



Contingence

Ravencroft Book III

Susan Van Lue

Dedicated to H. H.
You inspired me to do more.
Let's hope it can live up to that.

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Prologue

Kruegh Hall, Angevin England, Summer 1237 A. D.

The frigid drizzle that slashed down from the gloomy gray skies onto the already sodden ground went unnoticed by the preoccupied eyes of the man brooding by the window. Though he appeared to be studying the outer world, he was deep in thought and paid no heed to the comings or goings below . . .

The bedchamber behind him was as silent as the grave, eerily empty, quiet enough that Hamisch Kruegh could even hear himself blink.

The chamber bore silent testimony to Kruegh's immense wealth. Heavy, rich, deep forest green silk brocade draped the prominent bed on the dais, as it did the expensively paned windows as well as the thickly cushioned chair he currently occupied. An Oriental carpet covered the cold stone floor, and gracing the wall across from the bed was a brilliant tapestry depicting an immense golden lion, teeth bared, one paw slicing the air, against a forest green background. It was the crest of the powerful Hamisch Kruegh.

'Power,' Hamisch thought bitterly, his lips twisting into a cynical sneer that was supposed to pass for a smile. His whole life had revolved about that one vile word. Even after leaving Eichstadt in Bayern, not to mention his little empire there, he had greedily sought more. Worse, he got it.

Aye, he would pay for the sins of his youth. He was near two score in age but looked much older. Kruegh grimaced as the chair that was his prison mocked him, reminding him incessantly of the misery his existence had become.

The discreet knock shook Hamisch from his dark contemplations, and he uttered the terse word that would bring the intruder into the chamber.

Sir Juergen Bersche entered quietly, glancing about to be certain his lord was alone. Satisfied that Kruegh was, Juergen stepped forward, planting himself beside Hamisch's chair.

"Do you possess the information I sent you to find?" Hamisch asked curtly in lieu of greeting.

Juergen nodded, ignoring his lord's surly tone.

"I have, milord."

Hamisch's dark brown eyes lifted to meet those slightly lighter ones of his confidante and master-at-arms. With a slight growl of impatience, Kruegh thundered, "Do not keep me in suspense, man. Tell me what you discovered!"

Juergen prudently hid his smile. Kruegh's eyes narrowed as he stared at Juergen. He could almost read his master-as-arms' mind. He made an impatient gesture, and Juergen snapped out of his reverie.

"The man you seek is the youngest living son of Lord William Draven."

Hamisch sighed. "And this Draven . . . He is landless?" he asked, eyes intense and searching.

"He does possess one minor demesne adjacent to that of his eldest brother's primary keep, Ravencroft," Juergen conceded, "but it is of little

consequence, barely self-sufficient, as I am told.”

Hamisch digested that in silence. “And have you seen this young man? How old is he?”

Juergen blanched since the man in question was a bit young. “He is nigh a score and seven, and, aye, I have seen him.”

Hamisch’s countenance darkened. “You feel that he meets all the other criteria I have set for him, even at his age?”

Juergen nodded without hesitation. “*Ja, mein Freund.*”

“And how do women find him?” Hamisch demanded.

Juergen hesitated before answering his lord. “The young lord is not difficult to look upon, though I do not know why that would hold any bearing in your plans.”

Hamisch brushed that observation away as if it presented no consequence. “I would that she is pleased with his looks, Juergen. You know that.”

Juergen sighed. Hamisch had a feeling that Juergen was about to try to talk him out of his plan again. “Is this whole thing not a bit . . . preposterous?”

Hamisch snorted. “The young man would suit my purpose even were he not easy to look upon. That he is, in your opinion, is merely another good omen that my plan must, nay, *will* succeed.”

“As you wish, milord,” Juergen conceded with a shallow bow.

“His name?” Hamisch demanded, ignoring Juergen's deflated response.

Juergen turned his face to the window. “Sir Marlin Draven,” he replied.

Hamisch turned his own attentions back to the window, as well. This young man, this Marlin Draven, would be the perfect solution to his problem . . .

“Use any means necessary but bring him to me.” As Juergen started for the door, Hamisch called cryptically after his master-at-arms, “And, Juergen.”

“*Ja, milord?*”

The dry smile that lit on Hamisch's face was as devoid of humor as it was full of irony. "Do him no harm."