his hose. His flesh was urgent when Accolon touched it, and his hands pushed Accolon's shoulders down.

Accolon knew what Derryn wanted, because he wanted it, too. He licked the head of Derryn's

cock, then took as much of the length into his mouth as he could. Derryn writhed, fingers wrapped in Accolon's hair, urging him on.

The times they could do this had been precious, and far between; they had slept in abbeys and monasteries on their journey to Morgan's fortress, in rooms full of sleeping monks and servants. Accolon's cock was aching, but he wanted to bring Derryn release first. In this one thing, Derryn was above him.

Derryn's fingernails dug into Accolon's shoulders, and his flesh hardened in Accolon's mouth; then his seed spilled. Accolon held the seed on his tongue and let Derryn's shaft slip from his lips. The seed he spat carefully onto Derryn's belly.

"Stay still," he said, and Derryn's hands fell to the leaves beneath them, clutching at the soil, while Accolon pulled his own cock from his clothes and began to stroke himself.

The ache started inside him, hot and sharp, then his own seed splashed across Derryn's belly, pooling and trickling.

Accolon's breath was ragged as he reached for the dagger, and Derryn sucked his belly in, the mingled seed spreading across his skin as Accolon drew the flat of the blade through the precious fluid.

When Accolon lifted the knife, their mixed seed sliding down the blade, it gleamed in the flickering firelight, humming in his hand, and the runes shone brighter than the steel of the handle.

Derryn sat up and touched the hilt of the knife, tracing one of the runes with his fingertip. "It's singing, isn't it?"

"Yes." Accolon took a cloth out of the weapons' kit and wiped the knife clean, then bound the blade carefully in the cloth and packed it at the bottom of the weapons' bundle.

"France is pleasant," Derryn said. "Or so I've heard. We could throw it off the boat, on the way there."

"You haven't been to France, have you?"

"No," Derryn said. "But I'm Welsh, and I've just been to Winton and survived."

"I wasted a summer in the French Court as a young man," Accolon said. "Let's consider the Spanish Court as an option."

Derryn shifted the pottage back over the fire. "You practise your Spanish obscenities, and I'll warm our meal."

The knife sat, wrapped in cloth and bound in twine, in a chest in Accolon's bedchamber, for the rest of the summer and autumn. Accolon had a farm estate to attend to, and no one would expect a Lord to be at Court through the busiest time of the year.

Derryn worked beside Accolon, managing the estate accounts, arguing with the household staff, chasing the hounds and lacing Accolon's shirts.

He shared Accolon's bed through the summer, too; eager and delicious when he was awake, snoring and scratching when he slept.

The summons to Court was inevitable, delivered by messenger at the end of harvest. The hooded, nameless figure, arriving the next day, standing at the gates and demanding to speak with Lord Accolon, was a surprise.

Accolon pulled on his gambeson and picked up his knife.

"What do you want me to do?" Derryn asked.

"Get your bow," Accolon said. "And your blades."

Derryn followed Accolon out of the main Hall doors, bow cocked and lifted, circling around the gravel forecourt so he had a clear line of sight at the gates. Accolon walked up to the gates, to where the cloaked person stood.

"Lady Morgan," Accolon said, when the person lifted the hood from their face, revealing dark hair with gray streaks.

"Your squire is suspicious," Morgan said. "I approve."

"Strangers at the gate, who won't give their names," Accolon said. "I'm suspicious, too. Why are you here?"

"To remind you of our agreement, and to ensure you uphold your end of it."

"How?"

Lady Morgan reached into the folds of her cloak and lifted out a black stone with one flat side that had been polished to a high sheen. She held the stone out, for Accolon to see.

"I felt you blood the stone the first night, which surprised me. I had not expected you to be so incisive, or careless with your squires. When my men were unable to find a body the next day, I scried upon you."

The surface of the stone rippled, the black eddying and clearing, and tiny points of light appeared, like stars on a cloudy night. The points of light grew, turning into small candles, and a

view of Accolon's bedchamber spread out, from the candles. On the bed, partially hidden by the bed drapes, and no bigger than Accolon's smallest fingers, were moving figures that could only be himself and Derryn.

Lady Morgan put the stone back in her cloak. "Go to Court. Take the knife. Kill Arthur."

Accolon shook his head, stepping back from Morgan, signaling with his other hand to Derryn.

The arrow whistled past Accolon, and right through Lady Morgan, who melted away like mist in the warmth of the morning sun.

Derryn ran to Accolon, spraying gravel, sliding to a halt as he slid his next arrow into his bow. "Where did she go?" he demanded, spinning around. "What happened?"

"She wasn't here," Accolon said.

Derryn dropped his arrow. "But I could hear her voice."

"Oh, she was speaking."

"What did she say?" Derryn asked.

Accolon put his hand on Derryn's shoulder. "She knows."

"Knows?"

Accolon nodded. "She showed me a scrying stone. She's been watching us."

Derryn blushed, color creeping up his neck and cheeks. "What are you going to do?"

"Go to Winton, with the knife," Accolon said. "Tomorrow."

The knife was still in the weapons' chest, in Accolon's rooms. Derryn lifted the bundle of cloth out and handed it to Accolon, and Accolon undid the twine.

The knife looked just as Accolon remembered it, with shining blade and gleaming runes.

"I'll sleep in the squire's bed tonight," Derryn said.

Accolon bundled the knife back up. "If you wish."

The ride to Winton, through autumn rains, was dismal. Derryn rode in silence, thirty yards behind Accolon, his bow across his lap, and Accolon missed his voice as much as his company under the blankets.

Accolon felt like his skin was cracking and splitting from misery. Derryn hadn't kissed him once since Lady Morgan had visited their gates, hadn't smiled or laughed, and Accolon didn't think he could endure the silence a moment longer.

He stopped his horse, rain trickling down his face and soaking through his cloak.

Derryn rode up behind him, and stopped his horse, too. "My Lord? Are we resting here?"

Here was between two fields of mud, at the beginning of a long descent to a village.

"Go to France," Accolon said. "When we reach Silchester, you can take the turning for Canterbury, then Dover. I have enough coin on me to pay for your passage to France. You'll have to make your own way when you get there, but you're clever and you can read, so you can go to a monastery again if you have to."

"France?" Derryn asked. "By myself?"

"Though maybe Morgan could reach you there," Accolon said. "You should keep going, to Greece, or even to the Holy Lands. Just keep going."

Derryn was silent, and when Accolon looked back at him, Derryn was staring at his hands, where he was holding his saddle.

"Do you want me to?"

"I want to save you," Accolon said. "I'm going to die, in Winton, because either Arthur or Morgan will kill me. You don't need to die, too."

"I wouldn't be a very good squire if I let you ride into battle alone," Derryn said. "You're going to need my bow and knife."

Derryn lifted his head enough that Accolon could see his white cheeks.

"When they take me, and they will, promise me you'll save yourself," Accolon said.

Derryn nodded.

Accolon knew he wasn't going to get anything more from Derryn, so he urged his horse forward again.

They rode into Winton at dusk, during the evening meal, and Accolon stayed with Derryn, settling the horses and carrying their belongings to their room. No one would be surprised at his rudeness, and he was glad he'd cultivated a reputation as a recluse over the years. He wished he'd taken it to its logical conclusion, and become a hermit, then he'd be safe in a cave somewhere, rather than back at Arthur's Court.

Derryn brought him back a slab of bread and a hunk of bird from the kitchen, and they ate in his room, in the cold and by the light of a candle.

Accolon wiped his hands on his britches. "My clean shirt and surcoat, Derryn. I will stand at the back of the Great Hall."

"The knife?" Derryn asked. "Will you take the knife?"

Accolon shook his head and touched Derryn's cheek, where Derryn's beard grew new and light. "No. Not tonight."

Derryn nodded and turned to the packs, unfolding oilcloth and shaking out Accolon's shirt.

The Great Hall was smoky, the fire in the center spitting out fumes, but little heat and light. A servant carried a lit torch past Derryn and Accolon, as they walked around the back of the hall, and Derryn held his hand across his mouth.

"Welcome to winter at Winton," Accolon murmured. "Under-lit, cold, damp and smoky."

"My grandmother's hut was better than this," Derryn whispered, behind Accolon's shoulder. "I think her grave probably was, too."

Accolon chuckled, nodding to Gawain, who lifted a hand to Accolon across the Hall in acknowledgement of his presence.

Arthur turned around, on his dais, and beckoned to Accolon.

Accolon picked his way through the lower orders, the courtiers, musicians and French emissaries, and climbed the steps to Arthur's throne, surprised that Derryn was following behind him closely instead of hiding in the shadows.

"My King," Accolon said, bowing low. "And Queen."

"Lord Accolon," Arthur said. "Your presence at Court is always welcome."

Queen Guinevere's eyes slid past Accolon, to Derryn. "Who is this? Your squire?"

"Derryn of Caernarvon, my squire," Accolon said. "Who wishes to be presented to the King and Queen."

Derryn bowed, appropriately low, and Guinevere spent far too long looking him over.

"Do you play?" Guinevere asked, and Accolon wondered that Arthur didn't hit her.

"A little," Derryn said, and Accolon hid his surprise. It had never occurred to him to ask his squire if he had any musical abilities, though it was possible Guinevere was asking something completely different.

"Attend me tomorrow," Guinevere said, waving her hand. "Bring Lord Accolon with you, and he can hover and loom while you amuse me."

Arthur was speaking with his own squire, who was refilling his goblet, and ignoring Guinevere, so Derryn and Accolon bowed and backed away, through the rows of knights and ladies.

"No Lady Felicity and Lord Brunor," Derryn said, once they were safely against the back wall of the Hall.

"You had time to notice?" Accolon asked.

Derryn shrugged and gestured to one of the servant boys, who brought them jugs of small beer.

"Didn't want you to be killed for something minor," Derryn said.

"You'll get us both slain, flirting with the Queen."

"Sorry," Derryn said. "I didn't mean to."

His voice was hard, like the stones of the wall Accolon was leaning against, and just as cold, so Accolon didn't argue with him.

Instead, Accolon let the fingers of his hand brush against the back of Derryn's hand, where it hung by Derryn's hip.

"Derryn?" Accolon whispered.

Derryn glanced up at him, and he looked as scared as Accolon felt.

"Yes," Derryn said.

Their room was too cold to take their clothes off, but Derryn let Accolon wind all the blankets around both of them, binding them together in the darkness.

"When will you do it?" Derryn whispered. "Do you know?"

Accolon pulled Derryn closer. "When there's a hunt. I'll have to wait, until his guards have fallen behind."

Derryn trembled in Accolon's arms, and Accolon didn't think it was from the cold creeping through the castle.

The Queen's rooms were warm, at least, with a huge fire in the corner and tapestries hung over the walls to keep the drafts out. Accolon declined the chair he was offered and stood against a tapestry, watching in a kind of horror as Derryn kissed Guinevere's hand and was introduced to her ladies-in-waiting.

One of the ladies, small and pert, tried to talk to Accolon, but he fought off her attempts at politeness. Derryn, however, was perched on a stool at the Queen's feet, lute in his hands, laughing and chatting.

"A Welsh song?" Derryn asked. "For your Majesty."

He strummed the lute, and sang something passably polite in a decent voice, while Accolon watched the ladies and thought about how absurd life had become. Accolon had put so much effort into avoiding ladies, with all their complications, and Derryn -- Accolon still didn't know what to call him, apart from his name -- had landed him in a room full of women, all of them fussing and fluffing.

Derryn sang and talked, charming and sweet, and Accolon stood until his feet were numb and his mind was even number. The ladies, and the Queen, seemed content to sew and talk, until the door to the room swung open and King Arthur strode in, hounds behind him.

The ladies giggled and pouted, and Guinevere held out her hand to him, then Arthur took a jug of beer from a servant and joined Accolon at the back of the room.

"Lord Accolon, I hadn't expected to find you here, with the hens," Arthur said, his voice low.

"I'm escorting my squire, Derryn," Accolon said. "I don't think it's safe for him to be here by himself."

"Poor boy," Arthur said.

Derryn must have heard his name, because he bowed to the Queen and stood up, then picked his way through the ladies toward Arthur and Accolon.

"Has your voice failed you? Have you had enough--" Accolon asked, but Derryn was pushing past a girl, running the last steps, blade in his hand...

Arthur froze, but Accolon shouted, "No!" and jumped between Arthur and Derryn, sending the three of them to the flagstones in a welter of tapestries, flailing arms and flashing blade.

The ladies were screaming, high-pitched and persistent, in the background, and Accolon got one arm around Derryn and cracked Derryn's head on the flagstones with the other hand, knocking Derryn out.

The knife slid across the stones, and Arthur shouted, "Don't touch that!" as Derryn went limp in Accolon's grip.

Guards rushed into the room, spears and swords drawn, and Accolon covered Derryn's body with his own protectively, burying his face against Derryn's neck.

"Kill both of us," Accolon said.

"Clear the room, get the ladies out," Arthur ordered.

A moment later, Arthur crouched in front of Accolon and Derryn and said, "No one dies, not until I say so."

Something sharp prodded Accolon in the back, where a guard held a sword, and Accolon reluctantly lifted himself off Derryn's body. Blood dripped on the stones, trickling from Accolon's shoulder, and Accolon pressed a cautious hand against the pain, and found a gash in his clothes.

Arthur frowned and lifted Accolon's hand away, examining the cut. "I'll send the apothecary to you," he said. "Derryn will need attention, too, because that was a solid crack to his head you gave him."

"What will happen?" Accolon asked.

"We're going to my chambers," Arthur said. "I want to know what Morgan did to your squire to make him try and kill me."

In Arthur's chamber, Accolon sat on a bench while the Court apothecary bound a cloth around his arm.

Derryn was a hunched ball of misery on the floor, holding a cloth soaked in witch hazel to his head and refusing to meet Accolon's gaze.

The knife, wrapped in silk, sat on a table, while Arthur's Court magician examined it.

"Morgan's runes could have pierced your protections, your Majesty," the magician said. "The power for this would have had to have come from another death."

Derryn groaned, hiding his face further.

"That will be all," Arthur said, to the apothecary and magician. "Guards, too."

Arthur's chief guard, more troll than man, who rumor said had been with Arthur forever, said, "My Lord, I'm not leaving you alone in a room with a murderer and a knife."

"Lord Accolon is here," Arthur said. "He stopped the attack before."

The chief guard crossed his arms and planted his feet more securely on the flagstones.

Arthur waved his hands. "Stay, just don't listen."

"I never do," the guard said, positioning himself in the doorway.

Arthur sat down on a chair beside the table and poked the knife. "Derryn? What did Morgan threaten you with?"

"She threatened me," Accolon said. "I didn't know Derryn even had the blade. I think Derryn was trying to do the task himself, so I didn't have to."

Arthur turned to stare at Accolon. "You? What hold could she have on you? Lady Felicity?"

"At first," Accolon said. "Then she--"

"Accolon," Derryn said. "You can't..."

Arthur leaned forward, and for the first time, Accolon found out what it was like to meet Arthur's gaze.

"What?" Arthur asked.

Derryn crawled across the floor, through the straw, to Accolon's feet, and Accolon helped him up, so he was leaning unsteadily against Accolon.

"Derryn is everything to me," Accolon said. "Morgan saw, in her scrying stone. I tried to make him go to France, so he would be safe, but he wouldn't."

Arthur exhaled sharply. "My blindness astounds me. My apologies, Lord Accolon, for every time I have not seen you."

Accolon blinked, and Derryn lifted his head, making a small noise of pain.

"What will happen to Derryn?" Accolon asked. "Will he be killed?"

Arthur stood up, then knelt in front of Accolon and Derryn, and Accolon could hear the King's knees creaking in complaint.

"Derryn?" Arthur said gently, taking Derryn's hand. "I don't want to have you killed just for trying to save Accolon. You were doing what any squire should, what any husband should."

Accolon glanced at Derryn, blood drying in pale hair, and tried the word 'husband' in his mind.

"Accolon?" Arthur said, and Accolon jumped. "You hate Court? Despise us all?"

"I've always tried to separate my personal distaste for attending Court and enduring the civilities here from my respect for yourself and the Queen," Accolon said. "Some of the knights, however, are fools."

"And my half-sister is a treasonous attempted-murderess, who I am bound to continue to endure here. If the two of you will leave Court, and not return, I will consider the matters of honor settled between us. I'll speak with Morgan myself, so she knows you are both released from her control."

Derryn lifted his head. "Your Majesty?"

"I'd suggest you didn't come back, Derryn," Arthur said. "As I'm going to tell the Court I killed you myself. The family of whoever you also murdered with that knife is free to pursue you to resolve their own debt of honor."

"There was no other death," Accolon said. "I give you my word."

Arthur glanced at the blade on the table. "Interesting. Your word is adequate. The Court will be the weaker without both of you as knights. If the Picts prove to be particularly troublesome, and the border falls, I'll be calling on you both still, so Derryn should choose another name and be ready to cut his hair off."

Accolon tried not to sigh at the thought of another winter spent in the icy mud, fighting the Picts, and he thought he was successful. He wanted to ask about Morgan, too, but there didn't seem to be a polite way to suggest a little fratricide to the king.

Arthur stood up, looking tired and worn suddenly. "Go, now. I have to go settle the hens."

Accolon bowed, and Arthur patted his head, then Derryn's.

"Look after him," Arthur told Derryn. "He's very shy."

Arthur stalked out, and they heard him calling, "Guinevere! I told you not to torment the squires! You have got to stop this!"

The guard turned to look at Derryn and Accolon. "Cloaks, then your room, then horses," the guard said. "Not that I heard anything."

Accolon's Hall, and his chambers, had never been so welcome.

The servants rushed, lighting the fires and candles, and handing Accolon and Derryn jugs of beer and platters of food.

Accolon sat down, in a chair on one side of the fire, and Derryn sat opposite him, and they exchanged glances over the back of the servant who was trying to coax more than a flicker out of the kindling in the grate.

"You could light the fire, Derryn," Accolon said.

"Or you could," Derryn said. "Since I'm a knight now, too."

"We could get a new squire," Accolon said. "How many squires are too many, in a year? This will be my third."

The servant fumbled, and Derryn made an unhappy noise in his throat and got out of his chair to kneel in front of the fire.

"Give that to me," he said. "Get out of here."

When the door had closed behind the servant, and Derryn's face was lit by the first flames of the fire, Accolon asked, "How's your head?"

"Sore, from where someone hit it against the stone floor," Derryn said. "Your arm?"

"Someone cut it open," Accolon said. "It hurts."

He leaned forward, closer to the fire and Derryn. "Husband?"

Derryn smiled sideways at Accolon. "It's not a word that I had thought to use, but if you would like to, you can.

Derryn lit the fire in the bedchamber, too, because Accolon's servants were idiots and needed to be yelled at, and Accolon let him yell.

"Are you going to shout at the new squire, too?" Accolon asked, pulling his shirt over his head and handing it to Derryn.

Derryn tossed the shirt on the floor, and threw his own after it.

"Certainly. Someone has to, and you won't."

In bed, Derryn scraped his teeth across the top of Accolon's undamaged shoulder, making Accolon hiss. Derryn's hands were gentle, though, across Accolon's belly, sliding down to touch his cock.

Derryn kissed where he'd bitten, and his fingers tightened, making Accolon jerk his hips. Derryn pushed with his knee, and Accolon let him roll them both onto their sides.

This, the moment of strangeness, still left Accolon breathless and uncertain. But then, a moment later, Derryn was so close, touching him, whispering to him.

Between what Derryn was doing and the feel of Derryn's hand on his cock, Accolon couldn't move, and couldn't stop himself, it was too good.

Derryn groaned, suddenly and sharply, and fell against Accolon's back, breathing hard, his arm wrapped tightly around Accolon's chest.

With the roar of the fire, and the heat of Derryn's body, Accolon was warm for the first time since they'd left for Winton.

END