

Excerpt: One Yuletide Knight

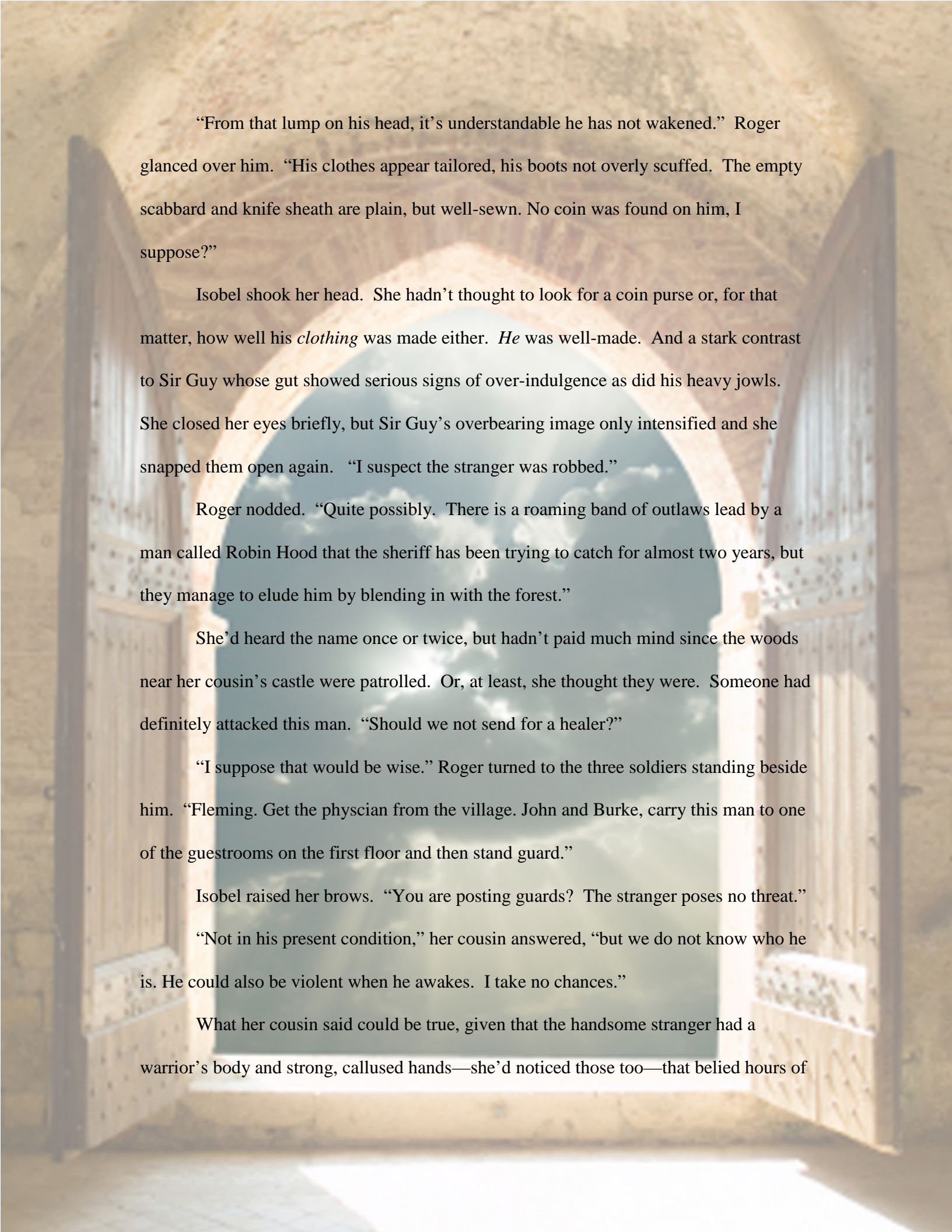
Roger was waiting for them when Isobel and her party arrived at the castle with the unconscious man in the back of a wagon she'd sent two of the maids to procure. They obviously had been overly animated in their telling of the odd discovery since not only had a stableman brought the wagon, but a number of squires and pages came with him as well. Altogether, almost a score of people had gathered at the glade and another score or so had followed the procession up the road to the castle.

Roger dismissed most of them with a wave of his hand and then peered over the wagon's sideboards at the stranger. "Has he awakened at all?"

"He moaned once when the men were lifting him," Isobel said, "and his eyelids fluttered, but did not open." She didn't add that she wondered what color his eyes were. While she had been waiting for the wagon to arrive, she'd had time to study him. He appeared not much older than her twenty years. The long brown hair had golden streaks, probably from the sun since his face was tanned. That face was strong and angular, cheekbones high, nose straight, and jaw firm. The body beneath the cape—she'd only pushed it back to make sure there were no bleeding wounds—was equally firm. The wet shirt that clung to him defined a broad chest, hard, flat belly and sculpted biceps. He was so perfectly molded that she'd glanced around the glade, wondering if the Welsh myths of faeries were true and the stranger were really a Fae prince meant to lure her to the Otherworld, safe from a marriage she didn't want. Yule was almost here and the auld gods granted wishes on feast days...at least, according to the stories that the Celts loved to tell, much to the disapproval of priests and bishops.

Isobel jolted back to reality at the sound of her cousin's voice.



A stone archway with a view of a cloudy sky. The arch is made of light-colored stone and has a decorative pattern on the sides. The sky is blue with white clouds. The arch is set in a wall of similar stone.

“From that lump on his head, it’s understandable he has not wakened.” Roger glanced over him. “His clothes appear tailored, his boots not overly scuffed. The empty scabbard and knife sheath are plain, but well-sewn. No coin was found on him, I suppose?”

Isobel shook her head. She hadn’t thought to look for a coin purse or, for that matter, how well his *clothing* was made either. *He* was well-made. And a stark contrast to Sir Guy whose gut showed serious signs of over-indulgence as did his heavy jowls. She closed her eyes briefly, but Sir Guy’s overbearing image only intensified and she snapped them open again. “I suspect the stranger was robbed.”

Roger nodded. “Quite possibly. There is a roaming band of outlaws lead by a man called Robin Hood that the sheriff has been trying to catch for almost two years, but they manage to elude him by blending in with the forest.”

She’d heard the name once or twice, but hadn’t paid much mind since the woods near her cousin’s castle were patrolled. Or, at least, she thought they were. Someone had definitely attacked this man. “Should we not send for a healer?”

“I suppose that would be wise.” Roger turned to the three soldiers standing beside him. “Fleming. Get the physician from the village. John and Burke, carry this man to one of the guestrooms on the first floor and then stand guard.”

Isobel raised her brows. “You are posting guards? The stranger poses no threat.”

“Not in his present condition,” her cousin answered, “but we do not know who he is. He could also be violent when he awakes. I take no chances.”

What her cousin said could be true, given that the handsome stranger had a warrior’s body and strong, callused hands—she’d noticed those too—that belied hours of

training with weapons, but somehow she doubted he was violent. While she had been waiting in the glade, holding those hands and talking to him, encouraging him to stay alive, the thought of violence had never occurred to her. Indeed, by the time the wagon arrived, she'd felt more and more drawn to the stranger, almost convincing herself that he had truly been sent as a gift to help her escape Sir Guy.

Yule was the season for gifts, after all.

