

VOYAGER 15

SNEAK PEEK

THE DEVIL'S DIADEM

SARA DOUGLASS

Maeb Langtofte That Was, Her Testimony

In the name of our Saviour, the heavenly Lord Jesu, and of his beloved mother, the blessed Virgin Mary, greetings. Pray hear this testimony from your humble servant, Maeb Langtofte that was, on the eve of her dying. May sweet Jesu and his Holy Mother forgive my sins, and let me pass in peace, and forgive me the manner of my passing.

My faithful servant and priest Owain of Crickhoel writes down these words and in some places will speak for me when I no longer have the breath. Brother Owain has taken my confession and offered me Godly advice these past thirty years. He has been a good and faithful friend to me and I pray that his reward in the next life will reflect this.

My life has been one of sin, but no sin has been greater than that of my young womanhood. Pray sweet Jesu forgive me, forgive me, forgive me. I did what I thought best and yet I am stained with mortal sin. Pray sweet Jesu do not apportion blame on Brother Owain for what he writes. His pen may wield the words, but it was I who wielded the sin.

Sweet Lord forgive me my lack of trust, and forgive me my lack of learning, for in both I have failed you in this life. I pray that in my next life I can redeem both sins and failures to you. I thank you from my heart for the gift of the Falloway Man, for without him I could have no hope of redemption. Your grace and love of this sinner, this womanly fool, is unending.

But I waste time, Owain, for I do not think I have long left in this mortal life. So we shall begin, and it is fitting I begin with that day I met he without sin, the one, shining, uncomplicated love of my life, Lord Stephen of Pengraic.

Part One

Rosseley Manor

Chapter One

His footsteps tripped down the great stone staircase as if from heaven – their passage rich with joy and authority. Their lightness and pattern told me he was tall, athletic and undoubtedly young; happy, for those footsteps surely danced in their delight of life; confident, and therefore a member of the great nobility who lived in this manor house, for no one else would have dared to so skip through the majesty of the central vestibule.

He would be one of the older sons, a prince in bearing if not quite in rank.

There was a flash of gold and silver as he passed the doorway of the little shadowy alcove in which I sat, waiting. He was tall, and golden-haired, bedecked with jewels and vibrant fabrics and with a glint of steel at his hip.

I was dazzled, even by this brief glimpse of a member of the Pengraic family.

Then, unbelievably, he was back at the doorway, and stepping into my alcove.

I rose hastily from the rickety stool on which I had waited, and dipped in brief courtesy. I kept my eyes down, and surreptitiously pressed my hands into my skirts so that they may not betray my nervousness.

I prayed my French was gentle enough to sound sweet to his ears. I had spent too much of my childhood practicing my English with the village children, and not enough perfecting my courtly French with those of more seemly rank.

“What have I found here, hiding in the doorkeeper’s alcove?” he said, and the warmth in his voice made me dare to raise my eyes.

He was of my age, perhaps nineteen or twenty years, and therefore must be the oldest son, Lord Stephen. His hair was light wheaten gold, his fine beard similar, his eyes a deep cornflower blue. His clothes were of a richness I had never seen before, his tunic all heavy with gold and silver embroidery that his noble mother must have stitched for him.

“Rumour has it that doorkeeper Alaric has only rats in here for company, not beautiful young maidens.”

“My lord, I am Mistress Maeb —”

“Mistress Maeb Langtofte!” he said, and I was amazed that he should know of my name. “My mother told me she expected a new woman to attend her. But what do you here? In this dark hole? Has no one announced you yet?”

“The man at the door —”

“Alaric.”

“Yes, my lord. Alaric. He asked me to wait here while he sent word to your lady mother.”

“Alaric has always been the fool ... or maybe not, for if I had found you suddenly at my door I, too, might have secreted you away in my bed chamber.”

I glanced at the tiny cramped bed nestled into a hollow in the thick stone wall — the alcove had not the floor space for both bed and stool — then met Stephen’s eyes.

And then, the Virgin help me, I flushed deeply at the import of his words.

“I only jest, Maeb,” he said gently, and, at the care in his voice, combined with my overall awe at his presence and kindness, I felt my heart turn over completely. “My mother has been resting this afternoon, and thus you have been kept waiting, for foolish Alaric must not have wanted to disturb her. Had he told any of us you were here, we would have seen to it you were welcomed far more warmly, and far sooner. Alaric is a fool, indeed.”

Lord Stephen paused to study me, and the gentleness in his eyes and face increased even more, if that were possible.

“You cannot wait here,” he said. “I shall escort you to my mother myself —”

“Stephen,” said a voice, and we both jumped.

“My lord,” Stephen said, and half bowed as he turned.

A man stood in the alcove doorway — he could not have entered unless he had wanted to completely fill the tiny space of this alcove with the crush of our bodies — an aged and wearied form of the youthful vitality which stood before me.

It could only be Lord Stephen’s father, Raife de Mortaigne, the Earl of Pengraic.

Unlike his son, Lord Pengraic’s tone was hard and devoid of compassion, and my eyes once more dropped to the floor, and my hands clutched again within the poor woollen skirts of my kirtle.

“You have no time to waste in idle chatter,” Lord Pengraic said to his son. “The bargemen await and we must be away. Have you said your farewells to your lady mother?”

"I have, my lord," Stephen said.

"Then to the barge," the earl said.

Stephen inclined his head, managing to shoot me an unreadable look as he did so, then stepped past his father and disappeared from my sight.

The air felt chill and the world an emptier place without him close. I was amazed that so few moments in his company could have made so profound an impression on me.

To my consternation the earl did not turn immediately and follow his son.

"Who are you?" he said.

I dipped again in courtesy, and repeated my name.

"Langtofte ..." the earl said. "Your father was one of the sons of Lord Warren of Langtofte, yes?"

"Yes, my lord. Sir Godfrey Langtofte." A son left poor with little land, and who left me yet poorer in worldly goods and hope when he left what property he had to the Templars at his death five months ago. My mother, might the Virgin Mary watch over her always, had long been in her grave. My father had left me with the name of minor nobility, but nothing else of any worth, not even brothers and sisters to comfort me.

"And so now you are here," the earl said, "waiting upon my wife, which doubtless you think a prettier life than one spent at your devotions in a nunnery, which must have been the only other choice available to you."

His tone hurt, and I kept my eyes downcast, lest he see the humiliation within them.

"Mind your ambitions do not grow too high, Mistress Langtofte. Do not think to cast the net of your aspirations over my son —"

"My lord!" I said, now stung to look at him too directly. "I did not —"

"He would think you nothing but a dalliance, and would ruin your name yet further, and you would need to grace whatever nunnery I banish you to with a brawling infant of no name whatever, for do not expect *me* to allow it the de Mortaigne —"

"My lord! I —"

"Think not to speak over me!" he said, and I took a step backward, pushing over the stool, so wary was I of the contempt in his face.

Pengraic was one of the greatest nobles in England, not only the most powerful of the Marcher Lords, but also close confidante of the king. He could destroy my life with a word.

"Be careful of your place here, Mistress Langtofte," he said, now very soft, "for it rests only on my sufferance."

With that he turned on his heel and was gone, and a moment later I heard shouting as the earl's party moved down to the great barge I had seen waiting earlier at the pier on the Thames.

I stood there, staring at the empty space which still seemed to me to throb with his anger and contempt. My heart thudded in my chest, and I bit my lip to keep myself from tears.

The earl's unfairness knifed deep, particularly since it contrasted so brutally with the warmth of his son. I eased myself with the notion that Lord Stephen must have received his gentleness and kindness from his lady mother, and that she would keep me under a similarly gentle and most noble wing, and shield me from the unjustified anger of her lord.

Thus began my life in the Pengraic household.

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