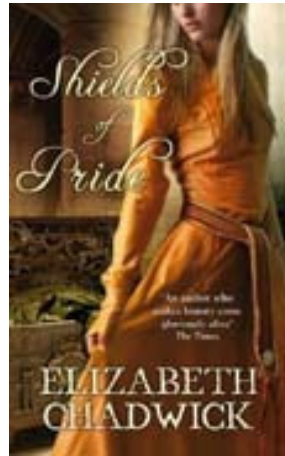


SHIELDS OF PRIDE

ELIZABETH CHADWICK

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EXTRACT

CHAPTER 1

Summer 1173.....

SWEARING THROUGH HIS teeth, Joscelyn de Gael drew rein at the head of his mercenary troop and scowled at the covered baggage wain that was slewed across the Clerkenwell road, blocking the way. He had been in the saddle since dawn. It was late afternoon now, had been raining all day, and the comfort of his father's London house was still five miles away on the other side of the obstruction.

An assortment of knights and men-at-arms surrounded the wain like witnesses clustering around a fresh corpse. A man was crouched, examining a damaged wheel. His cloak was trimmed with sable, his boots were of red leather and the horse his squire held was clean-limbed and glossy. A handful of women huddled together, anonymous in mantles and hoods and watched the men from beneath the dubious shelter of an ash tree overhanging the road.

Dismounting, Joscelyn tossed his reins to his own squire and approached the crippled wain. The soldiers stiffened, hands descending to sword hilts and fingers tightening upon spear shafts. The crouching man stood up and his gaze narrowed as he recognized Joscelyn.

Joscelyn eyed Giles de Monstrosorrel with similar disfavour. The baron was distantly related to the Earl of Leicester, and thus considered himself a man of high standing. He viewed Joscelyn, the

bastard of a warrior who had carved his own nobility by the sword, as dung beneath his boots. They had encountered each other occasionally on the French tourney circuits, but no amity had sprung from these meetings, Montsorrel not being the kind to forgive being bowled from the saddle on the end of a blunted jousting lance.

Forced by circumstance to be civil, Montsorrel gave Joscelin an icy nod which Joscelin returned in the same spirit before fixing his attention on the broken wheel. Not just broken, he could see now, but with a hopelessly shattered rim. 'You haven't a hope in hell of cobbling a repair here,' he said. 'You'll have to hire another cart from the nearest village. Clerkenwell isn't far.' He walked slowly around the stricken wain, examining it from all angles before halting in front of the three sturdy cobs still harnessed in line between the shafts. 'How much weight do you carry?'

'None of your business!' Montsorrel snapped.

'Oh, but it is,' Joscelin said. 'I cannot bring my own wain past while yours is obstructing the road. If it's not too heavy, I'd be more than willing to help you drag it to one side.'

Montsorrel glared. 'You think I'm going to stand aside for hired scum like you?'

Joscelin thumbed the side of his jaw. Suddenly he was very aware of the pressure of his sword hilt against his hip. 'Hired scum?' he repeated softly.

One of the women murmured to her companions and, detaching herself from their group, stepped forward to place herself between the two men. She faced Joscelin, forcing him to divert his attention from Montsorrel. She had delicate features and unfathomable grey-blue eyes that held his for a moment before she turned to indicate the broken wain.

'Messire, by the time we have found a wheelwright or hired another cart, the city gates will have closed for the night.' She hesitated. 'Forgive me, but I notice your own wain is larger than ours and but lightly laden. I am sure if you lent it to us of a kindness, my husband would compensate you for your inconvenience.'

Joscelin stared at her in surprise. He was accustomed to being propositioned by women, but in different social circumstances and for different reasons it had to be said, and never in front of their husbands. She looked down, a flush brightening her cheekbones. The rain continued to fall in a steady, cloth-soaking drizzle.

'Linnet!' Montsorrel's anger diverted from Joscelin to his wife. 'Do you dare to interfere?'

She flinched, but her voice was steady as she turned to him. 'I was thinking of your son, my lord. He must not catch a chill.'

Montsorrel cast an irritated glare in the direction of the other women. Joscelin looked, too. One of the bundled figures under the tree was a small child. A little hand was held in the grasp of a nursemaid and Joscelin received the impression of wide, frightened eyes and a snub nose set in a wan, small face. Amid anger at finding himself trapped because he could not for shame refuse the woman, he felt a thread of pity for the infant.

Montsorrel said stiffly to Joscelin, 'Very well, you're a mercenary. I'll pay you the rate to deliver the goods to my house.'

Joscelin bit back the urge to retort that he was not so much of a mercenary that he would allow the likes of Giles de Montsorrel to buy his obedience. 'I'll not serve you,' he said derisively, 'but your lady did speak of compensation. Perhaps we can reach an agreement.'

Montsorrel clenched his fists and looked as if he might burst.

'No?' Shrugging, Joscelin started to turn away.

'Christ's Wounds, just get on with it!' Montsorrel snarled.

Joscelin gave a sarcastic flourish and sauntered away to instruct his men to strip and reload his own sound wain.

Linnet de Montsorrel rejoined the women. Her stomach was queasy with fear. Everything had its price, and she knew she would have to pay hers later when she and Giles were alone.

'I'm cold, Mama,' her son whimpered, and abandoned his nurse to cling to Linnet's damp skirts.

She stooped to chafe his hands, noting with concern that his eyes were heavy and his complexion pale with exhaustion. 'It won't be long now, sweetheart,' she comforted. She folded him beneath the protection of her cloak like a mother hen spreading her wing over a chick.

'Madam, I know that man.' Ella, her personal maid, jutted her chin toward the mercenary whom Linnet had just shamed into helping them. 'It's Joscelin de Gael, son of William Ironheart.'

'Oh?' Linnet knew of William Ironheart by reputation. They said he was so hard, he pissed nails, that he was stubborn, embittered, and dangerous to cross. Linnet studied de Gael. 'How do you come to be acquainted with such a one?' she asked in a neutral tone.

Ella blushed. 'I only know him by sight, madam. He was at my sister's wedding in the spring as a friend of the groom. They were both garrison soldiers at Nottingham castle.'

Linnet assessed de Gael thoughtfully. She judged him to be in his late twenties. 'What is he doing in the mercenary trade if he's Ironheart's son?'

'He's only Lord William's bastard. His mother was a common camp follower so rumour says.' Ella folded her arms, hugging her shawl against her body. 'Apparently when de Gael's mother died in childbed, Lord William went mad with grief and tried to kill himself, but his sword shattered and he was only wounded. After that, men started calling him Ironheart because his breast was stronger than the steel. I'd say Brokenheart was more appropriate.' Ella's gaze returned to their reluctant rescuer, who was now standing back from the wain, one hand on his sword hilt, the other pushing his rain-soaked hair off his forehead.

Linnet, all romantic notions literally knocked out of her head by six years of marriage to Giles, said nothing, her feeling one of irritation rather than pity. She knew what it was like to be usurped by another woman in your own hall, and how much that other woman's status also depended on arrogant masculine whim.

Two panting men-at-arms struggled out of the broken wain carrying a large, ironbound chest between them.

'Make haste!' Giles snapped, and Linnet saw him scowl at de Gael, who was eyeing the chest with open speculation.

'I see now the kind of weight you carry,' de Gael remarked. 'Small wonder that your wheel broke.' In his own good time withdrew his scrutiny and approached the women.

Linnet retreated behind downcast lids, knowing she would be the one to suffer if de Gael chose to take his impertinence further. Giles might think twice about assaulting a man of the

mercenary's undoubted ability, but no such restraint would prevent him from beating her. She heard the men puffing and swearing as their strongbox was manoeuvred into de Gael's wain. Giles's voice was querulous with impatience and bad temper, and inwardly she quailed.

De Gael crouched on his heels and gently peeled aside a wet fold of her cloak. 'And who have we here?' he asked.

'My son, Robert.' She flashed a rapid glance at her husband. He was still occupied in ranting at his guards, but in a moment he would turn round.

De Gael did not miss her look. 'You have a high courage, my lady,' he murmured. 'I won't make it harder for you than it already is.' Plucking the child from beneath her cloak, he swept him up in his arms. 'Come my young soldier, there's a dry corner prepared especially for you in my cart.'

Linnet stretched her arms toward her son with an involuntary cry. Robert peered at his mother over de Gael's shoulder, his eyes wide with shock, but the move had been so sudden that he had no time to cry, and by the time he did let out a wail of protest, he was being placed on a dry blanket in the good wain with a lambskin rug tucked up to his chin.

Linnet, following hard on de Gael's heels, found herself taken by the elbow and helped up beside her son. Robert stopped crying and began to knead the lamb's wool like a nursing kitten. Linnet stroked his brow and looked at de Gael. 'You have my gratitude,' she said. 'Thank you.'

The mercenary shrugged 'No sense in keeping him out in that downpour when he can be warm in here. I expect your husband's compensation to reflect my care of his goods.' He started to withdraw. 'There is room for your women, too, my lady. I'll tell them, shall I?'

Rain pattered on the roof of the wain. She looked out through a canvas arch on a tableau of hazy green and brown. The smell of her wet garments clogged her nostrils. De Gael walked across to her maids. He moved with a wolf's ungainly elegance, and she did not think that the similarity stopped there. And yet he had been considerate beyond the bounds of most men of her acquaintance.

On the death of her father at nine years old, she had become a ward of the Earl of Leicester, who had sold her marriage to his kinsman, Giles de Montsorrel, heir to the estates and castle of Rushcliffe. She had been wed at thirteen, as soon as her monthly bleeds were an established fact.

Linnet eyed her husband and felt queasy at the sight of his fists clenched around his belt. She had tried to be a good wife to him but he was difficult to please and she dwelt in a constant state of trepidation, wondering from which angle of his nature the next small cruelty would come. He always found a scapegoat to blame; nothing was ever his fault, and in the household that scapegoat was usually her.

Behind her, at the other end of the wain, their soldiers were depositing the clothing coffer with much bumping and cursing. Robert's eyelids drooped and closed. Linnet leaned her head against her son's, her arm around him, and wearily shut her own eyes.