

~FOR KING AND COUNTRY~

~ONE~

MARCH 1461

'Tis a terrible thing to want to die; yet Jack de Laverton thought that at least if he were dead he wouldn't be able to feel the gnawing cramps of his empty belly nor the crippling ache of his frozen fingers and toes.

'Boy!'

The rough voice dragged Jack back from his morbid isolation to the hostile snow-ravaged moor where perhaps thirty thousand men lay just as he did – waiting to die; for if they did not succumb to the cold tonight, they would face death in the battle for England in the morning.

'Fetch more wood, boy! Do you want us to freeze to death and give the field to Lancaster on the morrow?'

Jack rose like a man twice his age. Even if he had wanted to answer back he couldn't, for his teeth were chattering like the rattling of bone dice in a cup. Snow flickered from his clothes and fell from his black curly hair. He shook himself down like a wet dog, pushed a thick shock of hair from his eyes and then rubbed his hands together, trying to bring life back into them.

'God's bones, you look like a gypsy! Are you sure you're not here to curse us?'

Jack's eyes bored into the speaker, but he knew he must bury the insult deep, along with all the others.

'Leave him be, Higgins!' growled Will Kennerley, their captain.

Higgins opened his mouth, but then closed it again without saying anything.

'Jack, be as quick as you can!' Will called to him, a note of sympathy in his voice.

Jack nodded and darted away into the darkness. He soon found the skeleton of a hawthorn bush. Thorns ripped at his fingers, but though he saw the blood pearling on his skin Jack felt no pain; he was still too angry and his fingers

too numb for that. Jack snapped the twigs into kindling, and then returned to where he saw the now-silent silhouettes huddled beside the dwindling flames.

Most didn't even move as he dropped the wood onto the fire, sending a shower of snapping sparks into the air, but Will Kennerley did. He looked up, nodded his thanks. His brown eyes met Jack's and his face lined into a faint smile.

Jack didn't smile back; instead he turned quickly and stamped to his place near the wagon; the place for urchins and vagabonds such as he was. It was only as he lay down on the iron-hard ground that he heard footsteps crunching in the snow and realized that Will had followed him.

'Ignore him, Jack, he means no harm,' Will said. His words puffed into clouds in front of him. 'He's just tense – we all are. Tomorrow –' Will's voice tailed off.

Jack turned to look at him. He hardly dare think what tomorrow would bring: the supporters of Lancaster and York would meet on these fields to decide the fate of the English crown.

'Stick with me on the morrow, Jack – I'll see you right,' Will said softly.

Jack didn't answer.

'You listening to me, Jack?' Will asked. 'I said I'll see you right!'

Jack's stomach rolled over as he suddenly realized what Will meant. Jack was going to be a part of it! 'Fight?' he stammered. Surely Will couldn't mean that Jack would fight? He was a half-starved baggage boy, not a fighting man!

Will was staring at him. His eyes retained the brightness of his youth beneath his thick grey brows. 'We need every man if we are to win the crown for Edward, Jack,' Will said earnestly.

'Every man?' Jack raised his eyes to Will's, searching for reassurance; he didn't feel like a man, though he knew at seventeen he wouldn't be the youngest on the field.

'I know your father trained you well. And the anger in your belly will be enough to carry you through, I'll warrant!' The latter was said with a gentle laugh and Jack wondered if his anger really did burn so brightly that men

could see it in his eyes? Evidently Will had seen it surface at Higgins's insult; though Jack knew Higgins was half right!

Will was still looking at him. 'Or you can stay here with the boys and the carts,' he added with a shrug. 'It's up to you, Jack. Thought you would have wanted to show them ...' Will stood up stiffly.

'Yes!' Jack said quickly. Of course Will was right; he wanted to show them all!

'Rest then,' Will instructed as he began to walk back to the fire. 'You'll need all your strength for tomorrow.'

Jack stared up at the purple sky. The darkness was dusted with stars and he thought how the stillness was at odds with what would unfold on Towton field at first light. 'Fight!' Jack thought. That was all Jack knew how to do. It seemed that he had been fighting for each one of his eighteen summers. He had spent the years since his father's death fighting for the right to exist, mainly against Jacob's fists, or the lash or the rough thick stick, or whatever else Jacob had brought to teach Jack his place in the household.

Jack ran his fingers through his tangled hair as he tried to wipe the memories from his vision. Yes, he could fight; Christ's wounds, he would fight the entire world if he had to!

Sudden movement fractured the silence. Unaware that he'd slept, Jack opened his eyes, and blinked rapidly, trying to focus in the half-light of the pink-grey dawn. A wave of activity rippled along the devastated hedgerow as men began to rouse themselves and search for their belongings. Jack's heart jumped to his throat and began to beat rapidly. Cold sweat ran down his face and he pushed his damp hair from his eyes. The moment had finally come, the moment he would fight against his king. He took a deep breath, then brushed the snow from his clothes and stood up. Fresh flakes fluttered down like white rose petals and Jack thought how absurdly beautiful the muffled world looked. He shivered; all that was about to change.

Will was next to him; he forced his back to straighten and Jack heard Will's bones crack. 'Remember Jack, stick with me,' he breathed as he checked the fastenings on his brigandine. 'Stick with me and you'll be all right.'

Jack nodded and managed a thin smile.

He noticed Will was holding something out to him. 'For luck,' Will said thickly.

Jack saw it was a small silver-coloured badge shaped like a bear. Will pinned it onto Jack's coat.

Their eyes met, held for a long moment and then Will turned away.

It didn't take Will long to purloin Jack some rudimentary armour. The harness, such as it was, was an old dented cuirass with an ominous hole in the side, which made Jack realize that the previous owner had not survived the skirmish at Ferrybridge. In fact, Jack realized, that was why there was enough harness here for a dozen men or more. He pressed his lips together and tried not to think of it.

Will must have understood his train of thought. 'Aye lad, but for the Earl of Warwick, all would have been lost yesterday. They would have broke and run.'

'The Earl of Warwick?' Jack asked.

Will nodded as he adjusted the buckles on the cuirass, tightening it over the thick padded jack. 'They were wavering, Jack. Some of 'em thinking how far to Wakefield no doubt, but Warwick stood before Edward and declared he would not fly the field until all was won or lost, and to prove it he slew his great destrier. That horse was worth ten such horses for its strength and courage, Jack, but he killed it dead!'

Jack stared with incredulity.

'Only such a gesture could have held them Jack. Warwick saved the House of York! And even though he took an arrow in the leg, Warwick fights with us today.'

'With us?' Jack asked. Jack had no concept of how this would all unfold. He had been trained to fight since he was seven years old, but he'd never seen a battle.

'Aye, with us, Jack, like the bear of his badge!'

Jack nodded and Will handed him a sallet. The helmet felt heavy as Jack buckled it on with trembling fingers. He rather liked the curving symmetry of it where it swept down to cover his neck. He tried not to think what had happened to its previous owner. He looked at the men around him; he'd never seen men look so pale. Wide eyes stared back at him and many of them gave him a curt nod; it was enough. He wondered how many of them would live out this day and then told himself not to think on it; this was the chance he'd craved, the chance he thought he'd never have, for as the priest had told him, along with the rest of the men at Mass on this Holy day of Palm Sunday, it wasn't a sin to be born into poverty, but Jack thought it a terrible sin to want to stay that way, though he wasn't sure that the priest would agree with him! And maybe the priest would never have said those words if he had known who Jack was, or more importantly who Jack's father had been, for Jack hadn't always been poor.

* * *

Jack looked at the strange uniformity of the battle line and breathed deeply, trying to steady his ragged heartbeat. He ran his tongue over dry lips and saw his breath like smoke in front of him. He couldn't feel his feet and could barely feel the weight of the sword Will had given him. He tried to flex his fingers round its hilt and felt the leather bite into his palm. A falchion. But this was not the sword Jack wanted; that sword was lost and perhaps he would never see it again, though he had sworn that he would find it; find it and take it home.

Jack couldn't see the enemy through the rising mist; the Lancastrian army was drawn up on the high ground and he squinted to try and catch a glimpse of them and judge their position and their strength.

'They have the advantage,' Will said as if he'd read Jack's thoughts. 'That ridge will take some reaching, Jack. We'll be target practice for their archers when we cross that open ground.' He nodded to the snow-covered gulf between them.

Will was right, Jack thought, there wasn't a scrap of cover for over three bowshots! Many of the men wouldn't make it.

Suddenly Jack saw movement to his right.

'Thank God!' Will said.

Cries of 'A York! A York!' began to echo along the line and Jack watched as Edward of York's archers began to swarm across the field in front of them. As one man they stopped and made their bows ready. Then, on command, they began to knock, draw and loose, sending a murderous shower of arrows towards the mist-shrouded Lancastrians. The archers soon found a relentless rhythm that made Jack shiver, as they sent wave after wave of arrows into the thickening snowstorm.

Suddenly grey shapes appeared like ghosts out of the fog in front of Jack. They were difficult to identify clearly, but through narrowed eyes Jack thought he saw the black and red livery of Northumberland's men. Realizing what would come next, Jack slammed down the visor of his sallet quickly. Through his narrowed vision he saw a dark cloud flying towards them out of the snow.

The line twitched.

Jack looked at Will. His face was inscrutable behind the grim mask of his helmet, but his body was ready, and so was the cruel steel of his sword.

The black rain of arrows reached its apogee and then began to descend. Men tensed, prayed, called out to Saint George.

Jack tensed too; knew he had drawn blood in his palm. He held his breath.

The arrows screamed earthwards, and the eerie noise seemed to stop Jack's heart. He waited; waited for death to strike them. But to Jack's surprise the arrows seemed to die on the wind. They faltered, dipped suddenly and fell harmlessly short of Warwick's men.

The line rippled as men began to breathe again. Jack too let out his breath.

The Yorkist archers continued to shoot; devastation following each cloud of arrows they shot into the Lancastrian line.

Jack could hear them now; piteous cries of injured men mixed with the angry shouts of their comrades desperate to fight.

Again the Lancastrians tried to retaliate and again their arrows fell short.

Jack wondered how long Northumberland would keep them there, taking hits but delivering none of their own. 'It'll not be long now, Jack,' Will said. 'No army will take a hammering like that for long and do nothing about it!'

Will was right; the Lancastrians had to do something and it was something Jack had never seen before. At first he wondered what the movement was as the Lancastrians parted, wondered what could be coming out of the snow towards them. He saw dark shapes and in a sudden shuddering heartbeat he realized they were guns!

The Yorkist archers carried on regardless, punching the Lancastrians with arrows like stones; but what were arrows compared to guns, Jack thought. Were they expected to stand here while the Lancastrians fired at them?

'Will!' he called in a ragged voice. 'For Christ's sake, Will, they've got guns!'

Will's helmet nodded. 'Easy lad, easy.' He put a steadying hand on Jack's shoulder.

How could Will be so calm when they had firearms pointing at them and they couldn't move? They were as easy a target as rats in a terrier pit!

'They're not as accurate as archers,' Will said wisely. 'Trust me, Jack. Stand your ground!'

Jack swallowed thickly. Sweat coursed down his back and he knew he was shaking. Other men must have felt the same, for there were cries of 'steady, boys!' along the line. Jack felt anything but steady.

Still the Yorkist archers drove arrows into the storm and the Lancastrians failed to return the damage.

Suddenly Jack saw plumes of grey smoke and they were followed by flashes of flame like dragon's breath and the loudest noise Jack had ever heard; like thunder only a more piercing cracking sound. He wanted to dive for the floor and cover his ears and several men turned to flee, only to be pushed back by their comrades. Jack heard

terrible screams and then another loud explosion which again sent panic along the Yorkist lines. But the screams and yells of the fallen seemed far away and for a long moment Jack didn't know what had happened.

Unexpectedly the Yorkists around him began to cheer and Jack realized that they hadn't been hit; Will was right: the guns weren't accurate.

'By the saints!' Will said, pointing into the thinning smoke. Jack followed his gesture and saw a terrible sight; men were down, crawling, screaming; men blackened and burned like charcoal, limbs lying severed like broken sticks. Jack closed his eyes tightly as he felt his stomach heave, and it took several moments before he could open them again without fear of being sick.

'What happened, Will?' he stammered.

'Their guns exploded,' Will said neutrally. 'Hot metal and cold weather, I suppose.'

'Oh,' Jack said shakily, not really understanding.

'That ought to do it,' Will said, and he was right; with their arrows hampered by the wind and their guns now useless, there was nothing left for the Lancastrians to do but fight and the exploding guns acted like a command. In a seething rush of angry steel they surged down the ridge towards Jack. They shouted for King Henry and Lancaster and Jack felt his stomach roll again. He braced himself for the impact and his heart met his throat.

The shock slewed up Jack's arms and rattled his teeth as the Lancastrians screamed into them. God's bones but they were angry! No soldier likes to stand around waiting to die; if they must die they like to die as they know how, with a weapon in their hands and an enemy in their face and these Lancastrians were no exception!

Jack found himself crushed between the bill men who had taken the full brunt of the impact, but who had taken a backward step or two in doing so, and the ranks of skirmishers behind him; there was no room to use a sword, no room to fight, no room to even breathe!

'Jack! To me!' Will Kennerley hadn't forgotten him and he bellowed like a raging boar at Jack to keep them together.

Jack pushed his way to where Will had gained some space and enough time to at least gather their thoughts. But it was only heartbeats before a few Lancastrians came out of the snow – they were skirmishers too and had danced around the cumbersome bills with some skill in order to make it this far.

‘Jack!’

Unused to the heavy sallet and its effect on his vision, Jack hadn’t seen the man to his left. Just in time he raised his sword and blocked the thrust to his neck. Jack turned quickly, knowing instinctively that the man had tried to circle him. He swung hard and felt his weapon meet resistance that crumpled with a sickening crunch of bone and a cry that almost stopped Jack’s heart. For several moments the world froze as Jack realized that he’d killed a man; he’d taken a life and sent a soul into purgatory. Then the noise and smell and taste of battle engulfed Jack’s senses and he swung round seeking Will.

The older man was fighting like a cornered animal; three men were around him but they couldn’t get close.

Jack swung the falchion again; it was a clumsy weapon that didn’t demand the skill of the long black sword his father had carried, but it was effective. The blade bit bone, spat blood and a man sank to his knees, but no sooner was one threat gone than there was another and another. Jack’s breath rasped hot in the prison of his sallet. He swung, parried, blocked and thrust until every muscle and sinew screamed within the confines of his harness, and at last it seemed that he and Will were free from enemies. Bodies lay all around them, some still twitching with ebbing life; red blots on the perfect whiteness of the snow, and Jack realized that there were as many of their comrades lying here as there were Lancastrians.

Will staggered away into the blizzard and Jack followed him as closely as he could, breathing hard. He knew where Will was going; they were vulnerable on their own; they needed someone to make a stand with.

The battle shook all around them and it was difficult for them to gauge who had the better of it, but as Jack saw

body after body in his Yorkist livery he began to think that the day must be for Lancaster!

In the snow and mist they came upon the flank of the Earl of Warwick. The men were hard-pressed, and but for Warwick's leadership Jack thought here too the Yorkist cause would be lost. Perhaps it was Warwick's desire for revenge that kept him fighting when others would have fled, for Jack knew the Lancastrians had killed Warwick's father after Wakefield. Jack knew how he would feel if he had a chance to come up against the man who had killed his father; killed him and taken his sword!

And so he felt a kind of kinship with Warwick, though in station and degree they might have been on different continents, and he watched in admiration as the earl rallied his men, clapped them on the shoulder as his brother-in-arms and then plunged into the mêlée. It seemed as though he had the strength of ten men as he thrust and cut and killed, and the tired men around him suddenly stood straighter too as he fought with them.

But even the earl had to draw breath, and when he emerged from the front to do so Jack noticed blood flowing freely down his left leg.

The earl raised his visor and called for water in a strong voice, his breath clouding in front of him.

Will drew them closer. 'My lord, how goes it?'

Warwick took several gulps of the precious liquid and then put the cup down. He turned to Will and a broad smile consumed the earl's dirt streaked face. 'Ha, Will!' he said as he clasped Will's shoulder. 'Certainly we are hard-pressed!' Quick dark eyes flicked to Jack. Jack raised his visor and then lowered his head humbly.

'Is he with you?' Warwick asked.

Will nodded. 'Aye, my lord, that he is.'

'Is he quick?' Warwick asked.

'As quick as a fox, my lord,' Will answered.

'Then I have need of him.'

Will beckoned Jack closer still.

'I have not heard from Sir Robert Hardacre. He is pressed much harder than ourselves and has been drawn

away. I think he does not realize how wide the gap now is between us!’

‘Have you sent a man?’ Will asked.

‘Three!’ Warwick answered. ‘But none have prevailed. Lancastrian archers still stalk this field,’ he added.

Will looked at Jack.

Jack’s stomach somersaulted inside his harness.

The earl’s gaze followed Will’s and Jack was suddenly aware of looking up into intelligent eyes that seemed to see inside his heart.

‘Jack?’ Will asked.

Jack stepped closer. ‘My lord, I am at your service,’ he said kneeling.

‘He’s young, Will,’ Warwick said in a voice that was both soft and strong.

‘Aye, my lord, but a braver lad you’ll not find in the whole of Yorkshire!’

Jack looked up. Warwick was nodding at him.

‘What’s your name?’ Warwick asked.

Jack swallowed his racing heart. ‘Jack de Laverton,’ he said, rising on Warwick’s gesture.

‘Laverton?’ Warwick asked.

‘By Ripon, my lord.’

Warwick nodded. ‘I didn’t know Sir John had a son.’

Will coughed.

‘Well, can you do it, Jack? Can you run the line and fetch Sir Robert back to me?’ Warwick asked.

Jack tried to sound more confident than he felt. ‘Yes, my lord.’

‘Tis important you speak with Sir Robert himself,’ Warwick said, his eyes not leaving Jack’s. ‘He must swing hard by and come away from the trees, for I fear the Lancastrian prickers are hidden there.’

Warwick turned and pointed to a large clump of trees Jack could barely make out through the blizzard.

Jack nodded his understanding: an ambush. The mounted prickers were employed to deter desertions from their own side, but if they got a clear chance to run at the enemy, then they would.

‘I shall find him, my lord,’ Jack said.

‘Then may Saint George protect you,’ Warwick said. ‘Go!’

Jack turned and with his heart thudding louder than a drum he flung himself along the line of fighting men. He clung on to his falchion, felt the reassuring nip of the handle in his palm, but hoped he would not need to use it again.

From Warwick’s position Sir Robert and the thicket hadn’t seemed so far away, but Jack had underestimated the rise and fall of the land and he soon found the soft ground beginning to suck at his legs as though it was alive and was trying to drag him down to his doom.

His breath came hard and cold into his chest, chilled as it was by the snow-soaked southerly that wrapped around the dale and smothered his vision again.

Jack looked for Sir Robert’s banner but he couldn’t see it and neither could he see the copse which cloaked the Lancastrians who were waiting for him.

Panic stung Jack’s muscles into action and with tears of frustration burning his eyes he pulled himself out of the mud and headed to where his instinct told him Sir Robert must be.

Jack heard the arrow a heartbeat before he felt it. It didn’t hurt as much as he thought an arrow wound would and hurt a good deal less than one of Jacob’s beatings, but instinctively he drew his left hand closer to his body and saw the arrow had gone straight through his forearm. There wasn’t much blood, but the world span and he suddenly felt sick. He stopped. An arrow fizzed in front of his eyes and Jack knew if he hadn’t stopped, it would have killed him and he realized why none of Warwick’s messengers had got through.

Jack turned and saw the Lancastrian archer through a gap in the fighting men. The man was struggling to free his sword from his belt; plainly he had no more arrows to loose.

For a moment Jack contemplated running at him, seeking vengeance for the burning pain now pulsing through his arm, but something stopped him. That something was an inner voice which told him that his mission must come first – his own revenge didn’t matter –

for if he didn't steer Sir Robert back to the safety of close company many lives would be lost, maybe even the whole battle and with it the crown of England!

Jack snapped the top from the arrow to reduce the encumbrance. He sucked in cold air through his teeth at the sudden jarring pain, but he knew better than to try and pull the arrow out. Then he turned and plunged down the slope towards the river; more sliding than running. Ice was forming along the margins of the beck, stiff grasses stood like sentries among the pools of bloody water and Jack's arm began to throb as though something hot and hard was being driven through it again and again.

In the bloody beck were writhing men and horses and all around them the frozen dead were being shrouded in snow. Jack tried not to look at their staring eyes and tried to close his ears to their terrible screams of the fallen as he realized they would never leave Towton field alive. He waded in. Freezing water filled his boots, and rose quickly up to his thighs. The shock made him suck in his breath again and a cold wave of air thrust into his lungs like a dagger blade, slowing him down. Snowflakes settled on him, melting at first but then beginning to knit together as though they were weaving him a shroud too. His limbs were suddenly heavy and his fingers numb. He couldn't feel his sword, though he knew his hand was frozen in a tight grip to its hilt. He shivered; his teeth began to chatter and the world around him became muffled and white. Relentlessly the cold began to claim him; his limbs became sluggish and he sank deeper into the reeking mud. Jack tried to fight it, but the cold was draining his strength; stealing his life. Was this where he was going to die, he thought, like Warwick's other messengers? He had given his all, but Warwick had asked too much of him. He was, as Higgins had said, only a boy! What place did he have here on an English battlefield? He should have stayed with the carts; perhaps then he would have seen his beloved Laverton again, even though he would hardly be welcome! Perhaps if he hadn't been wearing the metal harness or the thick coat on which Will had pinned Warwick's badge that morning, he would have been able to struggle free, but it was hopeless. As Jack's

strength began to fail he remembered the look in Will's eyes, the look that said he believed in him and from somewhere deep, Jack dragged a ragged cry and his heart suddenly kicked; lifeblood pulsed; he couldn't let Will Kennerley down! He fought for control of his stiffening limbs. He heard his own voice as if from distance cry out to the saints, as he tore himself free. Like a man held in chains he dragged himself up the slippery bank until eventually his feet found firmer ground. Then he stood for a moment with his hands on his knees, endeavouring to catch his breath. His clothes stiffened and icicles formed on the collar of his coat as Jack pulled breath into his aching lungs. He looked up just in time to see the flash of steel aiming for his throat. Instinctively Jack threw himself to his right and then rolled so that he could get to his feet quickly; once down he knew he was a dead man.

The Lancastrian came back on him swiftly and it was all Jack could do to parry the blow. He staggered with the effort and, further unbalanced by his injured arm and the sodden weight of his clothes, he stumbled and hit the ground hard on his knees. The jolt forced the precious air out of his body and he stayed wide-eyed and motionless as the man came in for the kill. Jack fought for breath like a landed fish on the riverbank, his chest working like a pair of bellows, but without any effect. He gulped; he gaped, frozen like a statue of a martyr in a church with his eyes fixed on the blade that was to end his life. He shook his head helplessly and the word 'no!' echoed inside his head and he knew if he'd been able to, he would have screamed it.

Suddenly his breath came back in a freezing rush that scorched his lungs. Using instinct and an inner strength he did not know he possessed, he thrust swiftly up under the man's overhead attack and into his throat. Blood splattered Jack's face but he pushed harder and harder until the man sank before him into the mud. The man uttered a wild strangled cry and Jack tried not to look as he writhed in front of him, hands clutching at Jack's sword in vain.

Finally the man was still. Jack placed his boot on the bloody body and drew out his blade. His breathing was

ragged, his chest and arm ached beyond belief, but he knew he had to keep going; the crown was not yet won!

Jack tried to find his bearings, but in the mist and snow finding any landmark was difficult. He whispered a prayer under his breath. Tears welled again; if he didn't find Sir Robert soon he knew the Lancastrians would! As if in answer to his prayer the blizzard eased briefly, allowing Jack a glimpse of Sir Robert's plunging banner, a brilliant smear of black and silver against the white vaporous sky, and Jack allowed himself a smile. He wiped a hand across his face to clear away the blood from his eyes and then he stepped towards Sir Robert's banner, as a thirsty man approaching a water-well.

A sudden cry to Jack's left caught his attention and he saw what he had feared the most. At first he couldn't be certain, but then it became all too clear what was happening; the Lancastrian horsemen had emerged from the trees.

Ignoring the burning pain in his arm, Jack began to run. 'Sir Robert!' he screamed, but his voice was hollow in the whirling wind. 'Sir Robert!' he cried again. He stumbled, fell, dropped his sword but somehow forced himself onto his feet. His cramping muscles threatened to down him again, but Jack dug deep. 'Sir Robert!' he yelled and at that moment it was as if the battlefield was silent apart from Jack's desperate cry.

Sir Robert looked round; his men stiffened to the danger.

But Jack had seen what they still had not – one pricker rode apart and his lance was levelled directly at Sir Robert.

Jack knew a warning would be futile; Sir Robert would be unable to avoid the main body of horsemen as well as the lone assassin.

Jack threw himself towards the rider, as the man urged his horse into a trot.

Tears blurred Jack's vision as the horseman closed the distance to Sir Robert as a man closes in on the boar at the end of the chase.

'No!' Jack cried as the spurs raked back.

Jack saw something close, glittering; he bent, picked it up, threw it with all his strength, and then staggered after it. The spear struck home. It hit the horse's shoulder, not hard enough to stay in, but it was enough to make the animal shy.

Jack took his chance. Recklessly he flung himself at the horse's head. He grasped at the reins close to its mouth and pulled as hard as he could.

The horse reared, the rider swore and the three of them fell in a tangle of limbs and harness.

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