

## Chapter 1: A Small Massacre

I was on the beach at Llansteffan with my brother Goronwy watching the sunlight winking on the water. In April 1093, the fifteenth year of my father's reign as King of Deheubarth, I was twelve and Goronwy was thirteen. Our mother complained we were too old to play together. Goronwy should spend more time practising at the archery butts and I should be indoors, improving my very poor skills on the harp. But the sun was shining, and our mother was heavy and sluggish with the child she carried in her belly, and we took advantage that she did not see us slip out of the compound and skid and slide fast down the hill to the yellow sands that we could not resist. Goronwy was building a splendid sand palace with a moat and a rivulet that ran to the edge of the sea and filled up more and more with each rush of the tide. 'It's your palace in Powys,' he told me, referring to my betrothal to Prince Owain ap Cadwgan and that I would, in time, be the king's wife in Powys, the lands adjacent to our own.

Something black was half-submerged in the sand between my feet. I bent and picked it up, blowing off the sand and turning with glee to my brother. 'Look, Goronwy! I've found a claw *at The Claw!*' We called this place The Claw because of the shape made by the three rivers that flowed into the bay here – the Taf, the Twyi and the Gwendraeth. It wasn't a shape you could see. You had to imagine it, as if you were a bird flying high above, looking down at the three blue river talons reaching up into the land. Goronwy did not reply, absorbed in his building, so I turned back to the sea, twisting the bird's claw between my thumb and finger.

I remember the sun shone in my eyes as I looked out to the sea and the next trickle of surf. The breeze whipped loose strands of my black hair into my mouth, and I had to hold it from my face with both hands cupped to my brow, shading my eyes and opening them as wide as they would go. 'I think I can hear bells ringing under the sea,' I said. There was no response from Goronwy, so I turned around to protest it was true and ran toward his palace meaning to plant my claw in its crest as a sort of grisly banner when something made me look up to the fort on the cliff above us. Perhaps a stone skittering down the steep rock face or a blinding flash of sun on armour. I looked up and saw flames. 'Goronwy, the fort's on fire!'

He ignored me, slapping his sandy turrets into shape, thinking I was feigning. He often teased that I was a spinner of tales.

I tugged at his sleeve. 'No, look! Really!' We screwed up our eyes to see the fort high above us. There were horsemen in armour milling on the road and gouts of black smoke staining the blue sky. 'Father!' I said. Our father and older brothers had been away for the last few months, campaigning against the Norman invaders.

'No, it's not ...' Goronwy started to say, but then he spun swiftly to the right, where horsemen were galloping down the long beach toward us. Not the Welsh warriors we knew but Norman warriors we had heard about, sheathed in chain mail with conical helmets and metal strips projecting down their noses. Their big *destriers* kicked up spray at the water's edge as they rapidly closed the distance between us. I pulled at Goronwy's sleeve, twisting my body toward the dense undergrowth at the foot of the cliff where I knew places we could hide. The horses kept coming. I could see the whites of their eyes battling the pain at their mouths, the foam at the corners of their black lips. Now I could hear the clanking weapons above the sound of the sea.

One man at the front of the group leant forward in the saddle to shout in Welsh. 'Boy! Are you the *edling*, the son of Rhys?'

'Lie!' I hissed, still pulling at his arm.

Goronwy resisted my pulling and turned to face them. 'I am Goronwy, prince of Deheubarth, son of Rhys,' he yelled, since he had been drilled to do so.

'We have to hide,' I said desperately, but it was already too late. 'Goronwy!' I moaned, pulling at him, but he stood his ground as they were upon us, milling around in a crowd of hooves, shields and sea-spray. One of them swept me up, slung me unceremoniously on my stomach across his saddle, a hand gripped in my belt. He turned his horse back toward the path up to the fort. Upside down, the long black rope of my plait dangled. I heard a cry from my brother and I tried to see what was happening, but there was just a blur of spurs and boots, the legs of the horses, their snorting. I closed my eyes on the sound of blades grating as they were drawn from their scabbards.

My captor's horse hauled up the steep path to the fort, and I tasted acrid smoke that roiled around us like thunderclouds. I felt sick, jolted and bruised in every direction, the breath knocked from me, the warrior's hand heavy on my back keeping me in place. We clattered under the

gateway, and I saw, still upside down, a dire scene of confusion. Servants and the few warriors my father had left to guard us lay dead, their blood congealing in dark red pools. I recognised the features of my father's huntsman, but many of the corpses were too mangled or bloodied to tell who they were. Buildings were in flames, their timbers cracking loudly, heat washing over me as we passed close to the conflagration. A roof beam lost its hold and fell with a thud that shook the earth, carrying burning thatch with it, sending out more fire spores. The beautifully carved lintel that had stood proudly over the hall door lay on the ground, splintered in half. A small group of women and children had been herded into a corner and were eerily quiet as Norman warhorses milled around them. The iron scent of blood was in the air, but my nostrils seared with the charring heat.

The man who had swept me up, plucked me again by my belt and dropped me to the ground. 'Nest!' my mother screeched. I got to my feet, rubbing at my bruised upper arms, searching in the direction of her voice. She lumbered out between the horses, oblivious to their efforts to corral her, and grabbed me by my sore arms, causing me to cry out. Her white face was streaked with tears and smuts. Her belly was huge with the child she carried. I struggled to comprehend what I was seeing: the sudden transformation of my father's well-ordered court, his *llys*, to this wreck and chaos, the translation of my mother from stately king's wife to grimed, distraught woman.

'Mother. Sit down,' I said slowly, trying to give my numbed mind time to catch up with the evidence of my eyes, realising my legs were jellied and I needed to sit myself. We stumbled toward a mounting block and sat together, her hands roaming over me, searching for injuries. Two bodies hung from the metalwork above the well, which had been turned into a makeshift gibbet. Their faces were contorted and their tongues lolled, but I recognised my father's bard and my playfellow, the cook's boy, and turned my face away. I had been staring blindly into space with my mouth open for a long moment when my mother asked, close to my ear, 'Did they find your brother?' I nodded miserably, and she fell against me, wailing.

A man in Norman dress spoke to me harshly in Welsh, snapping me out of the shocked trance I had entered. 'Girl! Keep the woman quiet! The lord won't stand for no more screeching. He's getting a headache.' He laughed, showing teeth that were brown and jagged.

'Mother, calm,' I soothed her, trying to also soothe myself. She shook against me as I stroked her hair, sobbing in a low, moaning voice like an animal, rolling and rocking. I tightened

my grip protectively around her, hearing hooves skitter to a stop beside us, and looked up into the face of a warrior staring down at me. He looked peculiarly pig-like, with dark eyes peering around the nose-guard of his helmet and his long, brown moustaches bristling on either side of it. His horse and armour were splendid, so I guessed he was the leader of the attack. My eyes travelled over the fine red and gold silk of his saddle cloth, the rich red of the tabard he wore over chain mail, and finally I noticed the open golden filigree at the tip of his sword scabbard slowing dripping blood in a small vermilion pool close to his horse's hoof.

He called out, 'FitzWalter!' Another man rode up beside us in answer to the red silk man's command. I understood a few words of their language since my father at one time had Norman hostages in our household. I gathered the leader was giving orders about us, my mother and me, to the second man, FitzWalter. 'Take the girl to Cardiff and ...' I missed some words, drowned out by the racket of distress all around us. 'We have most of the forts now, but I must get to Pembroke before Cadwgan.' FitzWalter acknowledged the commands. The *llys*, I thought, my father's forts that our household moved between: Dinefwr, Pembroke, Narberth, Whitland, Carmarthen and here, my favourite place, my poor Llansteffan, aflame and running with blood, its elegant pillars splintered and blackened, its gold and silvery tapestries turned to smouldering ash.

My mother was gripped, pulled from me, and loaded into a cart that clattered out of the castle under escort, while the soldier named FitzWalter, leapt down from his horse, picked me up with ease and placed me on a small palfrey, tying my hands carefully so that I could move them enough to hold on to the reins and guide the horse but not do much else. 'I hope you can ride well, little princess,' he said, grinning. This one had a row of even white teeth and a full red mouth beneath the nose-guard of his helmet. His eyes were a washed-out blue colour and he seemed young. His Welsh was terrible, but I got the rough idea of what he was saying.

'I ride better than you ever will,' I told him.

A laugh burst from him in response and he shouted to his lord, 'She has spirit, this little Welsh girl!' The lord twisted in his red and gold saddle to stare at me and when FitzWalter told him what I had said, they laughed at me together. The young soldier remounted, signalling to six other soldiers to follow us, and he led my palfrey out through the gateway and palisade and onto the road. Through eyes smarting with smoke and grief, I looked around as we passed the blazing wrecks of the villagers' thatched houses and the hay wains of the royal estate, the *maerdref*. The

fields and garden strips that provisioned my father's court were blackened and trampled and more corpses, surprised in the midst of feeding the chickens or darning a sock, sprawled in the embrace of the land they had tilled and cared for.

Before long, we overtook the cart carrying my mother and the small escort of soldiers with her. 'Mother!' She looked at me, her face ashen, her mouth trembling terribly, forcing the remnant of a smile for me as we passed her.

For the first hour, I shook in the saddle like an old woman with palsy and fought to quell nausea and shock. Every fibre in my body thrummed and thrashed, but slowly I calmed myself until eventually I could shout in Welsh at FitzWalter: 'Where are we going?'

FitzWalter spoke over his shoulder to me. 'Cardiff Castle. We'll be five days on the road, so save your energy for riding, not talking, little princess.'

'How is it you speak Welsh, though so badly?' I called out.

He turned his horse to look at me, laughing at my insult. 'We have Welsh scouts and translators in our service,' he said. 'I learned.'

'Scouts? Traitors you mean.'

He ignored that. 'I've been in Wales most of my life, first sent as squire to Lord Arnulf de Montgomery when I was seven, and lately as captain of his guard. I've picked up Welsh over the years. Now I am in such exalted company as yours, I will of course try to bring more polish to my language. Perhaps you will teach me?'

I turned my face away from him. So the man in red silk who led the attack was Arnulf de Montgomery. I knew his father was the Norman earl of Shrewsbury, with lands on the English border.

The men all called me '*petite princesse*,' with mockery in their voices, as they gave me water and biscuits and tied me tight at night when we slept on the ground wrapped in cloaks. Waking in the morning, I immediately longed for the oblivion of sleep to return, when I did not hear the scrape of swords extracted from scabbards as the riders surrounded my brother on the beach, did not feel overwhelming fear and grief, and remember the misery on my mother's face.

We rode through mud and rain, skirting bogs and swamps, through dense forest lined with great oaks, and cruelly carpeted with gay primroses and bluebells, and more truly with gorse and brambles.

‘What has happened to my father?’ I ventured to the captain when we stopped on the second night and were eating the lean supplies. He had removed his helmet to reveal a sweaty head of dark blond hair. He shook his head impatiently, too tired to mangle Welsh any more, beckoning at the scout, a turncoat Welshman who came and answered my questions.

‘Dead,’ he told me. ‘King Rhys is dead, lady, and his son Cynan.’

I knew it already, but speaking it seemed to make it so. My mouth trembled, but I blinked away tears that I did not want these men to see. ‘How did they die?’ I demanded.

‘Rhys died in the battle at Aberhonddu, killed by the Norman lord of Brecknock, Bernard de Neufmarché, and Cynan was drowned in a lake. Afterwards.’ He looked shiftily at the captain when he said that. I forced the image of my valiant brother spluttering in filthy water from my mind’s eye.

‘And what of my other brother, Idwal, who was at the battle?’ I did not want to ask and hear that he was also dead, but I needed to know.

‘He was captured and imprisoned.’

FitzWalter said something swiftly and irritably in French, and I could not understand him. ‘Sir Gerald says enough talking,’ the scout said. ‘Sleep now, lady.’

I looked at my caretaker, Gerald FitzWalter. The sweat had dried in his fair hair and it curled softly at his ears like a girl’s. He was young – perhaps only seventeen. I saw in his posture and the dullness of his eyes that his fatigue was bone deep.

I lay awake, thinking about the words I overheard from Arnulf de Montgomery at Llansteffan: ‘We have all the forts, but I must get to Pembroke before Cadwgan.’ My father held peace in Deheubarth for many years and had been the only Welsh ruler to come to terms with the first Norman invader, William the Conqueror. The bards sang of that old Norman king riding into our lands and honouring King Rhys with his friendship. Father also defended our lands from the aggressions of neighbouring rulers, including Cadwgan, king in Powys, and promised me as bride-price to Cadwgan’s son Owain to keep the peace. I had been betrothed to Owain by proxy and never seen him.

Did the words of Arnulf de Montgomery mean Cadwgan had invaded Deheubarth again, in treacherous alliance with these enemies? My father always said Cadwgan was ‘tricky’ and I understood this was meant as humorous understatement. The men of my father’s warband, his *teulu*, spoke of Cadwgan’s frequent changes of allegiance: first to a neighbouring Welsh king,

then to the Norman earls on the border. Arnulf de Montgomery said he was making for Pembroke, the greatest of Deheubarth's strongholds. If Cadwgan had betrayed my father, did that annul my betrothal? I could not be sure from the few words I had understood. In any case, I was a captive and the future was a gaping, jagged hole before me. My uncle Rhydderch was my only hope since he was not at the battle in Aberhonddu. Perhaps he would rescue me on this journey, or treat a ransom for me.

I lay on the cold, hard ground thinking of my father, how he would never cup his big hand gently on the top of my head and call me 'my blue-eyed, dimpled beauty' or yell across the compound, looking for me: 'Where is that miniature queen?' He would never again squash me to his hip when he returned weary from battle with the gladness to be home brimming in his eyes. I determined I would be no vanquished hostage. For my father, my mother and brothers, I would be that queen in my heart no matter what came next.

On the third day of the journey, my horse was lame, and they put me in the back of a cart, bound with rough ropes about my hands and ankles. I heard an irritating noise and realised it was my own teeth chattering against the chill air. I peered into the dark trees lining the road, looking for rescue, but none came. Rain began to lash us as we moved off again. The small stony path we followed soon turned into the bed of a rapid stream. It took us diagonally across the dark green of a field toward a gateway where cows had been called for milking and churned the ground to deep mud. One of the soldiers cried out as he sunk up to his hips in black ooze. 'Jesu!'

'Don't move!' FitzWalter shouted to him. 'Stay completely still.' FitzWalter directed the other soldiers, who were laughing at their companion's plight, to lead the horses and my cart carefully around the firmer edges of the morass and through the gate while he pulled a small axe from his saddlebag and chopped two stout branches from a tree. One, he laid down on the ground for the man to hold onto to secure him from sinking any further, and the other branch he threw to the soldier. 'Lever yourself out, slowly, that's it!' He coaxed the anxious man gently, as if speaking to a nervy horse.

'My boot! I've lost my boot to the devil's grip!'

'Never mind your boot. We can find you a new boot. Just keep levering yourself and your bootless foot out of there.'

Slowly, the soldier emerged from the slimy grasp of the earth with lumps and smears of thick wet soil clinging to every inch of him, so that he looked like a mud monster rising from the

sod. His eyes and smile shone frantically through the muck mask covering his face. 'I thought it had me there!' he said, his humour on the edge of hysteria, as FitzWalter yanked him to the drier land, clapping him on the back.

We resumed our progress through the rain and mire, eventually finding a drier path and FitzWalter called a halt to the tramp of horses and men. The cart I sat in stopped abruptly and tied as I was, I toppled over in it, banging hard against the edge of a wooden chest. Later, black bruising bloomed from my shoulder to my elbow. FitzWalter, hearing me whimper, slid from his horse and climbed into the back of the cart to right me. He propped soft bundles of blanket-rolls around me so that I could not fall again. He took off his cloak and wrapped it around my shoulders, looking with concern into my face. 'I have a sister your age,' he said. You would call his actions kind, but in those days, on that journey, I had no notion there could ever be such a word or feeling.

He leapt down from the cart and stepped back up into his stirrup, his movements fluid and assured, giving the order for the cavalcade to move off. FitzWalter's cloak had a well-lined hood, but my hands were tied and I could not lift it to cover my head. I blinked at the water melding my eyelashes together. FitzWalter glanced back at me and rode swiftly again to the cart. His horse walked slowly alongside as he leant across toward me. Tutting and frowning, he lifted the hood over my draggled head and shook his own. My face streamed with rain. He took off a gauntlet and wiped my cheek gently with the back of his hand and then carefully, peering at me like a mother with her child, swiped his thumb under my wet eyes. He tried to get me to look at him, cupping his hand under my chin and turning my face to him, but I kept my eyes away from his. 'You *are* a beauty,' he said, 'even soaked to the skin.'

'You might speak thus of a horse, or a whore,' I told him in Welsh, around my chattering teeth, 'but I am the daughter of a king and you will speak to me with respect.' Now I stared at him.

Since he had given me his cloak, his hair was plastered to his head and water streamed down his cheeks. His mouth was open and then began to curve at one side into a smile, as it took him a moment to absorb and understand what I had said. One pale brown eyebrow arched. He inclined his dripping head to me. 'Well, that I will Princess Nest, for you have spirit and a sharp tongue as well as very fetching dimples.' I frowned, but he laughed and turned his horse back to the cavalcade before I could think of another retort to his impertinence.



We were riding across the lands of Morgannwg, that the Normans call Glamorgan. After the downpour, the sky cleared quickly to blue and sunshine. We rode through fertile fields with crops starting to push green through the mud, and now and then I gained a glimpse of the coast and distant harbours. We were about a mile from the sea, following a large river. Beyond the bend of the muddy waters, across a wide flat plain, a fortress was built on a rise in the land, surrounded by trees and shrubs, and all around the foot of the fortress were numerous thatched houses. It was one of the largest settlements I had ever seen. We rode up the main street between houses and shops where people cowered away from the soldiers and horses and craned with curiosity at me and my bindings, until we were suddenly confronted with an immensely long high wooden palisade that stretched further than the eye could easily comprehend and was fronted by a deep water-filled ditch. 'Cardiff Castle,' one of the soldiers told me, noticing how I had twisted round in the cart to look with amazement at this vast structure. 'It's built on top of what's left of an old Roman fort. King William the Conqueror founded it.' I rearranged my face to an unimpressed expression, but kept my eyes fixed on it. The men encouraged the horses and my cart onto the drawbridge, across the ditch, moving toward the shadow of the three-storeyed wooden gatehouse that bristled with soldiers armed with bows and spears.

The truth of things done should be committed to writing. Now, many years since those grievous events, as I look back on them as an old woman instead of the naïve girl I was then, I see how this story began long before I was born, in 1066 when the Norman duke, William the Conqueror, crossed the English sea from Normandy, killed the Anglo-Saxon king, Harald, at Hastings, took the kingdom of the English for himself and parcelled out those lands to his Norman barons. To begin with, the Norman earls on the Welsh borders were stationed to guard against Welsh incursions into the English realm, and among them was Roger de Montgomery, the earl of Shrewsbury, whose family features large in my story. Working with the policy that attack is the best defence, those Norman lords began to advance their territorial claims into Wales and there they met with fierce opposition from the Welsh kings and their kin.

William the Conqueror, or William the Bastard as he was also known, died in 1087, not long after I was born, and left behind him three sons: Robert Curthose, the eldest, who became duke of Normandy; William Rufus, the second surviving son, who became king of the English; and Henry, the youngest, who was bequeathed only money and received no lands or title. For

years to come, those three sons fought each other and struggled with divisions and rebellions among their Norman barons. Peacefulness and loyalty were not Norman traits, but then neither were they the habits of the Welsh warrior aristocracy from which I sprang.

A few days before I had stood all unthinking on the beach at Llansteffan with Goronwy, William Rufus, king of the English, lay on his deathbed in Gloucester. The king's younger brother Henry sat just outside the sick chamber, away from any possible contagion, listening to his brother's stertorous, salivaed breaths, reading Xenophon's manual on hunting. Henry would rather have been outside in the sun-striped forest chasing a hart instead of just reading about it, still it could not be helped. William, it seemed, was going to die and had no heir. Henry waited calmly. In the event, if it came to it, he knew exactly what he would do and who he could count on.

Around the same time and some sixteen miles west of Gloucester by the Welsh reckoning, the tall, fat, Norman lord, Bernard de Neufmarché, stood in the mud before his partly built castle at Aberhonddu, close to the Black Mountains where the river Usk meets the river Honddu, looking down at the bloodied corpse of Rhys, the great King of Deheubarth – my father – laid out before him like a gutted trophy stag. I imagined Neufmarché nodding his blood-and-mud-tousled dark head to himself, thinking, good, very good. Neufmarché guessed that King William must be dead by now and Duke Robert would soon cross the British Sea from Normandy and claim the English throne. The duke would be grateful to Neufmarché for taking this initiative. He might reward him with the dead king's lands in Deheubarth and that would make Neufmarché as mighty a Norman baron in Wales as Roger de Montgomery. Still staring at the corpse, Neufmarché, I suppose, allowed himself a satisfied grin that creased the folds of his fat face.

Three days later and fourteen Welsh miles further west into Wales from Aberhonddu, Arnulf de Montgomery, the fifth and youngest son of the earl of Shrewsbury and therefore hungry for his own conquered lands, was concealed with a small band of warriors near Llansteffan in the woods known as The Sticks. One of those warriors, Gerald FitzWalter, had recently been knighted and meant to demonstrate his mettle to his lord in the coming skirmish. Arnulf's spy sped the message from Aberhonddu of King Rhys' death. The truce William the Conqueror made with King Rhys held for twelve years, but now Rhys was dead, and Arnulf saw the whole of south-west Wales for the taking. He would be damned if Cadwgan or Neufmarché would beat him to it. He would take the fort at Llansteffan, then Carmarthen, then Pembroke and

prove to his father and Duke Robert that he had enterprise. He believed he deserved to be rewarded with the kingdom of Deheubarth – the kingdom that belonged to my family.

## Chapter 2: Cardiff Castle

As we moved across the drawbridge to enter Cardiff Castle, I shivered uncontrollably from so many wet hours on the road. My damp woollen clothes clung coldly to me like riverweed. Two porters strained to push open the huge doors to allow us to ride into the bailey, then the doors were banged shut and barred behind us. Four large dogs on chains lunged barking and were called to heel by a stableboy. Inside, the castle was a great rectangular compound surrounded by a high wooden palisade with several thatched wooden buildings that did not look so different from my father's *llys*, but what *was* different was the great grassy mound that rose some forty feet high, occupying the far left quarter of the compound and with its own moat and wooden wall. A steep causeway could be ridden up but ended abruptly in air several feet before the palisade surrounding the three-storeyed keep on the high, green mound.

We rode toward the largest building in the lower bailey, which I guessed to be the main hall. A woman on an upper storey was beating a blanket slung over a windowsill and she stilled her labour to look down at us. Another young woman, richly dressed in green and miniver sheltered from the wind in the doorway. She watched FitzWalter lift me from the cart and carry me toward her. Like my mother, her belly was swollen huge with a child. She stood aside, and he carried me in with the woman following, speaking swiftly to him and without pause. I was too tired to try to comprehend the torrent of her words, but I watched her, my chin bumping on his shoulder. Her most prominent feature was her stomach, straining the costly green fabric of her gown, advancing before her, as she walked with her feet placed flat and pointing away from each other in a V shape. Her feet and hands were large and broad, like a man's.

FitzWalter set me down on a bench close to the central hearth sunk in the floor. Slowly, I began to feel human again. Blood returned painfully to my extremities, rushing round the outer circuits of my ears. The woman tutted at the ropes on my wrists and the sores beneath. She said something angrily to FitzWalter, who knelt and cut my bindings with his dagger, then stood and held his palms out in apology to the woman. Exhausted as I was, I struggled to pick out the few Norman words I knew from their rapid speech together.

‘Does she understand any French? *Langue d’Oil? Français?*’ she demanded, turning to me. I shook my head and FitzWalter frowned since he knew I did understand a little, but he said nothing. The woman rolled her eyes and turned away to supervise the reception of the men. She had ale and bread waiting on the trestle for them. I watched three servants fuss around FitzWalter, one holding a brass bowl beneath his hands, while another poured water over his hands and the third handed him a towel. A maid set bread and a beaker in front of me, but I did not move to touch it. I flexed my whitened fingers as they recovered from their constraint.

The woman said something more to FitzWalter, and he lifted me up and carried me upstairs to a chamber where a fire burned in the hearth. He placed me on the large bed, gave me a wave that I did not respond to as he squeezed out past a maid in the doorway. The chamber was finely decorated with tapestries and gilded candlesticks, and I guessed it was the lady’s own quarters. She soon came and joined the maid in stripping the wet clothes from me and rubbing me dry. They pulled a warm nightgown, too big, over my head and regarded me critically. Gently, the maid applied a salve to the ugly raw strips around my wrists and ankles, and wiped my face. She murmured soothing words to me in French. She tipped a little wine into my mouth and I felt it burn its way down my throat and into my stomach. Together, they wrapped me in the furs on the bed. I stared into the fire while the women stared at me.

I must have closed my eyes and slept, for when I opened them again, the lady was sitting on a stool before the fire sewing. She exclaimed, and the maid went quickly out of the room, returning with a man who bowed to the lady and then regarded me on the bed. I had not moved, only opened and closed my eyes and then opened them again. I stared at him, immobile in my fur cocoon.

‘The lady wants me to tell you her name is Sybil de Montgomery,’ he said in Welsh, bending down to look in my face. ‘She’ll be giving you lessons and you’ll be learning to speak the Norman tongue.’

So she was his sister, Arnulf de Montgomery, the man with the red silk trappings on his horse who had led the attack on Llansteffan. I closed my eyes again.

‘No response,’ the man told the lady. And for now, they let me be.

When I woke the second time, FitzWalter was standing in front of the fire with Lady Sybil and they did not notice at first that I was awake. Sybil was tall and fair-haired with a plain, round

face and plump arms and fingers. She was young. I judged her to be less than twenty. FitzWalter, with his curly fair hair and pale blue eyes, looked handsome, now that he was dry and clean. They were discussing me and I was frustrated to understand only a few names and words: ‘... Arnulf ... wife’. I am going to be the wife of Prince Owain ap Cadwgan in Powys, I told myself, but perhaps Cadwgan had decided to renege on that? My stomach churned. I was of little use to him now my father was dead. A few days ago my future seemed clear, mapped out, but now I had lost all sense of who I was, all orientation. I screwed my eyes shut, trying to calm myself. I heard another word I knew. ‘... dead?’ Sybil asked FitzWalter, and I opened my eyes to watch him nod. ‘King Rhys, two sons, Cynan, Goronwy ... Bernard de Neufmarché.’

I shivered on the bed. Tears leaked out of the corners of my eyes and I rolled my face on the sheet to get rid of them. My sweet brother, Goronwy, who I had played with on the beach that day, who was not even a man yet, I guessed he had died there at the hands of those devils, his blood in the sand where we had built so many castles and moats and watched the sea rush into them, where we had tussled, giggled and swum in the salty water, where he comforted me when I cried at a cut foot caused by a broken seashell. They thought they had wiped us out, done for us all, the royal house of Dinefwr that had ruled Deheubarth for time out of mind. I prayed my brother had no chance on that beach to realise what was happening, to feel terror. I hoped he had that mercy. Carefully, I stored away the name Bernard de Neufmarché, who I presumed to be the murderer, as if I were writing it on a slip of parchment, folding it, stowing it in my purse.

The sudden vivid memory of my father talking at table, with his men around him, their beakers brimming, the bard seated with a harp, the fire blazing, made me realise anew that my world had come loose from its moorings. The high wooden palisades of the *llys* had not protected us. My tall brothers, my father and his warriors were gone, and I was alone with the invaders. Idwal, my half-brother, was chained in a prison, yet they could not know about my infant brother Gruffudd! He had survived the slaughter and was my father’s heir now. A year ago, my father’s lands were briefly overrun by Cadwgan. Gruffudd was born in Dublin, where Lord Torcall, my father’s ally, gave us shelter. When we returned to Deheubarth, the baby had been too feeble for the crossing and my mother left him in Dublin with the wet nurse, intending to retrieve him the following summer. I remembered his huge dark eyes staring at me unblinking and his tiny fingers curling round my index finger as I stroked his cheek.

I tried to focus on the thought of my tiny brother. When he was older, when he was a grown man, he would come and take vengeance on Neufmarché. He would reclaim his kingdom, and we would sit beside one another, restored to our lands. He would rule in Deheubarth and I would be the king's wife in Powys. Perhaps. My certainty about that marriage was dissipating, and the picture I was trying to create of Gruffudd and I slipped and dissolved. All I had to cling to in this wreckage was a tiny baby, far away.

I do not know how long I slept this time. Hours or days? I had no sense of it. I slept to avoid thinking. Perhaps, at some point, the lady, Sybil, had come and slept beside me. The maid banged through the door, startling me fully awake. She spoke to me in hesitant Welsh. 'Lady Sybil says I'm to take you to the room prepared for you and you must bathe and then dine in the hall.' I started to shake my head. 'It's not a choice, my lady.' I would rather slit their throats than share their meal, yet my stomach turned over on itself, consuming air and I knew I must eat or die and I was not ready to die yet. *I must* not die. For my father, for Cynan and for Goronwy, I had to live for vengeance. I sat up.

The maid led me along a narrow passage to the chamber next to Lady Sybil's. 'It's yours,' she said, and I had to make an effort not to mirror the glee on her face as I looked at the small room. The bed had a dark blue canopy, a gaily embroidered quilt, piles of cushions and thick blue curtains embroidered with golden suns. When I sat down to let the maid undress me, I felt a well-stuffed mattress beneath me. At the foot of the bed, there was a carved and polished chest. The table held a golden candlestick, a brass bowl and a jug, An arched cupboard with three shelves, an *aumbry*, stood empty against the wall. The fire was burning well in the small hearth and a curtained tub was set in front of it. A small window let out onto the bailey, allowing the smoke to escape from the room and the light to filter in.

The maid and I spoke to each other in a mixture of pidgin French and Welsh. Occasionally she tried words from her own Breton language, which had some similarities to Welsh, and I could understand her that way. Patting her chest, she told me her name was Amelina. She was a young woman with ample breasts that were a little more visible above the neck of her gown than they should be. She was on the short side and had a very long twist of plaited dark brown hair and grey-green eyes. She told me she was eighteen years old.