

Those Years Without
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But O, oblige me by taking away that knife.
I can't look at the point of it. It reminds me of Roman history.
-James Joyce

Prologue

“Every rebellion implies some kind of unity.” (Albert Camus)

Deep in Scotland

June, 1271 AD

Years later, taverns would whisper the name Rose Forbes – they were afraid, not because of the suspicious sideglances, but of anything louder than a mumble breaking her legacy like fine chinaglass.

Most of the writings have been lost since, crumbled and dusted by the attics of time, but scholars have pieced together the rainyday jigsaw (which still missed a piece here and there – that’s why it’s still a puzzle and not a picture).

Our Rose, the darling of the Amazons
Had lost her life to win us hope.
She bled like the ev’ning sun on that June day
For the mem’ry of a past that cannot die.

Rose would give the rhythm for all those songs and poems and chants and the like on that June day. It wasn’t evening – although that’s what all the poems sang – but morning. She fell in morning at the feet of the meadow. She could hear the cries of the dead just beyond the trees. Rose buried herself in the pillow-soft grasses. She breathed heavy, exorcising the pain out of her body like a thorn, but it didn’t work. She moaned and twisted, her fingers clawing at the scarlet pain that was melting her side. The arrow was quilling out of her thick cloak; she wrapped her hand about it and heaved. It didn’t come out but snapped, whittling away in her hands – the arrowhead was still buried between the ribs to stay.

Jesus Christ, she grimaced. There were no birdcries around her – the battle had scared off everything. All she could hear now was the sound of her men dying. She began crying, not from the pain, but from the end. The end to all those long years. The blonde in her hair mixed with the blue in her tears and the red in her wound until she was lying in a brightwhite puddle. But she was not innocent enough to deserve that.

Grass was crunching. She didn’t look up but could feel a presence. Her soul seemed to quiver.

“Ahhh, so what do we ‘ave here? It’s Boudica, back from the dead. And just ‘bout to leave again.”

She could hear a breathy laugh above her.

“Now, there’s a reward for your capture, you know. Can I live with a year’s worth of fortune if I bring your head in or two years’ if I bring you in alive?”

“You won’t get the chance,” Rose grunted, grating the words on her sharp tongue.

She could feel a swordblade dance on her neck. It felt cold but blazing at the same time.

“You know, I lost a lot of men today.”

Rose spat, “I have been losing more before this day.”

“A merry band of crooks and thieves? I weep. Really, I do. The day ev’ry madman is dead and buried, I’ll be out on the streets, begging with the lot of you.”

“I doubt the King will do that to one of his best rats...”

Rose cried softly. The sword quickly burrowed into her stomach for a moment, but it was long enough. The bright pain was withering away into a dull grey though.

The conversation was gone out of the man’s voice. He snapped, “Don’t tempt me to end you as a disgrace. I am no rat. I am Richard Norton. I have bested you in battle and I am your god.”

“You’re no god of mine.”

“I hold your life in my hands. I’m as good a god as any.”

“The day will come when I will get my revenge. I will live in the eye of your killer.”

“You will live in the eye of time itself? Nothing short of old age will claim me.”

“I doubt you will have that joy. I will come sooner than you think. I will lift the darkness of the land and settle it in your eyes. I will destroy you.”

Rose laughed raspy. The arrow stabbed at each halting laugh, but it was worth it.

“You don’t understand,” she said, “but I cannot die. Every hero survives his death as song. I will live in the eye of those who sing my song.”

“Enough of your womanly talk. After today, this kingdom will no longer shake at your name.”
To think, a kingdom afraid of a woman. Rose smiled at the thought.
There was a thin whistle in the air and all went dark.

Chapter 1
“Now I shall go to sleep. Goodnight.” (Lord Byron)
Lincolnshire, England
At That Same Moment

He could taste February’s ice on his lips although it was summer.

Before he even opened his eyes, he could feel the ice pressing in on him, crumbling the room up like parchment. His fingers crackled like fire as he moved the sheets and stumbled out of his bed. The ice had even froze the noise, silencing the entire world – even when his feet landed on the floor beneath the bed, he could not hear the reassuring sound.

Baron Albert de Vere rubbed the night’s sleep out of his eyes and looked around. Even though he had not lit a candle yet, the whole room glinted in pale blues. The walls absorbed the ice until they could stomach no more – thick sheets of the slippery stuff draped the walls. It seemed to swirl and dance in the light that came from somewhere. Each coating of ice felt like a brushstroke from some genius painter.

He suddenly remembered. He turned, but there was no one in the bed. There wasn’t even a dent in the side where his wife slept.

Where is she? Albert wondered. And why is there frost everywhere?

As Albert made his way across the floor, he was constantly on the verge of slipping. The floor was a pond iced over. He had not walked on one since he was a child. Once there was a time where he could run across such surfaces. Now he slipped and had to press his hand to the wall for support, afraid of a tumble. It was a lifetime before he reached the oak door that guarded the bedroom. He grunted as he heaved the door open – it took a few tries because ice had seeped into the hinges, rusting them shut.

The door finally gave way. The long hall before him was just as quiet as the room behind him. The glow seemed brighter out here though. Wondering where his love was at, he tried calling out Margaret but he was struck mute.

As he walked down the hall, looking for his love, he tried each door along the way. However, all of them were jammed frozen. Albert’s bones were too brittle for breaking open doors. He never remembered the hallway being this long before. It seemed to stretch elastic before his steps. He had been walking this long road when he should have been walking a hall no longer than an eavesdrop.

Just up ahead, he could see the last door. It was shut like the others, but this one had a flickering light seeping beneath it. Albert pressed on the door and it gave easy.

It was the main hall, silent of the shuffle of feet where his people would eat during the day. Now, it was empty, save for a fire that snapped and popped in the middle of the cavernous room. Its pulsing light scattered against the frozen-ocean floor. It was a strong storm of fire – even from this distance, Albert could feel the warmth pinching his cheeks. He was amazed that such a powerful fire did not melt the ice in the room. The flames leapt up like dancers, seeming to lick the high ceiling.

Albert rubbed his eyes – the bright fire irritated his sight for the moment. As his eyes adjusted, he could feel a blurry shadow between him and the fire.

The blur sharpened into a wiry man. The shadow from the fire behind him obscured the man’s face.

Albert demanded warily, “Who are you? Are you one of my people or an intruder?”

This time he could hear his voice. It echoed off the walls until he could hear several shades of himself asking the same question.

The man said nothing at all. Instead, he quietly picked up a clay mug – sloshing with some crystal liquid that ran over the sides. He reached behind him and pulled an arrow out of some unseen quiver. With a quick dip of the arrowhead in the mug, the man let the cup drop to the floor. It shattered like a splash in the gulf. The drops of broken mug immediately wisped away into smoke.

The shadow pulled a bow out of the cold thin air and trained the arrow in Albert’s direction. Albert tried to move. He was rooted fast to the ground though, like a proud sycamore waiting for the lightning topple.

The shadow echoed, I am no man. I am the ending for your play.

The bowstring gave. The arrow lunged. Albert didn’t even have a chance to scream. A shout is the worst last words to have.

The very second the poisoned arrow buried into his chest, Albert snapped awake. His weak heart pounding, he looked around sharply. He was back in his room. The morning was glaring through the open window near his bed. No ice.

Albert felt something heavy against his chest. He looked down, expecting to see an arrow dipped in his heart. He was relieved to find, though, that it was just his hand pressed firm against his breast, the fingers clutching at his old man's heart beneath its grave of ribs.

Drenched in sweat from the nightmare – yet glad that it was nothing more – Albert collapsed back into the folds of his straw-stuffed mattress, soaking in the warmth of the June morning. Although his eyes were closed, Albert knew there was suddenly someone standing over the bed. He was not afraid though – he knew who it was. He knew that soft-tempered perfume.

With opening his eyes, Albert smiled, “Good morning, love.”

Lady Margaret de Vere leaned over him and kissed him full on the lips. She glided down next to him on the bed and said softly, “But I thought your love was the hunt?”

“That's just to keep the rest of the peerage off my back, Margaret. I can't have people rumor about my being a romantic. They'll think I'm French.”

Margaret laughed, “But you are French.”

“My family may have a French name, but England has separated me from my past well enough. Besides, when I get older, my hounds won't be able to take care of me. If anything, they'd probably eat me.”

“You say that as if you aren't already getting up into the years.”

Albert scowled good-naturedly and said, “True, I admit...I am a frail man behind the baron. Each year has soften my strength and given me knowledge. Now I'm nothing more than a wise fool with soup for bones and lean meat for muscle.”

“No talk of food this early in the morning. It makes me hungry and the cooks are not finished with the meal yet.”

“Fair enough. Why are you up this early in the morning, anyway?”

The smile on Margaret's face washed away. She abruptly got out of the bed and sauntered towards the window. She looked out and sighed, “Dreams plagued my sleeping mind all night. I saw our poor son sitting on the shore of somewhere, washing his bloodied hands in Neptune's waters. Just think of him, so lost in the Holy Land and killing each day...I can barely stand it. Our Lord said that we shouldn't kill and here we are, killing in his name and in his very home upon this earth. Such a guilt has broken stronger men's shoulders...”

Her voice trailed off and she put her face in her hands. Albert strode across the room and held her firmly in his arms. As he embraced her, he said, “There is no need to worry about our son. No need at all. Peter is a strong, smart man. He will not die in the Crusade, and especially not as a sinner.”

Margaret, her head in Albert's shoulder, said chokingly, “I guess you're right, love. I'll try not to worry about it.”

As Albert hugged her, he put his hand in her hair, the flowing hair, the floating raven hair. He could remember a time when it was a brilliant midnight black. It still melted with black now, but there was a silver lining to it.

They were getting old. Too old. And Albert didn't like it.

He was going to tell Margaret about his dream, but after hearing hers, Albert did not want to startle her even more. Having dreams about your son and death are bad enough – it's even worse to hear your husband's dreaming about the end as well.

While Margaret was freed from her nightmare, Albert was just beginning to immerse himself in his own. The paranoia settled on his face like ash, greying him by the footstep. He knew dreams by nature are absurd, but he still started whenever he heard a door slam somewhere in the castle.

He strode through the gallery in his deep purple tunic that reached his knees. Over the tunic he wore a coat that was just as long and sported just as rich of a purple. From there his woolen socks wrapped around his legs on down to his toes. His feet were covered with poulaines. Albert – in a moment of jest – had ordered this particular pair of long-toed shoes to be so long that the extensions had to be chained to his tunic (otherwise he

would literally be tripping over his own feet). It was a vulgarity his fellow nobles frowned upon. It was the raging fashion though, and Albert – despite his advanced age – was all about the newest fad.

As he walked through his domain, he nodded good morning to several people who passed him. There was Joseph ben Samuel, the engineer who made sure the castle would still be a castle tomorrow. Trailing behind Joseph – like always – were several of his masons. In private, Joseph would joke to Albert that they followed him around like a line of swans. Albert also ran into several of his guards who were heading out on their morning patrol of the grounds. There were the laundresses and seamstresses, the tailor and the tanner. Not to mention the families of each of the workers – everywhere Albert looked there were children running about and giggling. He didn't mind the commotion and the hungry mouths behind the noise. His investments and inheritance were more than enough to feed the dozens of people living in the castle for decades to come.

He stepped out of the inner ward and into the blazing June sun. He walked through the courtyard and filled his lungs like bellows on the fresh air. The castle that towered around him was nicknamed Raven's Crest by the locals. The name came about due to the large number of crows that always seem to be circling the castle. Some of the townspeople of nearby Lincoln say it's because of all the meat that's carted into the castle to feed the workers there. Others speak of the familiar omen attached to the birds like stones – how the ravens hunger for battlefields, how the very sight of them conjures the thought of one's own death. Albert generally laughed off those superstitions, but the dream was still on his mind. He could see several crows strutting about the courtyard as he walked through. Albert couldn't help but think he was going to die.

Moving on to lighter talking points, the castle was an interesting work of art. The keep – or the building sitting in the bull's-eye of the castle's sprawling layout – was a motley collection of stone from various quarries in the area. This resulted in the keep having an unusual variety of colors ranging from a chalky white to a deep wine red. Despite the flow of colors, the keep and its surrounding walls were a towering menace in the English forest. Having adopted the traditional rectangular shape common amongst English castles, the curtain – or outside wall – seemed to box in the keep and give an air of order and organization to the castle. Massive towers stood guard at each corner of the curtain wall. The guards joked that you could see the whole way to London from one of those towers.

Albert took in all of this wonderful architecture as he walked towards the kitchen. The kitchen itself was housed in a building separate from the keep's inner ward. The castle's original architect felt the occupants didn't want to breathe in the nauseating scent of animals entrails as cooks butchered the poor creatures. Albert had to agree with the architect.

As Albert swung the kitchen door open and walked in, he was greeted not by the cooks but by a billowing smoke. He waved the smoke from his eyes and walked up to the hearth. It was a bloodred brick hearth with a cauldron on top, bubbling with a beef-and-parsley stew. Albert took a wooden spoon, dipped it in the stew, and sucked down the taste. It warmed him up better than June ever could.

Next to the hearth a boy was turning a spit filled with chunks of meat. Albert asked, "Say there, lad, what kind of meat is that?"

The spit boy looked up and – seeing it was the baron himself – blanched and said timidly, "Why, I think it's pig, milord."

"Pig? Is that so?"

The boy nodded weakly.

Albert grinned and boomed, "Ah, I love a good pig every now and then! Do you mind if I have a chunk of the meat?"

"I'm afraid it's not fully-cooked yet, milord."

"Nonsense. It looks fine enough to me. Besides, I will be going on a hunt this morning and I need to eat before heading out."

A voice from behind Albert said slyly, "Is it because you're afraid you won't catch anything to eat?"

Albert turned and laughed, "Hugh, how are you today?"

"Doing just fine, milord."

Hugh was descended directly from the Norman invaders. He claimed to be descended from William himself. A rather round person himself, Hugh certainly had William's look. However, Hugh carried his weight well, working too hard to have time to be sloth. He was an excellent cook, perhaps the best for miles. Hugh

was so expert at his job that Albert didn't mind him sneaking the occasional sweets for himself (Hugh claimed he didn't, but Albert knew better).

Albert gingerly took some of the hot pork off the spit and asked, "Do you have some bread I can eat this with?"

Albert walked through the courtyard, chewing on the pork and bread. The spit boy was right: the pork wasn't done yet. The food felt rubbery in his mouth, but he shrugged it off. It was too early in the morning for him to taste food anyway. He just needed some weight in his stomach.

The horses in the courtyard were already prepared for the hunt. They were fresh imports from Friesland across the water. Pricey, but worth the gold. They were beautiful, black horses, their muscles rippling beneath their skin like waves.

His fellow hunters were perched on several of the horses. Lord Johannes Chandler, Baron Thomas Kent, and Lord Simon Kelsey were chattering amongst themselves. Albert was still a bit of a distance away, but he could catch some of their talk.

"I remember that one time you missed that deer that was right next to you..."

"Well, at least I tried. I doubt you could hit a fox even if you paid some archer to do it..."

A roar of laughter sprouted from the crowd, bothering the horses a bit. The only person not joining in the laughter was – ironically – Albert's jester, Phillip Killigrew. Killigrew was off to the side on his horse, looking sullen. He was an unlikely jester though. He survived several military expansions deep into the heart of Ireland; it seems unlikely that a man could fit murder and laughter into his life. There simply isn't enough room to keep both. His earthy eyes were constantly on the alert, darting about as if demons were lurking in the shadows.

Noticing Albert approaching, Killigrew guided his horse towards the elderly noble and asked, "I hope you don't mind, milord, but early this morning I tied daggers to the heads of the rabbits we'll be hunting."

Albert laughed, "Excellent! Today's hunt might actually be interesting now."

They all pulled their horses together into a tight circle as they discussed their plans. After a few minutes of discussion, they galloped out of the castle and along the drawbridge, the horse hooves clunking dull on the wood. They galloped ocean-deep into the woods until they came upon a nearby meadow. The horses wanted to stop and nibble on the long grass, but the riders had game larger than grass in mind.

At the end of the meadow was a small pond. There was a bevy of geese trying to rest. This proved to be difficult since several of Albert's servants were holding onto a number of hunting hounds, who startled the swans at each bark. The dogs were demonic, snarling and nearly strangling themselves with the ropes leashed onto them. The servant did not seem to mind though, thinking it was better the dogs were focused on the swans and not on them.

When Albert reached the dogs, he pursed his lips together and hissed a whining whistle – it sounded to the other nobles like wind on a winter night. To the snarling dogs, though, the whistle sapped them of their savagery and they turned as one to Albert, their ears perked at attention.

Lord de Vere smiled and reached into his tunic pocket. He pulled out a small piece of rabbit skin, which he threw at the dogs. They curiously sniffed the skin for a few moments and when they looked back up at Albert, he could see the cold hunger had seeped back into their eyes.

Albert commanded, "Let them go."

The servants obeyed, untying the dogs free from the rope. The hounds immediately bounded off into the forest, their yelps trailing behind their leaps. The nobles waited a minute for the dogs to root out the rabbits and other creatures from their rest.

Killigrew edged up to Albert and asked, "Are you sure you're up to the hunt for today, milord?"

"Absolutely. Why do you ask?"

"Well, I've noticed that over the past few days, you've been struggling to stand and your heart seems of a weak constitution. Perhaps you should be resting in your chair back in the main hall rather than hunting rabbits out in the wild."

Albert shook off the jester's doubts, saying dismissively, "I have the blood of warriors in me, Phillip. The hunt is what gives me life. If I sit still for too long, I'll die, simply die. Now, not to change the subject, but might ya have a bit of spirits in your possession?"

Killigrew pulled a flask out and said slyly, "You know, back in Scotland they almost threw me in the dungeons because I was a demon possessing spirits of good and innocent men."

"Is that so?"

Albert laughed and took a swig from the flask. He coughed hard on the stuff and, rubbing his watery eyes, gasped, "What kind of fiery brew is this, Phillip?"

"It's from my kin's farmland to the west of here, milord. They say it's so strong it brought Alexander the Great back to life from his ashes."

Suddenly, Baron Kent asked, "Do you think it's time for us to begin the hunt?"

"Ah yes, I suppose it is. Let's begin then."

They commanded their horses to thunder into the forest. The horses dodged fallen oak trees and leapt over thin streams. A drought had worked its way through the landscape, wounding everything it had touched. The riders took out their bows and arrows, prepared for their prey.

They reached a claustrophobic clearing after a few minutes of riding. They listened quietly for a moment. Just then, they heard the staccato barking of the hounds roughly a hundred meters to their right. And a hundred meters to the right was where they went.

The dogs were right like always. Several rabbits bounded through the deep green grass, their patches of white fur flickering between the greens. By instinct, de Vere aimed an arrow straight for the nearest rabbit. The arrow just barely missed the prey, landing with a pillowsoft thud in the grass just behind it.

The other hunters tried their luck. Killigrew was the only lucky one, his arrow piercing the hide of a rather large hare in mid-leap. The rabbit collapsed and twitched out its death throes. The other, luckier hares scattered into the underbrush, the hounds quick on their cottontails.

Killigrew turned to the hunters and grinned, "It seems we happened a whole family of jackrabbits. Shall we wipe their bloodline off the face of the earth?"

The nobles all laughed and Baron Kent said, "Yes, let's rid the world of these wanton furry beasts."

Once more, the riders commanded their horses into the foliage. The trees seemed to blur and swirl into a collage of chaos as the horses galloped through. Albert winced as an unseen force wracked pain at his left leg. As soon as the pain hit him, however, it vanished. So too did the feeling in the rest of his leg. His right leg followed suit.

I have to stop this horse and get back on ground, Albert thought with panic. Something was definitely wrong.

He tried to stop his horse, but the beast – caught up in the moment of the hunt – continued through the forest. Albert clung to the neck of his horse with all his life, his life that was seeping through his fingers like sand.

As the numbing pain coursed through his arms, Albert felt more nauseous than he ever felt in his life. He leaned over the side of the galloping gargantuan and threw up his breakfast of chicken and whisky. The vomiting cost Albert dearly. He tumbled off the horse and crunched into the ground. The fall was cushioned by his shoulder, whose feeble bones shattered from the impact. Albert's leg snapped as one of the horse's rear hooves came down on his knee. It was a blessing that the paralysis took the pain for Albert.

His spill caused him to tumble across the ground, upsetting a hedgehog nestled in the long grass around a nearby tree. The other riders – just a few meters ahead – heard the commotion behind them and looked back to see their host sprawled on the ground, blood seeping from his leg where one of the snapped bones had punctured the skin.

Shocked at how quick it all happened, the riders skidded their horses to a halt and roared back to where Albert laid dying. Besides his head – which was shaking like mad – the rest of his body was frozen. He was becoming a human sculpture before their very eyes. The hunters gathered quietly around Albert as he entered his final moments. His eyes were bulging as if he was trying to see the spirit exhaled from his mouth.

Albert rasped and coughed harshly. Blood rivered from the corner of his mouth as he tried to speak. Even while dying, he was strong.

"Kent?"

Kent looked nervously at the others and leaned down next to the mangled shell of his old friend, a man who was riding with pride and confidence just minutes before.

“What can I do for you, Albert?”

“Wa...wa...watch over Margaret. And make sure...”

“Yes?”

“Make...sure that Peter...”

“What about Peter?”

“Peter...”

And with that, Albert went back to his dreams.

Chapter 2

“A king is history’s slave.” (Leo Tolstoy)

Sheen Palace, London

Two Days Later

The summer seemed to blister away the grains that grew along the Thames. The old river – which on normal days perfumed with raw sewage – repelled people, the unbearable heat mixing with the odors.

It was this monstrosity that we will contrast with the carved beauty that loomed on the shores. Sheen Palace was grand architecture, seeming to be inspired by the sight of lit candles. The palace seemed to be built around a series of thin towers, their roofs adorned with wooden sculptures crafted to resemble flames. Because wood and flames together make for a happy ending.

The wooden flames were then painted white, giving the impression of a palace always lit even during the day. Each of the towers – a giant over the Thames – was brashness against the known world, as if the crown of England was the sole bastion of hope against the dark evils.

Perhaps we should compare – instead of contrast – Sheen Palace with the Thames.

These arrogant flames were fueled by a wick which was lounging upon his throne in the palace’s aptly-named throne room. It was a grand room on the side of the palace facing the river – the sweeping view offered a look at the Thames without the stench.

The room sat on majestic marble floors that, despite the expense, were hidden from the public eye by even more-expensive Persian rugs. It was as if the marble was an embarrassment that needed hiding. The walls caged the extravagance with paintings of monarchs past, each of them propped stiff with a solemn pose and lifeless fish eyes.

Only two people were enjoying the throne room at that moment. King Humphrey of England lazily lifted his stubbled face from his diamonded hand. He seemed tired of sitting on his jewel-encrusted throne, looming over the room like some unnecessary mountain. His black, curled hair bristled like a rabid dog. His grave eyes stared coldly ahead. His strong chin canyoned apart by a noticeable crevice. He was made to belong amongst those portraits of hardened monarchs.

Humphrey did not care much for the room. After all, he was not the one who paid for it. It was a gift from his subjects, in appreciation for all that he had done. Yes, that it was he told everybody, that it was a gift. The more he said it, the more he believed it. Just because he forced the gift out of them by taxes did not cheapen their generosity.

Queen Eva – sitting in a throne next to him – was a wrinkled woman. It was not that her years caught up with her, but she caught up with her years. Even in her youth, she had been as callous and coldhearted as an ancient widow. Her parched face seemed to pale even more under her thinning hair. Once oaken and flowing, her hair over the years had receded and whiten into a skeleton. Her blizzard hair was symmetry to her personality; she was the winter queen if there ever was one. She was even hard enough to kill springtime if she wanted.

Eva suddenly turned and asked, “Is the Earl of Kent attending tonight’s banquet, Humphrey?”

Humphrey frowned as he shuffled for an answer. He answered, “Yes, I do believe the Earl is coming. Why do you ask?”

“Well, tonight may be as good a night as any to approach the Earl of Kent. You know, to ask him to share Canterbury Cathedral’s donations with us.”

Humphrey snapped, “What would be the point of that?”

The King was getting grumpy. He hadn’t had anything to eat all afternoon.

“It was just a suggestion on my part, Humphrey. For too long, the Church has had countless pilgrims pay their homage to St. Becket. Now, the Earl of Kent is a spineless man. He will no doubt bow to you. If he doesn’t, you can exercise your power – no, your rights – as king to make him bend. We can use the donations to build a castle in the region. Remember, Humphrey, your reign will stay stable only as long as you sink gold into it.”

“Are you saying my soul is greedy? Are you saying I’m meant for the fifth terrace of purgatory, to flounder with the rich who beg?”

“Of course not, Humphrey. I am merely saying that a powerful man such as yourself needs food to stay strong. Our...I mean your food is money. Now, how can greed be a sin if it is our destiny?”

Humphrey calmed down a bit and grumbled, “I’ll see what I can do, Eva. We must remember not to step out of bounds, though. Many of the barons in this land are still in a fury over what I have done.”

“The Magna Carta is weak, like all documents. Everything written with a pen fades over time. But it does prove something useful.”

“And that is?”

“It was originally crafted to have the barons keep the king in check. We should be mindful that balancing works both ways, Humphrey. Isn’t that why you ordered all of those castles constructed throughout the kingdom?”

“Those castles are there to ensure stability.”

“Stability for you. You are our government. These barons who oppose you...they oppose every corner of our way of life. They must be kept at arm’s length. But if they want to get to you, they’ll have to capture every castle in England first.”

“What will others say if they found I’m taking advice from my wife?”

“They’ll say my, what a wise leader England has.”

Humphrey laughed shortly.

Just then, a pounding persisted against the lumbering oak door leading into the throne room. Humphrey called out, “Enter.”

The door swung and a young man with a rich dark goatee stepped into the room. Dressed in a simple brown tunic, the man walked to where the King and Queen sat and, with the deepest of bows, announced, “Your Highness, a messenger from Lincolnshire is at the gate, claiming he bears the most urgent news from his county. He requests your audience immediately.”

“Is that so? Well then, bring him in.”

As the servant prepared to leave, Humphrey suddenly asked, “Yeoman, what is your name?”

The servant turned and, surprised, replied, “Although I don’t understand how my humble name would interest you, Highness, my name is Geoffrey.”

“Well then, Geoffrey, have you by any chance visited the shrine of St. Becket in Canterbury?”

“I actually have just come back from a pilgrimage there, Highness.”

“Did you generously give at the shrine?”

“I certainly did, Highness. They say that St. Becket’s shrine can heal ailments and my unfortunate heart has been plagued with troubles as of late. I gave generously, hoping St. Becket would return the favor some day.”

“Very well, you may go now, Geoffrey.”

“Certainly, Highness.”

As Geoffrey left, Queen Eva leaned in and whispered, “See?”

“I know,” Humphrey hissed back. In his mind, though, the King was already dreaming about this new revenue trickle.

Suddenly a man – presumably the messenger from Lincolnshire – burst into the room with two of the King’s guards in tow. The messenger seemed out of breath, his bewildered eyes darting about until they landed on the King. The guards assumed their position on either side of the main door. The messenger nervously walked the rugged floor and bowed before the royal duo.

He said, “Highness, I bring terrible news from my master’s estate in Lincolnshire. Yesterday, the great Baron Albert de Vere died during a hunting accident. It appears he fell from his horse during the hunt and was trampled by his steed. The gracious Lady de Vere and the townspeople of Lincoln have entered a state of mourning for their beloved noble.”

Humphrey hid his smile well. He had been hoping for this day for a long time now. Baron de Vere was a pain in his side for many years, raising protests from the other nobles over unwarranted tax increases and other supposed tyranny. Whereas Humphrey had his brute political power, de Vere had a certain cunning and charisma, just enough to turn the peerage in his favor. de Vere managed to raise a particular stink just a year before over a tax on grain. If it wasn’t for Humphrey begging for a Papal bull justifying it, he was sure there

would have been a rebellion in the kingdom. All the Pope said was that the money was needed for excursions in the Holy Land, and that shut up the whole lot of them. Humphrey wished he had the Pope's power.

"I am horribly saddened by the death of our beloved Baron, Humphrey announced – not feeling a pang of sadness – and continued, Please tell Lady de Vere that she has my condolences over the matter. Is there anything else I should be made aware of?"

"Well, actually, there is, Highness. The de Vere estate is in a dilemma since the death of my master. Baron de Vere's sole son is currently fighting in the Crusades against the malicious Moors. Until he returns, no one has proper control of the castle. Lady de Vere has requested me to ask you for advice on this issue."

Humphrey wasn't too interested in helping the de Vere family. Especially not after what that Baron has done to him for all those years, meddling in politics that weren't his.

"Unfortunately, there is not much I can do concerning your master's estate. That is an issue best left to those knowledgeable about it. You may stay in our guest quarters for the night and return to your master's estate in the morning."

"Thank you, Highness, and good day."

As the messenger was sent out, Eva leaned in once more and murmured, "You know, Humphrey, you have been curious about castles in that area..."

That was all it took to enlighten Humphrey.

Humphrey called out, "Guard!"

"Yes, Your Highness?"

"Fetch me Captain General Benedict Marshall. He'll be resting on the south lawn. Also bring me Lieutenant General Richard Norton from one of the guest rooms. Tell them I'll meet them in the royal library just down the hall."

Queen Eva could do nothing but smile.

The library was literally a labyrinth to literature. The stone cavern seemed to be propped up with columns of bookshelves. There were the books of treatises from Aristotle and Plato. There were the Homeric. The sparse poetry of Callimachus. The realism of Euripides. The incestuous Theban trilogy of Sophocles. The cycle of violence penned by Aeschylus. Virgil's Aeneid, Ovid's Metamorphoses. So many rare books, all owned by a King who never bothered learning how to read.

There was only one window in the library, casting its cut light through the room. The sun's dance across the day made the shadows move and bring the books to life. Captain General Benedict Marshall was sitting inside one of these shadows. He was of a short, stocky build with messy, hazel hair. He was dressed in a black tunic that had his family's coat of arms woven into the front. He was a proud man – quiet, but proud.

He had the Iliad open in his lap. He was still having a bit of trouble reading the Greek – even after all these years – but he still enjoyed himself. As a child he was wide-eyed about the Ithacan Odysseus, a man who could fight better with words than most men and their fists.

The thick door leading into the library burst open. The Lieutenant General Richard Norton strode into the room in his usual fashion. Benedict always shivered when he saw Norton. There was something about him that seemed possessed, as if demons were living in his every word. The English Channel itself couldn't wipe the perpetual sneer off his lips, the slime from his slicked hair.

Norton was chewing on an apple – his mouth open at every bite – as he said in his high-pitched voice, "Say there, General, why did our Highness bring us here to this library?"

"I know as much as you do, Richard."

"I'm just asking. His Majesty knows that I'm still recovering from my battle up north. I had to put down a rebellion for his sake. A woman actually tried to challenge the King himself. Imagine!"

"She did have an army about her, Richard. She didn't work alone."

"But still. To think that so many men would believe in a woman..."

"Women are more cunning than you may think."

"I knowwww. That's why I ordered my men to make hundreds of tiny cuts on her body. I left her for the wild beasts to feast on – the next day there wasn't a piece of her remaining. I wanted to make her an example to the people, show what happens to clever women such as herself."

“That’s disgusting, she was a woman.”

“She was a warrior first.”

“But still a woman. Some things aren’t necessary, even in battle. Killing a woman is not necessary.”

“It is to stop the kingdom from falling.”

“I doubt one person can fell a kingdom like a tree. It took centuries of bad emperors to splinter Rome.”

Norton snorted and – between chews of his apple – said, “Oh, you and your learning, General. I swear…”

“I’d rather learn from other people’s mistakes than my own. I don’t have the time to be a fool.”

A pause.

Norton spoke up, “Tis a shame, though. She was such a beautiful lady. She just had that rebellious streak to her. Women need to learn their place.”

Benedict glared and said, “There’s no such thing as a bad woman.”

“Well, there’s no such thing as an honorable general. So there we are.”

Benedict smiled thinly, “The people seem to believe I’m an honorable general. Perhaps that’s why they throw flowers at me and their chamber pots at you.”

Suddenly, the door swung open again. King Humphrey strolled into the room with several attendants pulled by his gravity. He shooed them away and, turning to his two top generals, said, “Thank you both for meeting me so quickly, generals. I am in an interesting situation that needs to be fixed quickly.”

Benedict bowed, “We are at your service.”

Humphrey told the generals about the situation in Lincolnshire, how his troublesome baron died in a hunting accident and how it left his castle wide open.

“Generals, now is the time, I think, to seize the de Vere castle and use it as a stronghold in Lincolnshire.”

Benedict mused on the thought for a moment before carefully saying, “That would make sense, Your Highness. After all, you may have many castles dotting your kingdom, but you don’t have any in Lincolnshire. And the people there have always been unruly towards your lordship. If we seize control of the de Vere castle now, we will be able to keep the populace in check.”

Norton asked, “But what if this young de Vere returns from the Crusades alive?”

“Well, you’re both generals. You have killed hundreds, if not thousands, of men. I’m sure you can make one man disappear?”

Benedict said, “We can worry about the baron’s son later. For now, we can fake his death. If we relay that news to his mother, it would be easier for your lordship to take over the castle, the baroness thinking she had no other option.”

Humphrey grinned widely, “Generals, go and win me my castle.”

Chapter 3

“Pax melior est quam iustissimum bellum.”

Tunis, Africa

At That Same Moment

You can hear death in the night air around these parts. The men crying out for salvation, but more often for their mothers or their lovers. At times, their cries were drowned down, the buzz of the mosquito swarm taking over. The mosquitoes either hacked the men to death or nested in the drinking water. It got to the point where the water the men drank was as black and deadly as oceanwater.

The Mediterranean was in sight, and it was so tempting to drink the water. But everyone knew it was the badwater, that the salt would thirst you to death even quicker. The African sun gave them no mercy, no quarter as it rained down hellfire at all hours of the day. Morning baked just as thick as afternoon did.

The men had only just landed on shore a few weeks before and they were already vanishing. They actually had to wait for reinforcements from Charles I of Sicily before proceeding. The grumbles were running riverdeep in the camp.

“I tell ya, the only man who can understand Charles’s ways is Charles hisself.”

“It’s those bloody Sicilians who talked us into coming here. It should be them dying in the heat, not us.”

Despite the angry murmur, their presence in Tunis was necessary – at least to the military brass. If they could hold Tunis, then they would have a stepping stone to Egypt. If they could get to Egypt, they can evict the Moors, driving their armies into the Mediterranean.

“But why were they in Egypt? Wasn’t it the Egyptians who enslaved the Jews? Why was Egypt worthy of the Crusaders’ help? If anything, the soldiers reasoned, they should be on another shore, freeing the Kingdom of Jerusalem from the Muslims. The leaders feared that the Muslims would do to Jerusalem what they did to Antioch. The Turks besieged that kingdom and wiped it off the map like bread crumbs. If they didn’t hurry, they would arrive to find there was nothing left to save.”

All this talk made the Christian soldiers even angrier. “Why were they dying on this Godforsaken shore? Was it to save the faith? Or was it to give their commanders good ol’ war stories to share later on? This is a good war story, dying on the illness the mosquitoes bring. How could something so small destroy men?”

So the men huddled around the dozens of campfires, hoping the smoke would repel the mosquitoes. Coughing up smoke like dragons, the men quietly swapped stories of home. There was the occasional laugh as someone cracked a dirty joke. For those moments, they forgot where they were. The comics in the group became gods for a time.

Out of all the tents, one stood out in particular – despite the fact it was the same grimy white as all the other tents. The man sitting in front of the tent, warming his hands against the fire, was the only noble in the camp. He looked too rugged for the peerage. He had cold, deep-ocean eyes, a grizzled beard, matted brown hair. Even his once moonpale skin was tanned by the Tunisian sun. No one back home would be able to recognize him, and he wanted to keep it that way. He was dressed in a flowing tunic of red and white. It was a parallel for him – an innocent man who was becoming blotched with bloodstains. A phoenix stretched its wings in the tunic’s stitching.

Peter de Vere – son to Baron Albert de Vere himself – was diligently whittling away at a piece of driftwood with his blade. The wood was becoming shapes that no one could understand, not that Peter cared. Some artists strove to make art seem real. Peter made art to make life seem less real. It helped keep him distracted.

Sudden whispers around the camp disturbed Peter’s hard work. It was quiet at first and then began to ascend into a crescendo, the sad French echoing itself as *Le roi est mort*.

The King is dead.

King Louis IX of France – a man already weakened by the old age – died the same death as all the commoners around here. He made the mistake of drinking the water. A mistake that all thirsty men make and never repeat again.

The French were disheartened, and so too were the English, Germans, and Italians. Louis IX was their main commander, after all. Another general would come and replace him, sure, but to lose your general before the battle is not the best of omens.

Peter shrugged off the news, though. He doubted that Charles I of Sicily would care much either. He would come with his army and force the Crusaders to march to death in Egypt. It was...the proper way to do things.

He went back to his whittling.

A man came out of the darkness and sat down next to Peter at the campfire. He watched Peter whittle away for a few minutes before asking in his gruff London accent, "Say there, what is that you're whittling?"

Peter carved for a few more moments before holding up his finished sculpture in the light of the fire. He yawned, "It's a sword."

The man laughed. He was Henry Mason – the two became friends on the long voyage around Spain and to Tunis. He was a good twenty years older than Peter, but they were still decent friends. You had to have at least one friend when you're waiting to die.

Henry chided, "That's a piss-poor sword ya know. I feel sorry for whomever wields that in combat."

"Tis a little pointy at the one end. It might give someone a bad scratch."

A quiet.

"So, I guess ya heard about the King?"

Peter nodded, "Tis a shame."

"Liar."

Peter shrugged.

Henry continued, "I think tis a sign."

"Go on."

"I don't think we should be out here. If the best of us is dying, what hope do the rest of us poor bastards have? Best to live to see another day."

Peter smiled thinly and offered, "Well, this is a nice change of pace coming from you."

"How so?"

"The same man who's running from his debt collectors in London, suddenly feeling the urge to go back."

Henry shrugged, "Am I a rich man? Yes. Am I a moral man? No. I could have ran anywhere. I could have ran north, west, east. No...instead I decide to run south, to kill and go against the Lord's teachings for the Lord himself! I am a man of paradoxes, my friend. I've come here to live out my death. I make no sense. Like war. Like this war."

"Well, this war is as stupid as they come, Henry. The men here have no idea why they're fighting. I'm a noble, I know why. The whys change everything. I hate whys – I wish I never knew them. I would tell these men, have them share in my misery. But they'll never believe a prophet of doom. No one ever does. They'll just break me like some heretic."

Henry laughed, "But you are kind of a heretic, lad."

"Shhh, not so loud. You'll make the priests cry."

A silence.

Henry finally asked the question that Peter had been waiting for.

"So if you aren't here for the faith, what are you here for?"

"Because my family wanted me to stay at home."

Henry snorted, "Is that so?"

Peter nodded, "They didn't want me to fight. To die. We argued over the matter. Next morning, I slipped out of the estate and headed for the nearest port. And now I'm here. I didn't come here to die, but I did come here to live. All my life I've been following rules. I've always wanted to make my own mistakes, but no one has let me. I had to cut the net and swim free. I'm a fish at heart..."

"...who's swimming into the leviathan's mouth."

Peter laughed. He knew it was true. He didn't really care, though.

Henry asked, "So are you planning on leaving then? You'll only die in vain here now."

"Yes, I am planning on leaving. Probably tomorrow morning, just before the sun rises."

A glint came in Henry's eyes. He hadn't been in the presence of such mischief since the night he ran from his debt collectors. He loved it.

"You know what this means, don't you?"

"What?"

"You'll be hunted like the dog you are. The generals don't care if you're a noble or not. Desertion is desertion."

Peter shrugged, "Well then, I suppose I better start running then. Don't want them to catch up with me too soon."

"Well I suppose this is goodbye then."

"Let's not say goodbyes. I'm not very fond of them. If you're ever in Lincolnshire, look for my family's castle. You'll always find a hot supper there."

"I hope I will, Peter, I hope I will."

"Let's not say hope either."

"Okay then, I won't."

Chapter 4
“One need not be a chamber to be haunted” (Emily Dickinson)
Lincolnshire
One Week Later

As powerful as the sun is, it cannot kill shadows during the daytime. If anything, it creates the little pockets of night that flicker here and there. The dark festers in the corners while the sun beats its chest in vanity. Between the shade of the grainstalks the night beasts lurk: the bloodred foxes, the tusked boars, the spiny hedgehogs. They hit from the light the way the farmers from night.

As the sun made its way across the landscape, it embarrassed itself by creating a shadow of its own. A massive ink blotch marched beneath the burning ball, trembling the earth into vibration.

Farmers stopped their work in the fields and looked out towards the road, shielding their eyes. As the blot crawled closer, they realized that it wasn't the sun's rare shadow but a small army. Columns of men weighed down in their armor. Each of them carried pain and fear that was crafted into weapons: the steely mace, the longbladed pikes, the brilliant swords. Each soldier walked with confidence, letting their weapons be frightened for them.

At the front of the pack was a knight astride his sharktooth-colored steed. The horse was terror enough, the monster seeming to burst through its armor like water from a leaky bucket. The knight was worse. His armor was a cold grey, ruined by the occasional dark stain, the scarlet red too stubborn to wash. He wore his sword on his left side; it was a massive sword, enough to trip most men. It was stout but strong – the blacksmiths made sure that nothing could crack and shatter the blade. The handle was rusted in jewelry from spoils of wars past. On the knight's right arm, he wore an enormous shield, the loops on the back wrapped snug around his arm. His coat of arms adorned the shield's front, the tiger emblem ready to pounce out of the shield, claws drawn and sharpened.

The knight moved like the night and was as silent as one. The men marching behind him followed his example, not breathing a single word. Perhaps it was because they were afraid, that the first word they'd say would be a complaint. After all, they had already walked twenty miles in the brute, brute sun that day.

Up ahead the dirt road began twisting and curling sinister into the shady forest. They were looking forward to the cool beneath the trees.

The knight knew the area well, like he knew the rest of his island. He knew the castle was just around the next bend in the road. They saw it well before the bend, though, the massive castle known in many circles as Raven's Crest – home to the dying de Vere family.

The procession of soldiers stopped at the foot of the castle, waiting their next order.

A call came down from the outer wall, “Who goes there?”

The knight stepped forward and removed his helmet. It was the General Benedict Marshall himself, dressed in his finest like always.

“It is I, the Captain General of his Majesty's armies. I am here at his demand. I am to speak with Lady de Vere and her alone.”

A pause.

“Do you have a letter bearing the King's seal?”

“I do indeed. Unfortunately, it is a small seal and you will not be able to see it from your tower. Allow me entrance into your baroness's castle. My men will stay out here for now if it will ease your worries.”

Part of the guard did not want to be stupid, falling prey to bandits masquerading as soldiers. The other part of the guard did not want to upset the top English general.

The other part won over. He ordered the drawbridge lowered, a demand that took several minutes to accomplish. Benedict got off his horse and walked across the drawbridge, the wood creaking beneath his armored feet. The moat smelled like sin – years of dumping waste into the water worked wonders.

Once Benedict entered the castle, a shy servant guided him through the maze of corridors. Servants hid in the shadows, eyeing him with suspicion. It was not every day the General walked through your home. He knew the curiosity would turn ugly once they found out why he was there.

They reached an enormous oak door. The shy servant-girl somehow heaved the heavy door open and called, "Milady, Captain General Benedict Marshall requests your presence."

A surprised voice said, "Let him enter."

As Benedict entered the room, the door was closed behind him. It was a bedroom built for two, but it wasn't enough room for a widow and all her thoughts. Lady de Vere sat in a chair next the window, her shoulders pressed in as if claustrophobic to the touch. She looked far more wrinkled than Benedict could ever remember. Her eyes were sunken deep into her face. She stared blankly ahead as she murmured, "General."

"Milady."

"Forgive me, but I wasn't expecting you. Like always, it's a pleasure."

"And I can say the same for you, milady. I have come to offer my condolences. Your husband was a grand man, a noble with England truly at heart."

This broke Margaret out of her trance and she turned slowly to Benedict. Looking at him shrewdly, she asked, "What do you want?"

"What do you mean?"

"I may be in mourning, General, but I can sense something's amiss. You are a good man, yes, but not one who would travel the whole way from London for such a simple condolence. A letter would have done just as well."

Benedict sighed, "I'm afraid, milady, that I will have to cut to the chase then. Earlier this week, news of your husband's death reached the King's palace. The loss of Baron de Vere had unfortunately been compounded by an obvious issue: who, exactly, owns this castle. The King spoke fiercely about the matter with his advisers and he has come to the regrettable conclusion that this castle be passed onto the crown."

"No."

"I'm sorry?"

"I mean that my husband arranged matters so that my son will inherit the castle. So no, the King cannot have it – not yet."

Although Margaret retained the air of a lady, Benedict could see a brief fury course through her as she said that. So that must be where the Baron got his stubbornness when dealing with King Humphrey.

"I'm afraid you mentioning you're son has forced me to make another painful confession," Benedict sighed, putting on his best act.

Before he had a chance to continue, Margaret's eyes turned glassy. Her nightmares were about to come true.

"Peter...he's not..."

"...dead? I'm afraid so, yes. Before leaving Sheen Palace, I received word of an ambush on our troops in Tunis. Your son's name was on the list of the dead. I'm so terribly sorry."

Margaret tumbled her face into her hands. She tried to cry, but nothing worked. She was all teared out from her husband's death already. The grieving for her son would come in time. Benedict silently waited her out.

"What am I to do, General? What is a lady like me to do? This month has killed my family. Am I left to languish?"

"Unfortunately...yes. Due to the fact that you are a lady, you are barred from owning any property, regardless of your situation. There is not much the law can provide for you...well, beyond advising you to find relations to live with for a time. Or to find charity in the church."

"Can King Humphrey help me? After all, I am part of a noble line. I don't mean to sound arrogant, but aren't I entitled to some royal assistance?"

What a conniving woman, Benedict thought. Even though she hates the King with all her heart, she will turn for his help in a moment.

"Well, King Humphrey could make an exception for you. However, if he did that, he would have to make an exception for everyone. With that in mind, our law states that unoccupied castles and such are to be confiscated by the King. So there you are."

"What? That's absolutely ridiculous."

“Well, it’s not so ridiculous when you look at it from our point of view, milady. See, an empty castle is easy pickings for rebels. The last thing we want is for enemies of the crown to have a stronghold to call their own.”

“So...I have no say in any of this?”

“No, none at all. I say this out of pure courtesy – I see no point in arguing the King’s declarations with anyone. The King has the final word.”

Lady de Vere stood up and looked out the window. She turned and – with a glare – said, “I will give up this castle. Not because I respect the eviction, but because I have no family left for this castle.”

“That’s good enough for me, milady. Now, if I may, I will order my troops into the castle.”

Chapter 5

“Be a sinner and sin strongly.” (Martin Luther)

Lincoln Cathedral

Two Weeks Later

“Pater noster, qui es in caelis, sanctificetur nomen tuum. Adveniat regnum tuum. Fiat voluntas tua, sicut in caelo et in terra. Panem nostrum quotidianum da nobis hodie. Et dimitte nobis debita nostra, sicut et nos dimittimus debitoribus nostris. Et ne nos inducas in tentationem: sed libera nos a malo. Amen.”

The solemn congregation’s words floated eerily to the roof of the cathedral and hung there, suspended like oil in water. Outside, the breezy Sunday morning knocked impatient on the doors, asking to be let in for the service.

The Cathedral was a grand building, testament to both the Bible and English engineering. It craned up into the skies, ironically looking more and more like the Tower of Babel in its construction. Nothing more than people attempting to fly by walking up stairs. It was Gothic by design, the architect preferring straight lines over curves as his flavor. It veered on being a glass house, the excess of windows allowing light to flood the insides like a drowning sailor. Despite the pouring light, the cathedral still had that cold, imposing look, daring the softer, more eloquent Renaissance style that was yet to be.

And like all English architecture, it literally fell upon its own flaws. Fires and earthquakes had twice demolished the church over the years. Fortunately, the people were more stubborn than nature, and each time they patiently rebuilt their sanctuary.

So the parishioners ignored the rolling winds and continued to chant the Latin hymns they had memorized since their childhood. Few – if any – could translate the dead language they were now pronouncing in chorus. They didn’t mind speaking a language they couldn’t understand. Echoing the words freed their minds from distractions. Distraction was a sin to the people in these parts. If it wasn’t a sin, it certainly led to sin. At least, that was how they understood matters.

Father Noah was standing before the altar, his hands raised as he led the townspeople in the prayer. Noah was getting old, and it showed. As a young man, he would run the rolling countryside until it flattened. At the same time, he worked as an apprentice for the town’s blacksmith. How the years change people. He was now a bald man, save for a thin, bristly beard and eyebrows. He felt so slow when he walked – his creaky bones seemed to rust shut in the winters. But what the years took away from him, they gave him just as much in confidence in his speaking.

And they say the wise old men never talk. Well, they should. And they should talk more often.

As the prayers quieted down, Noah closed his eyes for a moment and breathed. He was prepared for what he was about to say, but he doubted his parishioners weren’t.

And so he began his sermon.

“My people, late last night I received word from a good friend of mine, a monk who prays in the Canterbury Cathedral itself. He speaks of injustice being wrought against our Church.”

The mass of people mumbled amongst one another, shocked. They were not expecting scandal.

“As I’ve mentioned before, the late Archbishop of Canterbury died when his ship capsized in churning seas. Customs dictate that the Church has the right – no, the privilege – to choose a successor for the archbishop. However, the Church has been denied that right. Instead, our illustrious King has appointed one of his own to the position. The Church is unable to stop him unfortunately – our bishops are still squabbling in Rome over who shall succeed Pope Clement IV, who died two years ago. King Humphrey is aware of this. Now, it is common knowledge that us Christians have pooled our hardearned money and have donated it to St. Thomas Becket’s shrine. It is, after all, the right thing to do: paying homage to our humble saint. My friend has made aware, however, that Walter Kilwardby – the new Archbishop of Canterbury – has been rumored to be stealing donations at his cathedral. He has – in turn – given these donations to King Humphrey as a gift. Some of you may say that this is a rumor, that it is here in this world simply to slander those mentioned. And normally, I would share that feeling. Our Lord said that we should not lie, and is a rumor not possibly a lie? However, these are serious matters, which are well-worth the potential for sin. If true, this supposed scandal does nothing but hurt us – all of us – because our money is being squandered in corruption. Oddly enough, it

was corruption that ultimately killed St. Becket in the end. Now it has come back to kill his honest legacy. We are here today because we know that we are good people. We are also here today because we know that there are monsters gathering outside of our doors. The Church is no luckier – it too has fallen prey to the twists in the human soul. The Church is not corrupted, but those who practice it can be. We must ignore the swirling surface of madness and keep our eyes trained on the skies. Our hopes cannot be found drowning away in the tides of evil. Our hopes are dry and pure. Those who drown in the swirl, those who burn for jewels and fine foods and rich clothing, will burn slow. And we can try to save them, but it risks our drowning too. Although that we can do is keep our heads up.”

And with that said, Father Noah paused and closed his eyes firm. He raised his hands – palms up – to the ceiling as he meditated on the moment. Although his eyes were shut, he was sure he could see his parishioners’ stunned faces, them trying to piece together the shock. He knew that some would refuse to believe. Not everyone was willing to let their way of living die.

Noah was smart. He made sure they could not see the doubt in his face like he saw in theirs. If men of the Church could be corrupted, could he truly believe what he was saying? Evil breeds lies like fleas. But Noah had no choice. He had to believe. There was no room to reason.

When King Humphrey was looking for a temporary chamberlain, someone to run the daily affairs of Raven’s Crest Castle, he was certainly vain about it. When he announced the name Robert Hall, it was as if he was looking in a mirror. Robert was quite possibly the town fool of the kingdom – it seemed that he was the only one not in the know. If anything, he walked brimming with an arrogant confidence as if the world was handed to him, like it was a toy. And he certainly wielded it like a toy, breaking everything in his path. Robert was a man of little strength, being rather content just wasting away in his manor south of London. But what got him to this point was not strength or cunning – rather, it was his wormy loyalty to the crown. This is all that matters. So when it came time to pick a chamberlain, Robert was the first to crop up in Humphrey’s mind.

Robert walked with a strut through the courtyard. He was a proud man, and you have to be as him – not many can run a castle into the ground. And so soon too. It was only a few weeks since he took over, and already the castle was beginning to fall apart. He had let the once-mammoth food stores begin to dwindle, not knowing it was his duty to command the servants to bring in food. True, there was still roughly a month’s worth of food left, tucked away in the castle’s corners. However, all it took was a simple siege and the garrison would have to surrender quick from the starvation. Hunger destroyed castles better than catapults ever could.

Also, Robert had the gall to turn away a messenger from another castle. The messenger’s lord had requested Robert attend one of his banquets. An irritated Robert shooed the messenger away, saying he had no time for political games. The unimpressed and rather insulted lord – who happened to be Lord Simon Kelsey, witness to Albert de Vere’s unfortunate death – did not invite Robert to win favor. If anything, he did it out of a genuine act of kindness and hospitality. Now, Lord Kelsey was rather influential, carrying a lot of sway in the county’s politics. Rest assured now, if something were to happen to the de Vere estate, Kelsey would pretend to ignore it. He would have gladly died for Albert’s sake. Not for this weasel though, this weasel who stole his friend’s home and evicted his poor widow.

The old servants of de Vere’s who stayed on constantly murmured about Robert behind his back. A castle is always in a constant ruin and so need a world of attention. Robert ignored the requests for engineers, carpenters, masons, insisting that since the castle looked fine to him, it was fine enough. The servants knew the real reason why – Robert was afraid of using the King’s money to repair the castle. No one could waste away the King’s coffers except for the King himself. And Robert was too much a coward to challenge Humphrey to anything.

The only people that kept some loyalty towards Robert were the soldiers themselves. That loyalty ran thick, because it paid. And it paid well. Everyone’s a mercenary at heart because they love to hear money talk.

Despite the cold dissension brewing against him, Robert had no clue to the telltale signs of trouble. Which was why he was so surprised to see a guard approach him in the courtyard with such a look of worry. The guard himself was a scrawny man with large front teeth and a mustache in need of trimming.

“Chamberlain, I have some information – sniff – that you should know about. Although it – sniff – is important, I’m afraid – sniff – that you might find it insulting to your reputation, along – sniff – that of the King’s.”

“Okay. But first, would you stop pestering me with that infernal sniffing of yours?”

“I’m sorry, chamberlain...it’s just that I appear to have caught a – sniff – cold of some sorts. I don’t know how in this warm weather.”

Robert sighed, “Okay, fine, tell me about this news.”

“Well, chamberlain, earlier today I had attended church in the village of Lincoln. The – sniff – priest who was giving the sermon appears not very fond of His Highness.”

“Oh? Go on.”

“Well, the priest accused King Humphrey of stealing donations from the Church of Canterbury. After – sniff – the service, I heard many members of the congregation speak unfavorably of our King. It appears that – sniff – the priest is inciting revolt against the reign of our – sniff – glorious King Humphrey.”

“Hmmm, this is some interesting news.”

The gears in Robert’s mind, though, were whirring madly. This was bad news – for him. If King Humphrey found out, he would surely blame Robert for the troubles. Although Robert was officially in charge of the castle, he might as well have been the King’s representative to Lincoln. He could not afford to fail the King in this land. Especially when it came to priests. Men of the Church had a way of exciting the fervent. All it took were a few good words and the people would die for their priest. Robert had heard such stories before.

Robert mused out loud, “The only way we can surely stop the snake is to cut the head off. We must silence this priest and make an example of him.”

The guards following Robert were taken aback to hear this. They were not sure what to make of Robert’s talk. They knew for sure, though, that he was their leader. And you don’t want to anger your leader.

After Robert retired to his room to the evening to write his letters, the soldiers began to conspire about the priest. In the end, it would be the soldiers who would get the job done, not the incompetent Robert Hall.

As midnight struck across the land, the town of Lincoln couldn’t have been any softer. There was just the occasional owl hoot. All the townspeople slept soft as snow, patiently waiting for the next day’s labors. Only one person in the town was awake, and he was in the Cathedral.

Father Noah was kneeling in the first row of pews, praying for the next day to be better. Better not for him, but for his people.

Noah could see the candles he lit on the altar, the shadows dancing wildly at the beat of the flickers. He could feel the stone floor beneath his feet. It should have felt cold to the touch, but it was a hugging warmth. It was love.

He could hear the front door to the church open and heavy footsteps approach him. Grunting, he pulled himself up to a stand and turned around. It was a brutish man wrapped in a cloak.

“What can I do for you this evening, my son?”

“Forgive me father for I will sin. It has been two weeks since I’ve last confessed.”

“Will sin? Whatever do you mean...”

Just then, the front door slammed open once more. Several more brutes walked between the pews. Swords unsheathed. They sharkcircled around the priest at his pew.

Most people would have been frightened, asked for mercy. No one wants to die at a sword. Instead, Noah just stood in place, smiling thinly.

Noah said calmly, “I have been waiting to meet our Lord for so long now. There’s so many questions I’ve been meaning to ask. I’m just sorry that you all are going to hell on my account.”

Two of the men grabbed Noah by the arms, as if the poor old man was somehow thinking of fighting his way out. The other raised his sword and prepared the stab.

Father Noah saw the brilliant swordblade sliding silent through the air towards his neck. He closed his eyes and waited.

Chapter 6

“The Jew is the symbol of eternity.” (Leo Tolstoy)

Norwich, Eastern England

Three Weeks Later

Although it was deep in the afternoon, you wouldn't have known it. A thick fog had settled over Norwich, cloaking and choking the sunlight. The townspeople squinted to see more than a few houses ahead.

Only in England would there be night in the middle of the day.

There is something funny about fog, how it brings out a darkness in a man. It's almost as if they expect no one can see their evil in the haze. Explains why criminals feel attached to the night. The drag seemed to anchor onto everyone, though – each person looking sick and miserable. The gloom only seemed to lift in the marketplace. Dozens of shopkeepers shouted their latest wares to people walking past. Everything was sold there: from fine jewelry to rare fruits and vegetables. The wool trade was strong here as well – after all, it was what made Norwich the budding polis it was.

However, while the city was on the constant brink of something better, its people were still stuck a few decades behind. The townspeople thought backward, especially in the south district, founded by – out of all people – the Vikings centuries before.

One particular street in the district was abandoned, a rarity in a town this crowded. Perhaps it was because of the heavy fog. Perhaps it was because people got a bad omen when walking past it. Well...it wasn't deserted entirely. Out of the fog at the far end appeared a man, running for his life. Dressed in simple robes and barefoot, the man had no time to dress better. His life was a higher priority at the moment.

The terror began unfolding five minutes before.

The man was asleep in his house. He was tired, having just gotten back from traveling to the Mainland. He awoke to his front door slamming open.

He jerked upright on his straw mattress. He could hear voices in the main room.

“Where is that filthy little man? Where is he?”

“He must be here somewhere. Hurry and get this finished with, lad.”

The poor man – still sitting in bed, his eyes wide in terror – saw two men rush into the room, daggers in hand. The man – named Allen – knew why they were there. He also knew there was no time to ask questions. He leapt from his bed and dodged the first man who charged at him. He stuck out his foot, tripping the attacker, who then clunked his head against the floor.

Allen barely breezed past the second attacker's knifeblade and fled the house. Allen ran down the street not bothering to look back. He was magnetized towards the only safeplace he knew: Norwich Castle. He had friends there, friends more than happy to hide him from the troubles.

Although Allen still refused to turn and see if they were chasing him, he could hear hurried footsteps. It sounded a lot more than just two pairs of feet. It was as if a whole town of headhunters had joined the chase.

Allen bruised his feet at each bounce along the unforgiving ground, but he didn't dare stop.

He sharply turned a corner and headed down an alley, hoping to lose his attackers in the city's maze. He leapt over human sewage dumped from chamberpots above. Not that he was worried over shit squishing between his toes. That wasn't high up on his list of priorities at that moment.

His heart sank, however, as he noticed a wall just ahead. He was trapped. Behind him, Allen could hear animal screeches and yells of glee as the attackers knew too the chase was over. They slowed to a walk, enjoying the final moments of the hunt. Allen collapsed against the wall, gasping for breath, his lungs sore and his throat constricted with fear.

So this is how things will end.

The men chuckled madly, creeping malicious towards Allen. They drowned in bloodlust. Allen was a proper, goodhearted man who never hurt or swindled anyone in his life. He was a weaver's son. How can you hate a weaver's son?

None of this mattered to the group.

Allen closed his eyes.

That was when the pendulum swung the other way.

Someone demanded, "What's going on here?"

Everyone turned as one and faced the mysterious man standing behind them. The man was clad in armor. A crusader's armor. He wore a thick, golden-brown beard over his tanned face. His deepblue eyes were freezing, slushy with indignation and fury.

One of Allen's attackers snapped, "Leave us. This doesn't concern you. If you want, though, we can burn you at the same stake as this Jew."

The other men nodded and, as if to make the point, flexed their fists fervently, itching for a fight.

The crusader laughed, "No one's burning at the stake. Not today."

This crusader's amusement caught the group off guard. They weren't so sure of things anymore. Nervous, they took out their daggers.

"Last chance," one of the attackers called out.

"No one can tell me what to do."

With that said, the crusader whipped a massive broad sword his sheath. He swung it fierce in the air, the blade whistling as it carved the sky in half.

The attackers charged, hoping in their numbers. The alley was narrow – only a few men wide at some parts. If the Persians didn't learn at Thermopylae, who would?

One of the attackers lunged forth with his dagger, the tip aiming for the crusader's face. The crusader ducked, whipped his sword, pinned the man's dagger arm against the brick wall, useless. The man could do nothing as the crusader punched him in the throat. The man staggered back, gasping and reeling from the punch as he ashes fell down.

The sword kept hissing. The crusader brought the broadside down on the head of the next man, knocking him out coldcut. The crusader slipped the swordtip across the chest of the man to the right. Blood seeped through the shallow slash. The crusader pushed the man's head with his free hand into the wall. The man fell, hard asleep.

The crusader almost looked bored. He asked, "Anyone else?"

The remaining three tumbled forth without regard. Perhaps it was because they knew the only way out of the alley was past this crusader, that there was no way past him but over his dead body. The mysterious crusader quickly grabbed his sword with both hands. He heaved the sword into the face of the nearest man. The man couldn't stop in time, smacking his face on the broadside. He stumbled and fell back, blood seeping from the blueberry bruise that swept his forehead.

The next attacker was finally a handful. He was monstrous, but quick. The crusader swung his sword at the shoulder but missed. The monster tackled the crusader – still in midswing – and both landed on the ground. The monster swung several times at the crusader's face, gleeing that he could draw blood at each punch. Blood was everywhere. This embarrassed the crusader. He wanted it to stop quick. He craned his head sharply, his jaws connecting with the monster's wrist. He bit down. The monster's eyes widened – he never felt pain like this. He fell off the crusader and slid to the wall, trying not to weep while clutching his bloody, broken hand.

The crusader stood up shaky – still punchdrunk – and stumbled over. The monster looked up in time to see the crusader's heavy boot swinging at his head. Then came the darkness.

The crusader looked around for the last attacker. There was no one else standing there, save him and Allen.

The crusader wiped the blood from his cut lip and nose and asked Allen, "You all right?"

"Yes, yes I am. Thanks to you. You're a hero."

"Don't say that. Please. Where did the other bastard go?"

"The coward ran off when you were fighting that beast of a man. Cowardly, but smart of him."

Allen could have sworn he saw a ghostly smile haunt the crusader's lips. Instead, the crusader sat down next to Allen. A few moments of silence. The crusader caught his breath. Allen asked, "May I ask your name, good sir?"

"Peter de Vere. Yours?"

"Allen."

"Wish we didn't have to meet like this. You seem like a decent fellow. May I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"Why were they after you?"

“I would, but I’m afraid you’ll turn on me like the others.”

“I don’t turn on people I bleed for.”

Allen sighed, “Well, it’s because I’m Jewish.”

“Okay...?”

“A few days ago, a young woman’s body was found on a street nearby. Her stomach was cut wide open. A lot of her blood was missing. So everyone thought a Jew did it. As much as I enjoy this town, they are an ignorant bunch at times. This has happened before, them accusing Jews of ritual sacrifices. It’s never been this bad before, though. I heard that a Jew’s house was burned down last night.”

“What was the point of so many coming for you?”

Allen laughed shortly, “I recognized the one guy. The one right over there.”

He pointed at the man who Peter had knocked unconscious against the wall.

“He owed me money. A lot of money. Word has it that he enjoys the drink. A bit too much, I’m afraid. All those men you just fought down were probably in the taverns earlier. What can I say? The town likes its liquor. Anyway, he probably figured he could hold my being a Jew against me. If I was dead on the stake, he wouldn’t owe me anything. So, he probably rounded up his friends here to help out. Drunkards are willing to do almost anything.”

“That sounds like a pretty clever plan for such a stupid guy.”

Allen smiled, “That sums up most people, I’m sorry to say.”

“So where are you going to go from here?”

“To Norwich Castle. I have friends there willing to help me, until this all dies down.”

“Good enough. Well, if you’re ever in Lincolnshire, my home’s doors are open.”

“Thank you. For that and for saving me.”

“Glad to help.”

Chapter 7

“Surrender dreams – this may be madness.” (Miguel de Cervantes)

Battered, bruised Peter walked through the streets. He could feel all the eyes on him. Well, he was covered in blood – some his, some others’. He was less worried about the stares as he was about his nose. It smelled broken. He gingerly touched his nose. He winced. Felt broken too. At least he had the pain to wake him up – the long journey back home made him sleepy at all hours. All he wanted was a ride from Norwich to Lincoln. Before that, he wanted an inn to sleep in, perhaps a lady to sleep with.

As he bought a slab of salted pork from one of the shops in the marketplace, several men – looking foolish in their fancy clothing and armor – marched up to him. As they approached, the crowd parted before them, out of respect. Or fear. The man in front was intimidation. He had lanky body, grizzled face, & thick, fathom-colored hair. He looked like the Grim Reaper. He had an excess of nerves and a massive sword all for overcompensation. The men walking on either side of our Reaper looked birdish, looking like vultures dressed funny from a distance.

Peter turned from the shopstall and ran into the flock of men. Already having fought once that hour, Peter said tersely, “Excuse me.”

Peter tried to walk past but the Reaper grabbed him rough by the shoulder. The Reaper snapped, “I’m not about to let you go so quick. What’s your name?”

“I’m Peter de Vere, son of Baron Albert de Vere of Lincolnshire. And I’m starting to get angry. Get your bloody hands off me.”

“Why are you so far away from home, lad? Lincolnshire is quite a journey from here.”

“On my way back from the Holy Land. I was fighting in our latest Crusade. Not that you need to know. Now, who are you?”

“I’m the Sheriff of Norwich here. I am placing you under arrest.”

As the vultures on either side of the Sheriff grabbed Peter by the arms – restraining him – Peter demanded, “Why?”

“You attacked a group of innocent townspeople just down the street. Those who escaped your onslaught begged me to take care of you. Monsters need to be reined in.”

“I was attacking those ohso innocent men because they were going to kill a Jew. Those men deserved nothing less than my fists and sword.”

“Do you have proof? Witnesses?”

“I don’t know where the Jew is, if that’s what you mean.”

Peter remembered what Allen said, about heading up to Norwich Castle. But Peter did not want Allen to get in trouble again.

The Sheriff’s lips curled into a haughty smile. If Peter wasn’t being restrained, the young noble would have knocked that curl straight.

“Well then, we seem to have a dilemma, lad. Unless you have proof to back up your claims, I don’t see how you’re doing anything more than slandering those fine gentlemen.”

“So you’re going to take the word of low-life over that of a noble just returned from war?”

“Yes, yes I will. Now, if you don’t mind, please accompany me back to the dungeons. I’m sure there’s a cell just waiting for you.”

Peter was tempted to kill. But he was reluctant. This was a powerful man. He was smarter than fighting such strength. Peter also had a family name to save – the de Vere name was too pristine to splash with unnecessary blood. Besides, how much trouble can a street brawl bring? One, two days in the cell?

As the Sheriff and his men took Peter away, the quiet people in the marketplace looked at him with fear and anguish.

It was as if they never expected to see Peter again.

Norwich castle gloomed in the distance. Peter felt a stab of irony in his back. He was about to be imprisoned in the same castle where Allen was hiding. Peter couldn’t help but smile. The Sheriff and his men

– all walking on either side of their shackled noble – did not smile along with him. Instead they walked with sullen faces. People in these parts hadn't felt joy in years.

When they reached the castle, the Sheriff demanded the drawbridge be lowered. The bridge creaked and moaned to a halt against the unforgiving bank. As they entered the castle, the drawbridge swung up behind them, ominous.

Peter was led into a nearby tower. As soon as they passed through the heavy door, they went down a spiraling stone staircase that disappeared into a yawning blackhole. It was nearly impossible to see – Peter nearly tripped on each icy step, saved only by the men holding him.

They all walked down the narrow staircase that seemed to stretch forever. Like night to day, the stairs began to brighten. Peter could see a dim light just a bit further. He blinked several times to clear his focus.

So this is what a dungeon looks like.

Rusted bars corralled crowds of sleepy prisoners. Some were awake, their eyes blank, their mouths spilled ajar. Others laid on the ground, eyes closed – Peter shivered, not knowing if they were asleep or dead. He hoped for their sake that they were dead. Others were sobbing soft, their tears splashing on the haystrewn floor. Peter hoped he would never meet what could make grown men cry.

Peter shuffled through the corridor of fallen hay and dead rats. They reached a door at the far end. The door was thin – Peter could hear desperate pleas for mercy on the other end. Peter steeled himself. The Sheriff – a small smile widening – said while opening the door, “Now I wouldn't be a proper host if I didn't introduce my guests. Peter de Vere, let me show you Christopher Hawthorne.”

The Sheriff pushed the door open and shoved Peter inside. He tripped and fell to the ground. His hands still shackled, Peter couldn't cushion the fall. He thudded awkward on the stone floor. He was pushed to his feet by the Sheriff's men but felt knocked down by what he saw.

There was a stretching rack in front of him. A poor man – Peter assumed him to be Christopher Hawthorne – was shuddering with cries from the torture. Christopher looked decent and clean enough – not the sort of poor soul you'd expect to be in such a room. Christopher shivered wild against his tight shackles. In between sobs, he screamed, “Mercy, mercy, mercy!”

Peter closed his eyes. He heard of such things before. He knew what was coming next. He just wished he could hold his hands over his ears. The screams are always the hardest to forget.

The Sheriff laughed, “Mr. Hawthorne? You've been caught stealing loaves of bread from the market. What do you have to say for yourself?”

Christopher breathed hard several times. He gasped, “I'm a good man. I just...I just...”

“Say it!”

“I just needed food. For my family.”

The Sheriff sighed and turned to Peter, saying, “You know, I considered removing his thumbs with a screw. It's hard holding onto stolen loaves without thumbs. However, he's so persistent. It sounds as if he needs a better lesson. Isn't that right, Mr. Hawthorne?”

“Please...please...”

“Mr. Hawthorne, do you repent for your crimes?”

“Yes!”

“I don't think the bakers you stole from can hear you! Why don't you say it louder?”

“I'm sorry!”

“Not good enough, boy!”

The Sheriff nodded to his men. The lever turned even more. Christopher's muscles strained and stretched, drawing out Christopher's cries with them. Peter held back the vomit that was rising in his throat. He was watching a man being pulled apart before his eyes, and there was nothing he could do.

The Sheriff joked, “Well, if you survive the rack, my boy, you'll be the tallest man in Norwich. I'll give you one last chance: are you sorry for what you've done?”

“Yes I'm sorry! Just let me see my family!”

“It didn't sound like you meant it, boy. Sorry!”

The Sheriff twirled his finger in a clockwise motion to the torturers. The lever spun once more. Peter clenched his eyes closed, trying to wipe away the scene he couldn't stop. Christopher's screams were punctuated by sinew snapping, skin separating, bones breaking.

Peter refused to open his eyes, but he could still feel Christopher's soul flow out and splash on the floor like spilt water.

The torturers laughed at the mayhem they caused. Peter could hear the Sheriff whisper to him, "Open your eyes. See what you're in for tomorrow."

Still Peter refused. The Sheriff's cruel hands pushed Peter's eyelids open.

"Look at what you'll become, Peter!"

Peter saw, and he did something he had never done before. Peter fainted and collapsed.

He was right – he could still hear the screams. Even in his dreams.

But these screams weren't poor Christopher's. These screams were different. They were dim and distant.

Peter couldn't see anything, though he could feel snow crunching beneath his steps. He plunged like blindman through the frozen darkness. Peter suddenly lost his balance – there was a sudden ice underneath. The screams were creeping closer now. He knew who it was. He groped blind about, desperate to grasp a hand.

He wanted to save the voice.

He was nothing without the voice.

The screams were softening away though. Peter panicked, began running. He had to find the voice again. But the cries vanished and the darkness thinned into a blinding light. He could hear a voice – not the same as before. This one was different. He remembered the sound. God, how he hoped it was her. She was laughing soft. He could feel a warmth overwhelm his pumping blood. He could feel her flowing hair flutter past his face like birds. He reached out, finally found her soft hand. It was waiting for him, waiting to bless his crude, coarse hand with a touch. Lips met lips and Peter felt like a pilgrim. This was his shrine and the fire cleaned his wrongs.

Then everything vanished again. Back to the screams. Christopher's broken body, the limp eyes staring up at Peter. He could hear the voice.

Look at what you'll become, Peter!

Peter snapped his eyes open. His head was craned against the dirty floor. There was whimpering and moaning all around him. The jungle was alive with the prisoners' dying. He was still in the dungeon. He had no idea the time of day – they were so deep underground, not even the sun could find them.

He was glad he didn't know the time. Peter had heard it's better to die ignorant than to die knowing. The wait itself can kill a man.

Peter kept calm. Thoughts of vengeance danced in his mind. If he ever escaped, the first thing he would do is kill the Sheriff of Norwich. Monsters are meant to die, after all. Only man is meant to live, and the Sheriff was no man.

The Sheriff was miles away from Peter's cold fury. Good for the Sheriff. He was sitting in his home, sipping on a mug of ale while watching the fireplace crackle merry. The wind howled outside. Let it howl.

He was having trouble sleeping. Like usual. Morning was coming soon. A whole night to sleep – wasted. He sighed: he enjoyed sleep. And like all things meant for joy, he couldn't have it.

The second the Sheriff sipped the last from the glass, his world turned. A massive, brawny arm lashed around his throat and yanked him from the chair. It was so sudden, the Sheriff didn't know what to think. All he could do was gasp for air as his face turned blue. He looked down – his feet were dangling a decent five inches off the floor.

The giant behind the Sheriff growled, "You don't know me. I don't know you. Let's keep it that way."

"Okay," the Sheriff wheezed.

"I saw you arrest a friend of mine. Peter de Vere. That's very unfortunate. He's a good, decent man. I want you to release him in the morning."

The Sheriff stammered – not from shock, but because he couldn't breathe, "Wh-wh-what...?"

“If you don’t release him, I will hunt you down. I will break you. I used to be an executioner, so I know how to end people. And I love it, every moment of it.”

The giant let go and the Sheriff tumbled to the ground. The Sheriff wheezed and huddled himself into the corner, rubbing the feeling back into his throat. His sight was hazy, but he could hear the giant say, “Bring Peter to the meadow just north of Norwich Castle. Don’t bring anyone else. If you aren’t there by the time the rooster crows, I will wring your neck like one.”

The stranger stormed out. The front door slammed, leaving a shocked Sheriff in his wake.

Peter didn’t know how he slept that night. But he did. It was mostly troubled, dreams and nightmares slipping in and out. All of his life’s joys and pangs floated in his sleep, trying to remind him of what he was losing. As if he forgot.

Peter was already dead, anyway. The old Peter was dead. The new Peter felt cold but didn’t shiver. He was going to kill the Sheriff. He knew it like birds could fly.

There was clinking. The cell door slid upon. The Sheriff was standing there, looking nervous.

He said curtly, “Come with me.”

As Peter left the cell, he noticed that the Sheriff had Peter’s sword and armor in hand.

Peter was expecting them to head for the torture chamber. Instead, they went up the stairwell, out into the courtyard. Peter almost broke into tears – he didn’t think he would ever taste fresh air again. It was still dark outside – the sky to the east was beginning to redden and orange though.

They went to the gatehouse, where the Sheriff ordered the drawbridge to be lowered. He snapped at their questions, why he would be leaving the castle with a prisoner in tow.

At first, Peter thought the Sheriff had some change of heart and was taking him back to town. Instead, they headed in a northerly direction, deep into the dense thicket of woods. Peter had a thought that the Sheriff was going to behead him or hang him on a branch. Why didn’t the Sheriff bring any men with him? Why was he carrying Peter’s sword and armor? None of it made sense. Not to mention the constant look of fear on the tyrant’s face.

They reached a small meadow after ten minutes of walking. They came to a halt, and Peter asked, “What’s going on?”

The Sheriff refused to answer. He stared straight ahead, biting his trembled lip as if he was staring death in the face. Peter turned and looked where the Sheriff looked. The Sheriff was terrified, but Peter broke out in ecstasy. He was never so happy to see a giant bounding towards him.

The giant was certainly that, being a good foot taller than either the Sheriff or Peter. He was wrapped in blankets of bursting muscle. He was a bald man, save for a thick beard sprawling across his chin and cheeks. The mouth that barely poked out of the wooly beard was dressed in a snarl. As if the man wasn’t terrifying enough himself, he was clad in thicksteel armor that was strapped to every inch of his body. He didn’t carry a shield, but why carry a shield when you’re a walking fortress? He carried a quivering battleaxe in both hands... you know, for good luck.

As the Sheriff backed away, Peter stepped forward, all smiles.

“Milo, Milo, Milo...it’s always a pleasure.”

Milo Rowley broke out into a grin as broad as his axe. He grunted, “Heard you were in town. Just wanted to stop by and say hello.”

“Can I assume you’re the reason behind the Sheriff’s change of heart?”

“I might have told him I would rip his throat out if he didn’t release you.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes, why?”

While the two were talking, the Sheriff silently slipped to the edge of the meadow, prepared for a mad dash back to Norwich Castle. He wished he had brought some of his men with him for safety. But people don’t think straight when scared. He was about to ghost into the woods when an axe whooshed through the air. With a sickening crunch, the axe dug into the Sheriff’s back, shattering ribs before piercing one of the Sheriff’s lungs. The Sheriff crumbled, dead as paper.

A heavy silence floated over the meadow. Finally, Milo turned to Peter and said, "What the devil was that for? He was a bastard, but I made a promise."

"I made a promise too."

"What kind of promise?"

"For a poor guy named Christopher Hawthorne."

"Who?"

Peter sighed, "I'll tell you later."

Peter started walking and noticed that Milo was standing still behind him. Peter asked, "You coming?"

"Where?"

"Where else? Home. Lincoln."

Peter could see that Milo was hesitant.

"I'll rather not."

"Don't tell me you have something better."

"I don't, but..."

"But...?"

"I don't have anything worse, either."

"I don't understand."

"I'll tell you later."

"Come with me, and we can swap our tragedies."

"I told you I can't...I promised myself I'll never go back."

"You've already broken one promise today. Might as well break some more."

"Is that so?"

Peter nodded, "Just please walk with me. Just for awhile."

"Okay, just for awhile."

Chapter 8

“C'est le chagrin qui développe les forces de l'esprit.” (Proust)

On the Road to Lincolnshire

Later that Day

Peter and Milo walked for several miles, all without talk. At first, Peter thought Milo was just tired. Milo was a giant – true – but he was a sleepy giant. As time grew on, though, Peter had a feeling that Milo was being quiet for different reasons. They were the best of friends since childhood, but now they were being the worst of friends.

“Milo?”

“Hmmm?”

“Are you mad?”

“Why do you ask?”

“Is it because I killed the Sheriff?”

“Well, I frankly didn't see the point to it. I thought you were better than that.”

“Could I justify myself then?”

“Please do.”

“Hold on, let's stop at this creek for a moment. I need some water.”

The duo stopped and knelt at the banks of the creek. After gulping a few cupped hands of water, Peter said, “I killed him because he killed Christopher Hawthorne.”

“Who?”

“Some poor bastard. He was caught stealing loaves for his starving family.”

“Okay...?”

“I watched Christopher get pulled to shreds on the stretching rack.”

Milo shuddered, “I hate those things. There's no mercy to them. Not like the hanging. Or the axe. But continue.”

“I watched Christopher get pulled apart. The Sheriff told me the same was going to happen to me today.”

Milo went quiet for a moment. Then he said, “So I suppose the Sheriff got what he had coming?”

“That's right.”

“Well, in light of the facts, I suppose I judged you a bit harshly.”

“What, you thought I went around now, flinging axes into peoples' backs?”

Milo snorted, “No, but I guess it's a better way to pass time than to sew. But don't worry about it – I'm not here to condemn you. I'll leave that to the priests. Well then...let's speak of other things, shall we? Like why are you in England? Last I heard, you were sailing for the Crusades. What happened to that?”

“I came to my senses. I realized I was there for all the wrong reasons. Besides, my camp was dying from every plague imaginable. I wasn't in the mood to die from the sickness. Anything but that. But enough about me, what about you?”

“What about me?”

“Why are you so far south of Lincoln?”

Milo looked green. He glanced down at the ground as he spoke.

“You know how I was working as an executioner?”

“Yeah, what about it?”

“A few days after you left, there was talk of witches flying around Lincoln. Nasty business. Some trader lost his home and family in a fire. The guy claimed some lady casted a hex on him.”

“Why would he think that?”

“Said the wooden planks her husband bought was bad. That the roof collapsed while he was patching it – the husband died in the fall. Lady got mad, and that's when the trader said she cursed him. Of course, everyone got the fever, and before you knew it, there was a baker's dozen of women in jail. All found guilty of being witches. All sentenced to be axed before the week was done. Now, you know me, how I had been an executioner for quite some time?”

“Had been?”

“Let me finish. Anyway, I didn’t mind the executions so much. When you deal with criminal folk, women are the same as men. Besides, it meant money to me. A decent wage. That was, until I heard the names of the accused.”

“Who was it?”

“Joan.”

“Joan? Are you kidding me?”

“I wish. Joan was always causing mischief here and there, but it was all in good fun. Never thought it would lead to the axe for her.”

Milo stopped talking and stared blank ahead. Peter let the silence linger lazy in the air. He thought back, years back. Him and Milo leaving frogs in Joan’s shoes. An angry Joan flicking stones at their heads as they ran away. Peter subconsciously rubbed the back of his head.

Finally, Peter couldn’t stand the silence anymore. He had to ask, “You weren’t the one who...you know...?”

Milo shook his head solemnly, “No. I resigned from my position the night before. Fled the village like some coward. I didn’t want to see her killed. And I especially didn’t want to be the one who did it. So I came out here. Moving antsy from village to village, trying to find work. I was looking for a decent job in the market back there in Norwich just the other day...”

“...And that’s when you saw me getting arrested?”

A nod, “That’s right.”

Peter said, “I’m sorry to hear about Joan, you know. And also, you were not a coward for running away. It takes a brave man to ignore a demand. The fact you did it for your sister is even more admirable. You’re no coward. You might be a rat-bastard sometimes, but you’re not a coward.”

Milo smiled wanely, “Thanks Peter, I appreciate it.”

“You’re welcome. By the way, you can consider your debt to me paid now. I saved your life once. You saved mine now. We’re even.”

“I doubt we’ll be even for much longer. We seem to be getting into a lot of trouble lately. We may have to start playing heroes to each other.”

“I wouldn’t ask anything less of a friend. Also, I thought we were going to split ways?”

Milo said, “I thought it over.”

“And?”

“And I realized there’s no point. I could run the whole way across England and my sister’s ghost will always be chasing me. Besides, if I get into any trouble, you can rescue me. It’s your turn now.”

“So it is, Milo, so it is.”

Chapter 9
“The noblest Roman of them all.” (Shakespeare)
Outskirts of Lincoln
Few Days Later

They could finally see Lincoln in the distance. And it was wonderful. It was near evening and a deep fog was beginning to roll over the road, but they could still see the lights twinkling far off. It was their lighthouse.

They had bought horses and supplies from the last village they were in, tired of trudging it out on foot. The horses were patient and old. It was good: they didn't have to worry about the horses getting upset and knocking them off. It was bad: the horses walked as quick as stone grows.

Peter was beginning to feel uneasy, wishing the horses moved quicker. Fog was dangerous. Highwaymen liked to hide in the thick, billowy stuff. Night just made it worse. The trees along the road were dancing in the wind, the branches curling above Peter's head. It seemed like everything was alive and that he couldn't tell the difference between the robbers and the myth. He heard that the trees in Ireland talked amongst themselves.

Peter whispered sarcastically, “This isn't creepy. Not at all.”

“OH WHATEVER DO YOU MEAN???”

“Shhh, not so loud, you idiot!”

“Relax, Peter. There isn't a soul for miles...”

Suddenly, the fog up ahead darkened into a figure. Milo swore. Peter frowned at him.

“It appears you spoke too soon. Be ready.”

Peter gripped his sword hilt while Milo curled his hand around his axe. The figure got closer. Their grips got tighter.

It was all pointless, though. Out of the fog stepped an elderly man, wrapped in decent clothes. The old man was just as startled – and relieved – as Peter and Milo, snapping, “There's no need to scare a man, especially one so close to his deathbed!”

Milo apologized and said, “We are no highwaymen. We're simply travelers.”

The old man looked up, “Is that you, young Rowley?”

“Yes...”

“Don't you remember me?”

“No...”

“It's me, young Rowley, it's Warwick.”

Milo shattered into a massive smile. He leapt off his horse and embraced the old man.

“Warwick! It's been too long. How is the world?”

“You know me. Still making a fortune tending to fireplaces for lazy nogood nobles. But enough about me and all – how are you? I haven't seen you in a few months, not since the...well, you know...”

Warwick suddenly changed topics, asking, “Who's that traveling with you, Milo?”

Milo laughed, “It's one of those lazy nogood nobles you speak so highly of. It's Peter de Vere.”

Peter smiled, “It's been awhile since we've met, Warwick.”

He expected Warwick to be joyful to see him. Instead, Warwick's smile fell. It was clear he was struggling with what to say next. Finally, he asked nervous, “Have you come back because of what happened?”

“What happened? I've been in the Holy Land, Warwick. News doesn't travel out that far.”

Warwick hesitated. He finally offered, “Let's go to my cottage. It's just down the road a little way. You lads look weary from travel.”

The old man led the two curious friends towards his cottage. The house was modest – quaint, but modest. Its brick walls were coated thinly with vines. It was as if the house was mixing with nature. As they stepped into the cottage, Warwick headed straight for the fire. It was a pale red, the embers almost gone. In a few minutes, though, he had the fire stoked and crackling again. The single room in the cottage was rather large and airy. The house seemed larger on the inside than the outside.

Warwick ushered them to a large plank table and said gracious, “Take a seat, lads.”

“What is this news you’re so afraid to tell me?”

“Do you both want something to drink? I have some ale bottled up in the corner.”

“What’s this news? What’s been happening since I left?”

Warwick suddenly looked even older somehow. He looked like a gravedigger. He asked slowly, “Do you want something to drink?”

“Why?”

“Because what I’m about to tell you, you need to be sitting down and drunk to get through it.”

“Tell me.”

“Well...it’s like this. Some weeks back, your father was on a hunting trip. He...he died. I’m sorry I have to be the one who tells you this.”

Peter looked ahead quietly. He seemed out of focus. He snapped to and simply uttered, “What?”

“Your father fell from his horse during the hunt. The beast trampled him as it continued running...”

“No. No. That’s impossible.”

“Peter, I was at the castle when it happened. I saw them bring in the body...”

“No, that’s not possible. He was a hunter. He knew how to ride a horse. He couldn’t fall off a horse. Only foolish people do that. He’s not foolish...”

“He was an old man, Peter. A man’s body falls apart over time...”

“No...”

“He used to be one of the best hunters. But even great men like your father fall apart over time...”

Peter stood up and snapped, “I refuse to believe that!”

“Warwick shouted back, Sit down, Peter!”

Warwick never took that tone with Peter before. The young de Vere sat down slowly – still in a daze – as Warwick’s face softened.

“I hate to be like this to you, Peter, but you need to understand. Our Lord had need of your father. So our Lord came and he took what he gave us. Our Lord gave his life a purpose, and I’m sure his death had a purpose too. You need to understand this, Peter. You need to understand this quickly. It took me too long to understand my wife’s death. I’m just trying to spare you.”

Peter closed his eyes and exhaled hard.

“I’m afraid there’s more tragedy around these parts. Father Noah was murdered not too long ago.”

Shocked, Milo asked, “Murdered?”

Warwick nodded grim, “Yes, he was murdered in the church itself. What a blasphemy. No one knows who murdered him. The whispers all point to King Humphrey’s men.”

Peter pressed on, prepared for more news, “My mother? What about my mother? And my family’s castle?”

“Ah, yes...well, I’m afraid King Humphrey has temporarily taken the castle under his control.”

“What?”

Warwick nodded, “With your father gone, your mother being unable to own property, and you off to war, King Humphrey took the castle in the name of security. And put a dimwit in charge by the sounds of it. The people are tired of the nonsense. They are. Tired of the taxes. Tired of the corruption. Can’t do a damn thing about it now, though – thanks to that castle, Humphrey has a hold on this land. I doubt he’ll let go easy.”

Peter sat statue for a minute. Gears grinded in his head. He was reaching for answers. His father was gone. His priest was gone. Who else to turn to? There was one person left. But he was reluctant – and for all the right reasons. But there was no one left with answers, no one at all.

Peter stood up sudden, “Thank you, Warwick, for taking the time to tell me this news. Although it might not sound like it now, I do appreciate what you said.”

Warwick smiled, “Spoken like your father.”

Peter shrugged, “I may speak like him, but I am not acting like him. Not yet anyway. We must go now – there is someone in whom I must confide, and it must be tonight. Warwick, good night and God bless.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to stay the night? It’ll be hard to find shelter at this hour. It is the witching hour after all.”

Peter smiled thinly at the last sentence. Milo saw the smile, and he knew immediately. He groaned and swore under his breath.

Chapter 10

“You may find good witches and bad witches.” (L. Frank Baum)

Swamps Near Lincoln

“You know, the last time I was in water and it was night, I nearly drowned.”

“Does that mean I’ll have to save you again?”

“If you want to.”

“Well, this water is warmer than the last time.”

They were gliding through Lincoln’s swamps. The water was waistdeep in some parts, but it felt deeper somehow. Floating long grass gathered around their waists as they pushed on, creating a sickgreen wake around them. They made sure to keep their torches high enough above their heads. Doused lights don’t do much good in swamps. Especially at night.

“Ugh, I absolutely hate bogs. Do you even know where we’re going?”

“Of course I do.”

“That’s good, because it looks the same in every direction. Everywhere I look it’s bog and dead trees for miles...”

Milo made a face. A dead crow floating on the surface had bumped up against him. He flicked the carcass away.

“I’m pretty sure we’re going in the right direction. You know, for being a man who has executed criminals in the past, you sure are going mad with this wading.”

“You know, for being a man who managed to travel to the Holy Land and back, you sure don’t seem confident about finding this house.”

“What are you talking about? It’s over there.”

Peter pointed and Milo looked.

The monstrous man sighed, “It looks like she’s fixed it up since last time we were here, eh?”

The circular shack was crumbling away on the only dry land for miles around. Its walls were aged and moldy, seeming to fall apart at the very sight. There were a few shingles still left on the roof – Peter wondered if the shack turned into a pond during the rainy months. He always wondered when it had been built. Talk in the town was during the Norman landings. The shack somehow managed to outlive most of the wonderful architecture since, those other buildings falling to fire, shoddy masonry, sieges. This shack outlived them all.

It was as if magic was the only thing keeping the shack together

Milo knocked shakily on the door. No one called out.

“Well, looks like no one’s here. Let’s get back to Lincoln. The inn’s still there, you know. It’s nice and warm. They have ale there too. Let’s say I buy you a drink...?”

Darkness opened up the shack’s door, the hinges rasping heavily.

Peter said conversationally, “See? Nothing to be afraid of. The shack’s welcoming us.”

“Listen to what you just said – the shack’s welcoming us. A house is supposed to sit still and not welcome people.”

“It could always eat us, you know. Do you prefer that?”

Peter walked through the door. He turned back, “You coming?”

Milo sighed. He always knew there was something very wrong and twisted with Peter. Normal people don’t walk into haunted shacks. Still, he stepped into the shack with Peter, prepared to die.

“Well, look on the bright side, Milo...if no one’s home, at least we can spend the night here.”

“Ohhh, I’m looking forward to it.”

Milo noticed their torches were beginning to die down. This wasn’t a good thing. As they looked around, though, he suddenly wished the lights would die out sooner. All around them, they could see dozens – probably hundreds – of candles, their wicks unlit but still nearly burnt down. It felt like a church. But why did their souls seem to squirm?

They could hear a rustling behind them. They looked at each other warily before turning. They could barely make out a vague shadow in the far corner. They held their breath, their fists clenched and ready. For

what, they didn't know. The shadow snapped her fingers. The whole cottage erupted to life. The candles were all now blazing blind. Peter and Milo blinked hard. They could see who it was now.

It was a young, gorgeous woman dressed in pitchblack robes. Her robes and raveny hair were startling next to her ghostly skin. Her bloodred lips were full of life and quivering with potential. At the moment, the lips were pursed, grimaced at the thought of visitors.

“Who walks into my home uninvited? Against my dignity you have slighted.”

She asked boldly, harshness twisted with her soft, ethereal voice.

Milo took a step back, unnerved. Peter asked, “Ida, do you remember us?”

Ida cocked her head to the side, her eyes narrowed. She tried to remember. Peter stepped forward, pulled a chunk of cheese from his pocket. He offered it to her with a smile. She seemed to breathe it down and, satisfied, said, “You are the lads who before brought nourishment. You brought me food with good intentions meant.”

“Yes, we are those lads. You look at beautiful as the day we left you, Ida.”

Ida's lips curled into a toothy smile. There was a red tinge in her pale cheeks as she giggled, “Thank you lad, your honesty makes me blush. But looks trick all senses except for touch.”

She reached out and brushed her dainty hand across Peter's cheek. He should have felt a beautiful, smooth hand slide across his face. Instead, he felt bones scratching at his skin. He almost shuddered at the touch. He hid the disgust well – he grinned, “I'm sure you're a charming damsel once people know you.”

“What is the purpose behind your visit?”

“We seek advice, for you master magic.”

“Ah, you've come to seek wisdom from a witch. Hold my hands as I delve through the magic.”

Peter – bracing himself for the touch of cold bone again – took her hand in his. Milo quivered but did the same. Ida began convulsing – froth bubbled at the edges of her lips, her hands trembled. A rasp exhaled from her mouth, followed by an unearthly gurgle rumbling deep within her.

A pause. Then she began to say in a deep voice:

“Roses will wither before winter
yet show truth of the mind of a sinner.
Crushed rose petals bind fort's brick's together
to withstand the test of time and weather.
Along with spring comes a well-armed flood –
in the name of a king they want your blood.
Stand against them with your valiant men
and you bring this reign of terror to end.
Enemy of enemy is your friend
as new friendships surface while old ones bend.
And although wings again grace your sparrow,
release her not, else lose her to arrows.”

Ida ended her trance and stumbled away from the men, confusion in her eyes. She sat down hard and murmured, “I see a chaotic future for you. I see much deceiving all around you. Be warned and be wary for there's danger. I hope my advice found you your answers.”

As they said their thank yous and left the shack, Peter let Ida's advice sink in and weigh down his shoulders – he could feel the shoulder blades snapping at their knife edge.

It was ten years before.

A younger Peter and Milo were getting lost in the Lincolnshire woods. They stumbled upon a poor lady hobbling on some dirt path. Peter felt sorry for the lady – she looked so much like his own mother.

“Can I help you with something?”

“I beg you to, my child. I'm lost here in this wild.”

Over Milo's shushed pleas – even then he was terrified of this mystery lady – Peter gave her some brokenbread out of his pocket as they helped her find her cottage.

It was on the walk that she introduced herself as Ida.

They finally reached her cottage. Ida asked them in to have some food and drink. Reward for helping her find home.

As they sat down at the table, Ida lunged out. Grabbed both by the hand. Peter shook like mad when he felt bones grappling at his skin like spiders. How could her hands feel like bones when they looked so warm and plump? Milo was just as frightened, his pudgy face grasping for words. Neither found any words, none at all – all the syllables trickled into a pool beneath the table.

Ida went through her trance. Her eyes rolled back, her body swaying without a breeze. Although her eyes were vacant, Peter could feel them narrowing on him.

“Today, you lifelong sleep will have ended.
You awake by a bell sparrows tended.
You will then find love in the bell's music.
The bell's a muse – only fools won't use it.”

Ida turned to Milo and uttered the next stanza of her prophecy:

“Walking on thin ice, you nearly meet doom.
You're saved by your best friend as I assume.
He saves you from the scythe, you owe him life.
The debt will be repaid in ten years' time.”

Later that day, young Peter's prophecy turned true.
Later that winter, the first part of Milo's prophecy turned true.
Ten years later, the second part turned true.

“And although wings again grace your sparrow,
release her not, else lose her to arrows.”

This – all of this – terrified old Peter more than Ida's scaly hands did to Milo. Why? Because he knew what Ida meant by a sparrow. And he knew that the Sparrow was as fragile to arrows as anyone else was.

Chapter 11

“The ruling passion conquers reason still.” (Alexander Pope)

The Next Evening

The day was treacherous. The sun had razed the fields, baking the crops into wisps. The drought was making itself be felt throughout the forests, and it wanted to be the only thing the townspeople felt at all.

That was why the townspeople loved seeing the sun plunge into his soft mattress for the evening. The shimmering, starry blanket fell down soon after. The temperature fell with it, and all was good.

The farmers adored the night. Some sat out in the fields, falling asleep, not worrying about foxes and the such. Some – with the money – headed straight for Lincoln, which boasted the greatest number of taverns for two counties in any direction.

The taverns floated in their stupor within an hour. The people there were not in the mood for adventure – they were there simply to get lost in it all.

Unfortunately for them, Peter and Milo had adventure in mind as they walked across the road towards the tavern.

Milo spoke up, “You know, what are the chances of people helping us out? It doesn’t take Aristotle to know this is suicide.”

“Are you saying you won’t help me?”

“No, I’m not saying that at all. I’m not too keen on dying, but I suppose I would for a friend. But you got to think about it – would this actually work? I doubt even your family name would convince these people to follow you.”

Peter shrugged and they continued walking.

Milo spoke again, “Best case, we’re laughed at and they throw us in the stocks for the night. Worst case, we’re laughed at and they chop our heads off in the town square.”

“Do you really have no faith in me?”

“I do.”

“It sure sounds like you don’t. Don’t worry – I’ll sway them. If not with the loss of my castle, than with the murder of Father Noah.”

“I’m sure the Pope would approve you using a priest’s death for politics.”

“As if such blasphemies haven’t occurred before...”

“Shhh, let’s not speak of such things. We’re going to have a tough enough time convincing the lot of them. If they know one of us is a non-believer...”

“Who said I’m not a believer?”

“Then what are you?”

“We’ll talk about that later. Let’s go in and make fools of ourselves.”

“Aye.”

They stepped into the tavern. The shouts and laughs nearly drowned them. They had to keep their heads floating above the surface to think. The distinct odor of vomit certainly didn’t help matters either. As they walked, their boots splashed. Peter was afraid to look down, to see what the puddles were.

Milo and Peter ordered two mugs of cider and sat down at a table in the far corner. They watched the chaos bubbling around them.

“This is why I like to get drunk in my own home.”

Peter turned and smiled, “I thought it was because every time you went into a tavern, you bloodied up everyone in a massive brawl?”

“That too.”

“Soooo, when are you thinking about speaking to the masses?”

“Soon.”

“You better. Everyone’s going to be stumbling drunk in about a halfhour by the looks of it.”

“I’m thinking about what to say.”

“What to say? Nonsense! Just throw some words about freedom and taxes and they’ll lap it up like dogs.”

Peter called over the mayhem, "Like what?"

"Like dogs!"

"Ohhh."

Peter breathed deep and got up on the table. He was towering over the room at these heights. He hesitated and called out, "Quiet! I need quiet!"

The boisterous shouting quickly vanished. The woozy men turned their heads toward Peter.

"You probably don't know me. I am Peter de Vere, son of the late Albert de Vere, Baron of Lincoln. The reason why I'm here tonight is..."

"Hey, wait a minute! I heard Peter de Vere died in the Crusades."

Peter could see many men in the crowd nod. This was disturbing to him – he wasn't aware he was supposed to be dead.

"Well...as you can see, I'm very alive. And very angry. I need everyone's help in retaking my family's castle from King Humphrey."

A buzz of controversy passed over the audience. Peter could hear the scared whispers. They were afraid of treason, of mutiny – even more so than the King perhaps.

"King Humphrey has unjustly taken my family's castle. His only reasoning is his obsession for power. He has forced his unwanted legacy into every corner of our map. So I am sure that while I've been wronged, so too have many of you."

There was an awkward silence hanging over the room like chandelier.

A man stepped forth from the audience and called out brave, "The taxes against me are difficult. I've had to sell some of my live stock to survive. Even that isn't enough."

Another man stood up:

"Two years ago, King Humphrey forced me to be an archer in his army. While I was away, my untended crops withered. I lost most of my money. My son died that winter. If only I had the money to pay for a doctor, he would still be alive."

Peter felt bolstered. He called out, "Men! We have been taxed to pay for one man's luxuries. We have had to deal with corrupted officials. We have been forced to quarter troops in our homes. We have been drafted into armies when all we want is peace & quiet. I have heard there was a rebellion up north not too long ago, am I right?"

Nods.

"I heard a brave woman led the raids. That she was killed without mercy. Killed because all she wanted was happiness. We should not have to die for happiness! We should be able to live for it, we should be able to thrive in it. We are a cursed people. We are sinners. We are depraved. But we deserve to be happy, even if our own King is standing in the way."

A skeptic from the crowd asked, "Where's the honor in attacking our countrymen?"

"What do you mean?"

"You speak so much ill of our King. But he is still our King. Hate those Irish barbarians. Or hate the French. Anyone but our own. English shouldn't hurt English. These are dark times enough!"

"I know, but they don't have to be dark times. I'm tired of you lot telling me what I can and can't do. And what is this talk of English? Are we not men first, then English? We are called English simply because we pay our taxes and die in battles for this insignificant flea of a King. We all breathe the same air, though, and eat the same food, and that makes us men. It is our title as men that compels us, it is our title as men to push us to help each other. We cannot stand by and let this treachery continue. We cannot be Englishmen if we are not men, and we cannot be men if we do not have our souls anymore. Besides, an Englishman is weak. An Englishman takes orders from this man – this mere man – in fancy clothes, this same man who dwindles us to build his coffers. A man listens to himself and no one else. Let us show the world what happens when we stop being Englishmen and start being men!"

The crowd roared in approval. Peter's throat lumped.

Chapter 12

“Genius is a capacity for taking trouble.” (Leslie Stephen)

It was too early to be dawn. But the men were more than awake. They had to be, to do something this stupid, this daring.

They were going to ransack the town’s armory. The royal town armory.

Everyone had always grumbled over the whys. Why did King Humphrey feel urged to build an armory in Lincoln? The county was always a bit restless, yes, but so were all the other counties on the island. Peter had always reckoned that the armories were built as deterrence, as if to say yes, we are made of swords – just try to fight your way through us.

But if the armories were so important, why were there so few guards? There was a pair of them guarding the front door against the night that tried to seep in. They were haggard – no sleep was murder. Their eyes softly flickered close before they abruptly snapped open. They knew better than to fall asleep. The town seemed peaceful now, sure – but there was always the occasional drunkard or highwayman looking to stir up trouble. You know, occasionally.

A man shuffled out of the darkness towards the guards. One of the soldiers – crackling his knuckles menacingly – snapped, “What business do you have here? You have no right being in this part of town. Especially at this time of night.”

The shuffling man – his eyes unfocused – cocked his head to the side. He slurred, “I ‘ave no ideare what yer talk ov. I just, er...”

The guards rolled their eyes. It was just a farmer, too heavy from the drink. The one guard – obviously a superior – snapped at the other, saying, “Get this fool out of here. I can never trust a drunk man.”

The other guard grabbed the drunkard by the sleeve of his shirt and said, “C’mon, I’m dropping you off just down the street.”

The guard tried dragging the drunk, but found that the drunk was uncooperative. Several times the guard had to pick the pathetic man off the ground, fallen in a stupor.

“I’ll so sawry, siree. I usually showwww good at standed upreeght.”

The guard finally dropped the drunk and decided to leave him there. So what if the next horse coming down the street would trample him. The guard began to walk away, muttering, “Don’t drink so bloody much next time.”

The guard tried walking but realized that he couldn’t move. He looked back at the drunk. The fallen man seemed to sober up quick. Grinning slyly, the man was gripping tight to the guard’s ankle.

The second guard was getting worried. His fellow still hadn’t come back yet. He peered into the darkness, but it was hard to see beyond a few feet of his torch. He couldn’t see the wrong, but he knew it was wrong. He clenched the handle of his sheathed sword, ready. And hoping he wouldn’t have to swing the sword that evening.

Suddenly, he could see the vague outline of his fellow in the darkness approaching. He noticed that he had a limp – as though injured.

The guard rushed forward to help his fellow out. It wasn’t until the guard got closer that he realized his mistake. It wasn’t his fellow at all.

It took three seconds for the guard to notice the mistake.

It took another two seconds for him to unsheathe his sword.

Unfortunately, all that was four seconds too long. There was a scuffle from behind and a dull thud. The guard collapsed.

Peter – his role as the town drunk played out – checked to make sure the guard was out cold. He looked up at the shadows crowded around him, asking, “What did you all hit him with?”

There was snickering in the darkness. Someone called out, “A cauldron.”

“You hit him in the head with a cauldron?”

Milo rang defensive, “It was a small cauldron.”

Peter took a key from the fallen guard and faced the door. He put the key in the lock – it turned. Although his back was to them and it was pitch night, Peter could almost see the men behind him grinning. It was beginning.

Before Raven's Crest switched owners, it was guarded by no less than a dozen men at any one time. There was no point to a garrison – there hadn't been Viking raids in the area for decades. There hadn't been an invasion from the mainland since the Normans. And the de Vere family name was too beloved – not even the highwaymen dared to challenge the shipments coming in and out of the castle.

Which was why it seemed excessive now, the near hundred men guarding the castle from ghostly invasions. Robert Hall made a mistake in all of this – he put all these soldiers in a place far flung from the battlefield. The army was bored, listless. They were almost begging for an attack, anything to relieve the consistency of peace.

The sun wasn't helping, dragging time out into a melt. The garrison took to the shade beneath the castle's towers. Let the castle defend itself for once, the men muttered.

The rare guard keeping watch at the gate called out, "Men approaching!"

A column of soldiers was tramping through the woods towards the castle. They were dressed in the King's royal blues. There were at least a hundred men, probably more, the numbers squeezing between the crowded trees.

The castle was becoming a flurry now. Men rushed to their positions, waiting for...whatever really. They weren't sure what, but it had to have been more exciting than the past couple weeks.

The guard at the gate called out to the approaching army, asking, "Who is the leader amongst you?"

There was a shuffle of feet and a tanned, bearded man stepped forth. He was dressed in bulky armor, a broad sword weighing down his side. He walked with confidence, as if he knew the future. He called out, "Greetings! His Majesty King Osbert has sent us here the whole way from London."

"And?"

"And he wants us to relieve this castle of your forces."

"Why?"

"You're a persistent man, aren't you? Especially for someone of such a low rank. "

"We've only been here for a few weeks. Are you suggesting that we are not fit to guard a castle for any longer than that?"

"Are you suggesting that the King is wrong? Let us enter the castle. I must speak with your chamberlain about these matters."

"I'm still reluctant. You have yet to convince me of your identity."

The man snarled, "You dare defy King Humphrey's demands? We wear his colors, we carry his swords. I doubt he'll enjoy hearing about treason up here in Lincolnshire.

He could see the guard disappear from the top of the tower. He came back a minute later and called out, "Hold on for just a moment, sire. We'll lower the drawbridge for you and your men."

"Thank you."

It took the usual couple minutes for the drawbridge to rattle across the murky moat, slamming to a stop just in front of the mysterious armored man. The relief force strode across the drawbridge, the soles of their boots clicking against the wood. As they entered the courtyard, they glanced around. Many in the garrison were perched on the walls, looking curiously at them.

The relief force's leader, meanwhile, was escorted into the castle. Not that he needed an escort – he seemed to know the castle better than the guards. They were heading for the library, where Robert Hall the Incompetent conducted his work. As they walked through the halls, they passed several servants. All of them noticed who the relief leader was – they all wore the same look of shock as he walked past.

The library was deep in the castle's heart. More importantly, it was the Western's heart. Socrates. Plato. Aristotle. That an idiot could work in such a room and not collapse at the overwhelming genius was unfortunate.

They reached the library. The loud door slamming open startled the thin, pale Robert, who was sitting at a table in the middle of the library, writing a letter.

Robert asked terse, "What can I do for you?"

"I want you to leave."

Robert burst out laughing. He asked, "Who are you and what gives you the right..."

"Shut up. Let me speak. King Humphrey has taken my family's castle by force. You have desecrated this home and this town with your backwards thinking. You probably had a hand in Father Noah's death. Your garrison was also stupid enough to let my men over the drawbridge and into the castle. Of course, there's many other reasons why I want you to leave..."

"Who are you?"

"I'm Peter de Vere and I want my castle back. Please."

Robert stumbled out of his chair.

"Peter? I heard you were dead!"

"You're not the first to say that, you know. I wish people had more faith in me."

Peter began approaching Robert, who continued falling back towards the far corner of the room.

Robert begged, "Please, don't hurt me!"

Peter chuckled icily, "You think I'm going to kill you? No, I'm not going to kill you. If I kill you, how would you deliver my message to the King? Once you deliver the letter, though, he'll probably want to kill you."

Robert was terrified, but he couldn't help but scoff. He said, "King Humphrey will not kill me. I am his most trusted servant."

Peter shrugged, "If you say so. Humphrey has always seemed the type to kill the messenger though."

Robert stood up as brave as he could and snapped, "Don't think you can get away with this, Peter de Vere. Once King Humphrey gets word of your betrayal, he will bring his armies here. He will burn this castle to the ground, with you and your family still in it. You may be a young lad..."

"Aye..."

"So I'll excuse you for thinking we older men actually play little games where nobody gets hurt. Don't think, though, that Our Majesty will excuse you as kindly as I have."

Peter's eyes turned colder than they ever had. Robert almost lost his courage.

Peter snarled, "I want you and your men to leave this castle. Right now. You tell your garrison we aren't who we say we are? We will kill all of you. I don't want to spill blood in my home, but if need be, I will. If you leave quietly, you will survive. All I ask in return is that you tell our King that this castle belongs to its rightful owners. If he wants it, he has to fight for it. And if I have to die for it, I will – at least I won't die alone. I have a garrison standing behind me that's just as stubborn. Now, be a good guest and leave."

Chapter 13

“Where government fears people, you have liberty.” (J. Barnhill)

Sheen Palace

One Week Later

The clouds to the north were cold against the bright blue horizon. The storm was dark and fluid, seeming to flood the plains. The wind was pushing it south – along with the bad news. Bad news molded into a nervous, cloaked man galloping on his horse. From faraway, he looked like a centaur. As he got closer to Sheen Palace, though, it was plain to see who it was.

He pushed the horse on to the Palace. They were along the banks of the Thames now. His reflection was frosty in the murky waters.

He made his way through the Palace’s gates. Through the gardened courtyard, up the marble steps, and straight to the King’s throne room. He left muddy footprints in his wake – not bothering to clean his boots before entering the palace. He was too shaky to follow etiquette.

The messenger did not even bother waiting for a servant to introduce him to the king. Instead, he strode into the throne room, startling King Humphrey, who was deep in talk with his Queen Eva.

Humphrey shouted indignant, “Who do you think you are...?”

The messenger put down the hood of his cloak. It was Robert Hall, fresh from his embarrassment up north. His hair was matted, his breath ragged, his face wiry and weak. Humphrey instantly knew that something was horribly wrong. He demanded, “What happened, Hall? Why aren’t you at Raven’s Crest? You better have a good reason.”

“Highness, I do have a good reason. Unfortunately, a mass of troops claiming to be our relief force arrived last week. My guards foolishly gave them entrance. The leader of the force evicted us on threat of certain death.”

“What?! Who was this madman?”

“It was Peter de Vere, Your Highness. Son of the recently-deceased Albert de Vere. Milord, he threatened me with death if I didn’t leave with my garrison. You must understand...”

“Then you would have been better off dying at their blades!”

“Please, Your Highness, I didn’t have a choice. I was hoping you’d understand...”

“All I know is that you’re a coward. And apparently a fool to boot. I don’t have time or patience to deal with spineless imbeciles such as yourself!”

He motioned for guards nearby to apprehend Robert. Without saying a word, Humphrey pointed his finger downwards, down to where the dungeon and certain hell laid waiting. The guards nodded silent, dragged away Robert Hall, still begging and sobbing for mercy.

And that was it. Just like that, Humphrey simply forgot one of his most trusted servants.

Eva turned to Humphrey and said, “This is a serious matter, husband.”

“I know, I know! You think I don’t know that?”

“I’m just saying...this requires swift action on your part. Decisive action. You must put out this fire before it spreads. We cannot risk the rest of the kingdom getting these ideas of unrest.”

Humphrey sighed and looked ahead. He finally asked, almost in a whisper, “What do you think we should do?”

“We need a battle plan now. The longer we wait, the longer we risk losing ground to this Peter character. We need to take the castle back and make an example of this fool who thinks he can challenge us. Fetch for Captain General Benedict Marshall. Last I heard, he is still at his manor. He is by far your most able general. If anyone can win you that castle back, it’d be him.”

Humphrey scratched his nose. He was silent, thinking for once. Was it worth his soldiers and money to kill this foolish boy? This boy who had nothing but his father’s name and arrogance to back him up? It was possible that this little rebellion could collapse on its own, once the rebels realized that their leader was barely a man, let alone an inspiration. That said...people are stupid. People forget easily. So people need lessons. Wiping out a rebel army is one hell of a lesson. It would take years for people to forget that.

He snapped his fingers for one of his guards to approach the throne. Humphrey commanded, “Guard, I order you to go to Benedict Marshall’s manor. Bring him here as soon as possible. I need his advice on how to kill foolish lads.”

Benedict sat awkward in the cramped wooden chair. Chairs were not made for soldiers and soldiers were not made for chairs.

He was in the hallway just outside the throne room. He couldn’t help but wonder. If King Humphrey wanted to see me so urgently, why am I sitting out here, waiting to talk with him? The King never made sense, but so didn’t women dying in childbirth.

To pass the time, he closed his eyes. Although he was sitting still, he was building worlds up with his bare hands. At the same time he was tearing them down with battles. Carnage on floodplains, mayhem in the thicketed forests. His imagination was a gift. He could think of millions of ways a battle could go, in all kinds of settings, against all kinds of foes. He managed to succeed where the philosophers he read had failed. The thinkers all happened upon one idea and expanded upon it. He – on the other hand – considered countless situations, whittling them all down into one word: victory.

He was a genius who could kill. He was dangerous than most.

The worlds he was building suddenly halted. The door swung open and a voice said, General, King Humphrey will like to see you now.

Benedict groaned soft and stood up. He made his way into the throne room, the echoes of his boots preceding him. King Humphrey was on his throne, nervous and fidgety. Queen Eva was seated next to him – like always – looking stony and dour.

Benedict asked, “Highness, what is it that you want of me?”

“We have some serious developments to the north. It would appear that the de Vere castle in Lincoln has been snatched from our hands.”

“You mean the castle I was just at?”

“Yes, the very same.”

“Who would dare take back the castle?”

“It appears to be the son, actually.”

“The son? I thought he was still in the Holy Lands.”

“That’s what we all thought.”

“It appears we were wrong.”

“No, I’m never wrong.”

Benedict looked at him oddly, “But you just said you thought he was in the Holy Lands...”

King Humphrey grunted, “The King is never wrong.”

“My apologies.”

Humphrey continued, saying, “I brought you here in hopes you could lead the siege of the castle. And to kill this fool for the trouble he’s caused.”

Benedict was hesitant to call Peter a fool. He heard a lot of kind words about the young noble. And Benedict had met his father too, the late Baron de Vere, many times before. It was nothing short of a good family.

Benedict took a deep breath and asked, “Are you sure about this, Highness?”

“Sure about this?”

Benedict nodded, “This is going to be an expensive answer to a cheap problem. Surely, there can be a more peaceful solution. Surely, nothing is worth the pain of a siege...”

“Nonsense! You cannot possibly tell me that, as a soldier, you are afraid of your own sword.”

“Trust me, Highness, I can pick up my sword. I can hold it in my hand as easy as a flower. I can cut men down like flowers too. Just be ready, for this will cost us all. I am a mortal man, after all, leading a mortal army – if the enemy doesn’t kill us, disease will.”

“I am prepared for the pains, General. Don’t you dare convince me otherwise. All I ask is that you give me my castle back. If I want your opinion, I’ll ask for it. Until then, just nod.”

“Of course, High...”

“Nod.”

Benedict stopped. His eyes flared with shame. But he nodded.

“Good. Also, I have elected to send Lieutenant General Richard Norton to accompany you. You are a brilliant general, yes, but Norton has a fox’s heart and isn’t afraid of the dirtier side of war. I don’t know a lot about warfare, true, but I know winter is fast approaching. Your army, I trust, will be able to survive the winter?”

Benedict was careful not to bare his teeth. Humphrey has no faith in my skills so he’s sending that scoundrel Norton to breathe down my neck?

For the first time in history, a weasel was able to keep a falcon in check.

King Humphrey motioned for Benedict to leave, but then remembered something.

“Oh, and General? Remember, although you are laying the siege, I still have power over the army. I noticed as of late that you like to declare victories after your battles. I am the King of England, and though I don’t have many privileges, I daresay I should have the credit and the honor. I merely appoint you to do my bidding. Would you have one of your soldiers declare a victory for you?”

“Only if I was dead, Highness.”

Humphrey smiled wide, “Well then, it appears we agree on something. Finally. I was afraid I was the only smart man in the room.”

“Of course.”

As Benedict left the room, Humphrey’s smile disappeared. Something about that man isn’t right, Humphrey thought. And it scared him that he didn’t know what it was.

Chapter 14

“I have seen the agony of mothers...I hate war.” (FDR)

Raven’s Crest

Peter inhaled the cold autumn air deep. It filled him until it became his spirit. He was one with the winds and the earth and the water.

“Peter! Peter!”

Peter sighed and called out, “What, Milo?”

“Are you ready?”

“Let me be one with nature again.”

“What?”

“I said let me be a goddamn child again!”

“Oh.”

Peter went back to his trance atop the tower. He closed his eyes. He was not looking forward to the morning. The rebellion had begun smooth enough. Take the armory, take the castle. So far so good. But strategy was beginning to catch up with him. And logistics too. They needed food and water and training and so many other things. Peter never realized that a soldier – let alone a man – could need so much until this past week. The rebellion was in danger of crumbling before it even met Humphrey’s army.

Peter knew he couldn’t put it off any longer. He opened his eyes and walked down the steps. Milo was waiting a few steps below.

His eyebrows were raised. He asked, “Are you done being a goddamn child again?”

“Yes.”

“Good. I was afraid I was the only mature man for miles. It scared me.”

“It would scare a lot of people if that was the case. Let’s walk.”

“They began walking down the steps, heading for the courtyard.”

Milo began, “You know, these men are going to need a lot of training.”

“I know.”

“They’re bright men.”

“Yes.”

“And strong.”

“Yes.”

“But they’re not monsters.”

“No.”

“And we need monsters, Peter.”

“I know.”

“A monster only loses to a hero, and our king is no hero.”

“Well said, Milo.”

“I could use some of your advice, you know. You were once a soldier yourself. Say something more, for christ’s sake.”

“I know, I know...I’m just thinking. Thinking how in the world are we going to train these men. Consider it. We have to teach them the bow and arrow...”

“True.”

“And we have to teach swordplay.”

“True.”

“Good ol’ fighting.”

“I love it.”

“How are we going to teach them all that?”

“I have no idea. I’m horrible with my words.”

“Me too. This is going to be a problem, isn’t it?”

“Shut up, Peter. They can hear us now.”

The two were now standing before their garrison, the men milling about and waiting for their orders. They did not look like an army at all.

Peter called out, "Men! Although we have evicted the King's men from the castle, they will surely return. This time with larger numbers. If we are smart about it, we can stop them again. Now, before I continue, I must ask this question. Who here wishes to leave and who wishes to fight? I ask this because we will begin training today and we have no time to train a man who will flee. If you leave now, there will be no dishonor."

The courtyard was quiet. The men all looked at each other, questioning. This was an opportunity for some, a choice for others. Hesitating, a handful of men slowly parted ways from the crowd. They looked longingly back at the garrison as they walked towards the drawbridge. The garrison stared back. None of them made an effort to join the fleeing. Almost every man was prepared to die for the young, noble Peter de Vere.

Peter breathed and continued, "Okay, who here has ever shot an arrow?"

As expected, no one raised their hand.

"Okay then, who here has been trained in the art of rhetoric?"

Three men raised their hands.

"Good, I want you three to follow me. The rest of you, talk amongst yourselves until we return. We shouldn't be gone for long."

Peter turned on his heels and walked towards the drawbridge, Milo and the three soldiers in tow. They left the castle and settled in a field just outside the moat. The same field where Peter once rolled about as a child.

Decades are always shedding their skins, like seasons almost.

Earlier that morning, Peter had his servants lay bows and arrows out in the middle of the field. He pointed to these same weapons now and stoically said, "Pick them up."

The men gingerly picked up the bows. They looked at them curious. Peter allowed them a minute or two before continuing, "I want you to form a circle with your thumb and your index finger. Look through that circle at a faraway object."

The men did as they were told. They all picked trees at the far end of the field. Peter commanded, "As you look at that object, I want you to look through one eye while bringing the object to your face. Then try the other eye. Whatever eye feels more comfortable, use that while aiming your arrows."

Peter then taught them how to hold the bow, how the bowstring had to be pulled on the same side as their dominant eye. Peter demonstrated, showed them how to load the arrow into its rest on the bow. Then how to nock the arrow against the groove of the bowstring – keeping the arrow from slipping. The men caught on quick. In just ten minutes, they were drawing the string back and bringing the bow and arrow to shoulder's height, all in one fluid sweep.

Peter said, "Okay, do you see the tree I'm pointing to?"

They looked. He was pointing at an old, grey-haired tree at the forest edge. It was nicked good, the bark was stripped in some parts. You could tell it was used to being arrow practice.

As he suspected, the men completely missed the tree with their first shots. Twenty minutes later, only one man managed to hit the tree, and it was more a lucky shot than anything else. But Peter didn't mind.

One of the men called out, "Peter, I wouldn't trust us with these arrows if I were you."

Peter smiled, "This is only the first day. If you were working on this for months and still missed the tree, I'd be worried. Now what I definitely expect from you today is to teach the men back in the castle. I picked you men because you are smart and have gifted tongues. I want this entire garrison to know how to fire an arrow by the end of the week. Understood?"

The men nodded.

"Good. Now go. You have students to teach."

As the men left, a young lady servant approached. She curtsied and said graceful, "Milord...?"

"Please, call me Peter."

He had only been in command for a few days and he was already tired of the titles. His name was Peter. His enemies had no other names but King and General and Baron and Lord. People with proper names were his friends.

“Okay...Peter. The lady of the house, the Baroness herself, requests your audience immediately. She wishes to discuss urgent business with you.”

Curious, Peter nodded and said to the men, “Continue your practice, gentlemen. Milo here will be in charge until I get back.”

Suddenly, one of the men let their bowstring slip between his fingers while loading an arrow. Lucky for him, he was aiming downwards. The arrow plummeted into the soft soil below.

Peter grinned, “And that is why you keep the bow pointed downwards when you load it.”

Knocked twice.

A voice beyond the door called out, “Come in.”

Peter opened the door and strode into the bedroom. He suddenly remembered, years before, when he would run into this same room, asking his parents questions and questions.

Decades shedding skin.

Margaret de Vere was sitting in her chair in the far corner of the room. Her back was to Peter. Staring out the window, she said simply, “We need to talk.”

“So I’ve heard. What about?”

She motioned with her hand for him to come closer. Peter stepped forward and – pulling up a chair – sat down next to his mother. They both looked out the window for a few moments. The outside seemed so peaceful. It shouldn’t be so peaceful.

Finally, Margaret spoke up.

“I don’t want you taking arms against King Humphrey and his men.”

“Why?”

“You were always a stubborn son.”

“You think you know me that well?”

“You think I don’t?”

“Our servants raised me more than you did.”

“You were our first and only child. I wouldn’t know the first thing about taking care of you.”

“I wouldn’t have minded you making mistakes.”

“I would have minded. I also mind that you’re questioning me, when I should be demanding answers from you.”

“Everything’s more connected than you think. It’s all a building. Take out one wall, the roof collapses.”

“I know a thing or two about making decisions, Peter. I’m aware of consequences.”

“Are you now?”

“Yes, just because you don’t see them doesn’t mean I don’t make decisions. Not every decision has to be about killing people you know. Most decisions are more subtle. Thankfully. You’re here right now because I don’t want you to take a stand against King Humphrey. If you do, he will destroy this castle and everyone in it. You and I both know that.”

“Yes.”

“Just think for a moment: what would your father say about all of this?”

“He would probably be the first to grab a sword.”

“You say I don’t know you well, but you seem to know your father even less. We are a noble family, Peter. This castle has grown up alongside the family for generations. Your father loved the family name and found honor in it. Don’t ruin his legacy by smearing our good name and burning down this castle. Remember, Peter, if you fail, – and you probably will – the family’s crest will go down with you. We will always be remembered in infamy for daring our God-given King.”

“Father’s dead. Our ancestors are dead. What are they going to do against me? Would they even care?”

Margaret snapped, “Peter, as the woman who gave birth to you, I refuse to watch what I created be destroyed. I already suffered enough when you went off to the Crusades to die an honorable man. Please don’t make me live like that again.”

“I hope you’re ready to be disappointed.”

“Then in that case I won’t be around to watch you suffer. I’m going to be leaving, Peter.”

“When?”

“Within the week, probably. When I leave, I will be taking the women and children still in this castle with me. I refuse to let innocent people die for man’s stupidity.”

Peter scratched his ear and sighed, “Fine, you and the others may go. It’ll mean less mouths to feed when the siege hits.”

Margaret looked at him for a long moment. She said, “I suppose you really are a soldier. Everyone’s a number to you now. But enough talk of such things.”

“Agreed.”

“That was all I wanted to talk to you about, anyway. You may go back to your little games now.”

Peter started walking for the door when his mother called out once more, “Peter?”

Peter stopped, looked back.

Margaret said slowly, “When I come back to this castle, you better be alive. I do not want to bury any more of my family.”

Chapter 15
“Love is life.” (Tolstoy)
Just Outside Lincoln

As she twisted her fingertips around the lit candle, the flame would bend and form like pottery.

Isabella Sparrow was a muse amongst men. When an artist dreamt of her, the next day was renaissance. She could definitely propel. She was exotic, her hair and eyes washed in deep raven colors. Her colors were dark but shone, like a sun-kissed crow in an afternoon field. Her shy smile certainly helped. She was coy and mysterious. Men have killed for less. Fairies are rare after all.

She leaned against the window and looked into the quilt of night. The quiet fields mirroring the moon back at the skies. The heavy thump of boots along the floor, closing in on her bedroom door.

Isabella sighed and turned to Father walking into the room. Jon was a brute, his bearish skull resting on a swollen sycamore tree. It surprised everyone that he was a wealthy landowner instead of a prized pub fighter. He was a cutthroat businessman, one of the best for miles. He was no noble – far from it – but he was close to buying the prestige.

Isabella could see he was seething and storming at the moment. She had no idea why. He was usually calm – hardly anyone could cut to his nerve.

She asked, “Father, what has offended you so?”

Jon growled, “You know how the de Vere family’s castle was seized?”

Isabella nodded.

“Well, his son has taken the bloody castle back! I’ve wanted to buy some of that land for years and old Albert wouldn’t let it go. And I hear his son is just as stubborn...”

But Isabella wasn’t paying attention anymore. Her heart soared. Peter’s back? Memories floated in and out of Isabella’s mind. She smiled deep.

“Isabella, are you even paying attention?”

“Of course, father.”

Isabella was always a good liar. Father growled and awkward goodnight and left the room, snarling at the floor, the walls, the door.

Isabella looked out the window longing. She had wanted to see Peter so badly. It had been a year – at least a year – since the two last spoke. She winced, remembering the bitter shouts. The memory of it tasted stale.

She did not want things to end like that. No one does. She wanted the silent lull since to cease and to strike up their music once again. She did not want the quiet to stretch on and on like when Mother died from the plague. But she had to make the first move.

She always had to make the first move around Peter.

Isabella smiled. She knew what she had to do.

Unfortunately, her fantastic idea was not so fantastic. She found this out standing outside of the de Vere castle, looking helpless and forlorn.

A voice called down from the wall, saying, “Sorry Missus Sparrow, but I cannot give you entrance to the castle.”

“And why not?”

“Well, every time someone is invited into this castle, they take it.”

“And?”

“And the King’s men will be here soon to lay siege to this castle. We have sent away all the women and children as a result. Once the siege is over and done, you may come back to the castle at your leisure.”

“Please sire, I just need to speak with Peter for a few minutes.”

“I’m sorry, but Peter is busy directing the defenses. He cannot be bothered for anything short of war.”

Isabella frowned. She was not spoiled, true, but she was hoping that her family name had been good for something. She called back up, “Well, thank you anyway, good sir. Have a pleasant day.”

“Thanks. And the same to you!”

As Isabella walked down the dirt road, she thought. There has to be another way into that castle, but what is it?

A swift breeze suddenly kicked some dirt off the road. Some of the dust swept into her eyes. She sputtered and tried to rub the grit out. She hated dirt, hated the way it felt. It made her feel too much like a man...

Suddenly, everything made sense. A smile curled at the edges of her lips. Isabella had a wonderful idea. Insane, yes. But it was still a wonderful idea.

As he stood in front of his immaculate mirror – built by the finest artisans Father could afford – Isabella could barely recognize himself.

His pitch hair – normally crept past his shoulders – was now cropped closer to his scalp. He had also ditched the normal dresses. He now favored Father’s old work clothes instead. He was now a man to the hasty eye.

The things you do for love, Isabella thought, wistful. Absentmindedly, he said, “Hello.”

His voice didn’t sound right. He lowered it an octave or so until he had a crude man’s voice (redundant, I know). He felt awkward being a man, but it was all for the cause.

Isabella strutted around the room, mulling over names to choose. Not feeling creative, Isabella went with a more manly form of his name.

Isabella said to himself in the mirror, “Isaiah. My name is Isaiah.”

Isaiah had every right to feel nervous, walking up to the de Vere castle the next day. His disguise was about to be tested. He wondered the things that would happen. Could something go horribly wrong? Could he accidentally reveal his femininity? Could a tiny mistake cost him from ever seeing Peter again?

It was too late to back out now, though. He was already in the clearing, within sight of the castle guards. It was the same guard from the day before. The same one who refused Isabella.

The guard yelled down, “Who are you, sire, and what brings you to Raven’s Crest, home of the de Vere family?”

“My name is Isaiah. I was once a young man. Now I am an orphan. I lost my father to the Crusades. I am desperate for work.”

“Aren’t we all?”

“I am willing to work any job asked of me. All I ask for is food and a roof in return.”

Even from down in the grass, Isaiah could see the guard scratching his chin. The guard was thinking. He supposed that the servants could use an extra hand. Feeding a garrison of a near hundred men was no easy task.

The guard yelled, “Do you want to be a servant? The Baron needs all the help he can get. It is a hassle to put up defenses while keeping house.”

It’s so strange hearing Peter as a Baron, Isaiah thought. Hard to believe the little boy who once pouted and screamed when servants took his toy sword away was now a noble. He was thrilled by the idea of serving in the castle, though, and said, Why certainly, sire, I would be honored to be a servant in such a fine household.

“Good! Hold on a minute while I order the drawbridge to be lowered.”

Isaiah walked across the drawbridge a few minutes later, feeling like one of the Visigoths who stepped foot in Rome. The victory was short-lived though.

The guard had reached the ground level and – looking curiously at Isaiah – asked, “Haven’t I seen you before?”

“Um, I don’t believe so. I hail from York. This is the first time I’ve been in Lincolnshire.”

The guard looked confused for a moment and then shrugged, “My apologies, lad. I’m getting too old. Hopefully you’ll be a good martyr and never have to worry about that. I’ll have one of my fellows here take you to the castle. They’ll introduce you to the de Vere family. Also...?”

“Isaiah.”

“Right, Isaiah. I just want to warn you about Peter de Vere before you meet him.”

“Oh?”

“He’s, um...he’s rather fiery. Whatever you do, don’t argue with him. Or make him do something. If he wants to do something, he’ll do it. If he wants you to believe something, believe it.”

Peter hasn’t changed one bit, Isaiah thought with a smile.

Isaiah said, “I’ll be sure to keep that all in mind. Thanks for letting me know.”

The guard nodded, “Glad to be of help. He seems like a difficult man, but he knows what he is doing. Remember that, because it’s so easy to forget.”

As the guard led Isaiah towards the castle, the guard couldn’t help but feel he was making a mistake somewhere. Especially as they walked – Isaiah had a lightness to his step, when men are supposed to be clumsy.

Chapter 16

"Is binn béal ina thost."

"Milo, I think we have a problem."

"Oh?"

Peter and Milo were standing out in the misty courtyard, watching the soldiers practice marksmanship on straw targets against the wall. They were flimsy shots, often going wide of the targets.

"Our archers are terrible."

"You're telling me. I don't think we can even call them archers in the first place."

"Hey, I was the one who taught them to begin with."

"My point exactly. Peter, I love you like a brother, but you're horrible at archery. You teaching people how to use a bow and arrow is like...like..."

"Like an illiterate man teaching Aeschylus?"

Milo shrugged, "I suppose. Fact is, we need an actual archer to teach these men how to shoot arrows. They could practice all they want now, but they'll be practicing the wrong stuff."

Peter sighed harsh, "There's the problem."

"What is?"

"There isn't a phenomenal archer for miles. Or kingdoms even. They're all fighting and dying in the Holy Lands as we speak."

"What about...Paul is it?"

Peter shook his head, "I'm not going the whole way to Horncastle for Paul. He knows how to hit a rabbit, but when he's not holding a bow, he's holding a mug of ale. I don't want a drunk teaching our men."

"Well, we need someone. And we need them quick. Humphrey's men could be here tomorrow, they could be here next year. Lord knows. The sooner these men can kill with arrows, the better."

Peter asked, "Do you know of anyone else?"

"No..."

"You do know someone, don't you?"

"Well, yes and no. I heard about this guy. He apparently lives in the woods west of Evesham."

"A highwayman?"

"Pretty much so, yeah. Rumor has it he's the best archer in England. But that's just rumor."

"All rumors have truth to them. Anything else about him?"

"Yeah – I heard he's Irish."

"An Irishman? What's he doing here when he can be robbing travelers on his own island?"

Milo shrugged, "Because the people on his island don't have any money?"

"I suppose. Could you do me a favor?"

"You want me to find him?"

"If you don't mind."

Milo smiled broadly, "Only if it's a favor."

"Our friendship seems to be based on favors, doesn't it?"

Milo shrugged, "Those are the best friendships – they never end. I'll leave as soon as possible and head for Evesham. Any luck, I'll be back next week with an Irishman."

Peter said half-serious, "Don't let me down, Milo."

Milo laughed, "You have too much faith in me."

It had been three days since that talk. Milo had been seething about it since. It should have been a cold day, but the sun burned so badly. His water was running scarce and he hadn't seen a well or creek all day. Milo swore, wishing he had sent some servant out to find this mythical archer. Then it would be that servant dying instead.

Still, he refused to go back to Peter empty-handed. Even though none of the peasants he met so far knew about the archer. He still refused to go back without the Irishman. Peter never failed him, and he would never fail Peter. Even in death.

But death was getting close. I need water. His horse wasn't doing much better. He could almost hear it panting. He didn't care though. If the horse died, he would beat it with a stick. He needed to find this bloody archer.

Over the gasps for water, Milo could have sworn he heard a heavy creek running. It was faint, but it was there.

Excited, Milo hopped off his horse and walked to the side of the road. He strained his ears, hoping to hear the water gurgle. He did hear the running water. This was good. He also heard a bubbling growl. This was bad.

That was when everything went danger. He turned and ran. His horse neighed and crazed. The grass ruffled, the branches broken. A sounder of boars broke out of the forest and over the road, their tusks pointed. Milo dashed and crunched through the woods, hoping to shake the pack. He was afraid to look back. Had to be at least a dozen of the beasts. Milo couldn't fight them off. All he had was a dagger.

So Milo pelted through the forest. The heavy snorting was getting closer. He could almost imagine their snouts lapping at his heels as he ran...

And that's when the world gave out beneath him.

Milo was tumbling down a rocky slope, the stones cutting and bruising him at every turn. Milo went through ten seconds of hell before thudding on flat, pebbled land. His eyes closed, Milo winced as the tiny stones irritated his bleeding hands. Milo pushed himself up. The water gurgle was much louder now. He turned, saw that there was a large creek no more than a few feet away.

Milo groaned, "Well, found the creek."

He could hear squeals now. He looked up – the boars were sliding down the hill, gunning straight for him. He had to cross the creek. Never mind he was horrible in the water.

Milo stood up and started to run for the water, but he immediately collapsed. The energy seemed to sap out of him. His mind was kicking at his body to get up. Please get up, please.

There was an eerie whistle in the air. Breeze graced his face. One of the boars snarled, anguished. The other boars got worked up. More whistles had cut up the air. Milo looked. Several of the boars laid dead on the ground, their thick hides punctured with arrows. The remaining boars – smart enough to be scared of death – ran back up the rocky hill, their fear powering their every step.

A thick voice called out from across the stream, "You okay?"

Milo peered through the forest on the other side. He could see a shadow in the forest darkness. Milo grunted, "Yes. Thanks to you, kind stranger."

The shadow stepped out of the woods and waded across the stream. He was tall, lanky. Hadn't shaved in weeks by the looks of it.

Milo said, "It's a good thing you were out hunting, stranger. Else I would be food for the boars."

"Wasn't hunting."

"Then what were you...you aren't the bandit, are you? You know, the one who robs from the noblemen passing through the area?"

"What's it to you?"

"I've been looking for you for a few days now."

"The King send you?"

"No, not at all. We're actually fighting him. We're holed up in my friend's castle. We need your help though."

"Oh?"

"We need you to train our men in archery. They are worthless without you."

"Sorry. I fight alone."

"Well then, can I interest you in some food?"

Milo and the man were sitting around a campfire, burning the beef that Milo had brought with him.

Milo spoke up, "So I suppose you don't like talking much?"

The mysterious archer shook his head.

"What's your name?"

"Isaac of Connacht."

"Well, Isaac, can I ask why you're here in England? England is a good distance from Connacht if I can recall right."

When Isaac looked at Milo, Milo shivered a bit. He never saw such a warm fury boiling in the eyes before. It was hot enough to make his blood run cold.

"I used to have a family."

"And what happened?"

"I used to have a family."

"I'm sorry, I wasn't thinking..."

"You said you're going to be fighting Humphrey's army?"

"Well, yes."

"You hear of Richard Norton?"

"No, who is he?"

"One of Humphrey's generals. You think he'll be there?"

"Where, at my friend's castle?"

Isaac nodded stoic.

"Well...probably, yeah. We probably pissed off the King pretty good. I wouldn't be surprised if he sent every soldier he had after us."

Isaac said slow, "Norton will probably come then. Good."

"Why is that good?"

"Because that means I'll fight for you."

"Why?"

"You ask too many questions. I will fight in your garrison, but I don't want money. I want Norton. I want Norton dead."

Milo looked at Isaac shrewdly. They were bartering with men's souls here. Father Noah always warned against that. People are not money and money shouldn't be treated like people.

Still, Milo said, "That sounds fair to me. So I guess we have a deal?"

"Yes."

Chapter 17

“Let thy love be younger than thyself.” (Shakespeare)

Raven’s Crest

Peter was tired.

Tired of making the castle ready. Tired of waiting for all the King’s horses and all the King’s men. Tired of training a garrison that knew only farming and little else. Tired of hearing his engineer – Joseph ben Samuel – telling him about how the one wall is beginning to fall apart. More than that, Peter was tired of Joseph tiring him out. All Peter wanted was sleep, not a nap.

So when Peter sat down in his late father’s chair in the main hall and Joseph walked in, Peter rolled his eyes.

Peter, exhausted, called out, “What’s the problem, Joseph?”

“Milord...”

“Call me Peter. How many times must I tell people that?”

“Peter, I’ve been looking at that wall. It seems the soil is shifting beneath it, which is causing the instability. As to what’s causing the soil to shift, I do not know...”

“So what do you need?”

“I request your permission to go to the local quarry and get stone to strengthen the wall.”

“How long will that take?”

“Two or three days at the most. Depends on how much the oxen are willing to pull on each trip.”

“Permission granted. Just make it quick, for christ’sakes.”

“Certainly, Peter.”

Joseph left and Peter leaned back in his chair. He closed his eyes and breathed slowly, hoping to calm to sleep.

But he found no calm, even in his sleep. He was deep in the forest. He could hear screams, distant. He unsheathed his sword. He ran. On the dirt road now – everything was looking familiar. He ran along the road, hoping that his thoughts wouldn’t spill out behind him, creating a pensive wake. He could see specks far off. Peter ran more. The specks were becoming men, dots metamorphosing into limbs. The men were becoming an army, a blob that earthquaked the land as it marched like the wind.

Peter was terrified. He hid behind a tree. Let the soldiers pass, let them pass.

They were drenched in blood. Every single one. One of the men was dressed in armor. Peter’s suit of armor. Peter knew it was his suit – what with the ridges in the shoulders, the build of the helmet. How the helmet had slits for eyes, how small holes were punctured in the front for breathing, how royal blue feathers flocked the helmet’s top.

Peter yelled, “Hey! Stop!”

He was supposed to be hiding, but now he was running through the ranks, towards the armored man. Peter reached out. His hand went through the man’s arm. Confused, Peter looked down. His hand was smoky – he could see the road through his palm. And still the army kept moving, the soldiers passing through Peter as if he was a stiff breeze.

Bewildered, Peter realized why the road looked familiar. It was the road leading from Raven’s Crest back to Lincoln. He looked as far as he could down the road. He should have seen a castle in the distance. But all he could see was a column of smoke gushing into the sky.

Peter awoke sharply. He clawed at himself, found he was lounging on the chair in the main hall still. He looked at his hand. He couldn’t see the floor through it. He was still solid, at least for the moment.

Feeling uneasy and fidgety, Peter glimpsed someone walking past the ajar door. He called out, “Who is that? Do you mind coming in here?”

A young man with raveny hair slowly walked into the hall. He seemed so masculine – Peter wrote it off, figuring the man was just overcompensating for something.

“What’s your name?”

“Um, Isaiah...milord.”

Peter was getting tired of correcting the milord mishap every time.

He ignored it though and continued, “Do you know any good tricks? Or stories? My jester is visiting his sick mother at the moment.”

“Why do you need entertainment? Are you melancholic?”

“No...no. I’m just stressed.”

Isaiah took a few steps towards where Peter was sitting and nodded, saying, “I don’t blame you. Building a castle up can break anyone down.”

“So do you have a story?”

“For you, yes. This story comes from the mainland. I heard it while traveling through France on pilgrimage. There was once an arrogant king. He knew nothing about his subjects, who were dying from famine and the plague. He would add to their misery by charging them outrageous taxes. He probably thought if he bled the money out of people, that that would restore their phlegmatic humors. He would use the money for all these wonderful banquets and wine and such. Anyway, one evening a great chieftain from some Irish tribe visits. The king holds a feast for this noble barbarian. Now, the king had never met an actual Irishman before. All he heard about that people was that they enjoyed the drink. During the banquet, however, the king notices that the Irishman hadn’t touched a drop of liquor at all. The king – now very drunk at this point – asked, Now good sir, what is it that separates you from the common drunkard? The Irishman is insulted, but doesn’t show it. He calmly says instead, Why this very table between us, milord, is what separates me from the drunk.”

In spite of everything, Peter couldn’t help but smile.

“That was a good story...Isaiah, was it?”

Isaiah nodded.

“Well, Isaiah, thanks for the smile. I haven’t had one of those in awhile. Have we met before?”

Isaiah quickly said, “No, milord. I’m new to the castle.”

“Is that so? Well, welcome then. Sorry that I seem so absentminded. It’s hard keeping track of everything nowadays. Do you ever find yourself having the same trouble.”

“Everyday, milord. I wake up in the morning and I have trouble remembering who I’m supposed to be that day.”

“Ah, a shifty character?”

“Only for good causes.”

“You don’t have to defend your act.”

“I do if I want to keep my audience.”

“An audience is overrated. *Ars gratia artis*...are you sure we haven’t met before?”

“I’m sure.”

“It’s just that you remind me of someone.”

“Do you want to be reminded of someone?”

“In a way...well Isaiah, that’s all for now. Thank you. I hope I wasn’t interrupting anything you were tending to.”

“No, not at all.”

“If you ever hear another good story, let me know. I wouldn’t mind hearing it.”

Isaiah bowed, “Of course, milord...”

“You don’t have to bow, you know. I’m not God.”

“Certainly milord...”

“And no need to call me lord while you’re at it. Again, I’m not God.”

“Of course mi...of course.”

As Isaiah turned and left the hall, Peter looked longingly at his wake. Something about him invigorated Peter. Peter hadn’t been like that since...

Peter closed his eyes, massaged his temple. He was confused. And tired. He missed her.

Chapter 18

“Of all the things I’ve lost, I miss my mind the most.” (Twain)

“Milord! There are two men approaching the castle.”

Peter, who was walking the courtyard in the early morning, hoping to stretch the sleep out of him, called up, “Who do they look like?”

The voice from the wall paused, then said, “One looks like your friend. I cannot tell who the other is.”

“Well then, let them in.”

As Peter waited for the drawbridge to be lowered, he couldn’t help but feel a little excited. He knew that Milo wouldn’t disappoint him. His old friend couldn’t disappoint him.

As soon as the drawbridge collapsed against the moat, Milo and the Irishmen quickly strode across and into the stronghold. Peter met them halfway, saying, Milo! I’m glad to see you made it back safe and with this good man in tow.

Milo grinned and lowered himself from his horse. He bear-hugged Peter and said jovially, “You don’t know how close I was to becoming boar feed.”

“Boar feed?”

Milo nodded, “Lucky for me, this man here certainly lives up to his dastardly reputation.”

Milo turned and made the necessary introductions between the two men, saying, “Peter? I want you to meet Isaac of Connacht, the famed – or should I say feared? – archer who has gained fame through robbing poor, poor noblemen around Evesham. Isaac, this is Peter de Vere, heir to this castle as well as a field of prickly thorns to King Humphrey.”

Peter said happily, “Well, Isaac of Galway, I’m grateful for your help in the upcoming siege.”

Isaac, glancing around, said airily, “It’s the least I can do. I’m looking forward to breaking the mighty king’s ego.”

Peter laughed, “Well, you’ll be happy to know that you’re in the company of similar men. We are all different, but we’re a nation united under hatred for Humphrey. Do you wish to get settled in your room in the castle? Or do you wish to meet the men that you will be training?”

“I will train your men first. I hate a good rest, and if I don’t train your men properly, the siege might put me to rest sooner than I’d like.”

“Fair enough.”

The trio walked through the courtyard.

Isaac continued, “It’s nice to know, though, that there’s an Englishman who remembers his manners around his Irish brethren.”

“Like I said, Isaac, we’re a nation of our own. There is no Englishman nor Irishman here.”

Isaac said shortly, “One question.”

“Ask away.”

“Can I train your garrison alone? Without any interference on your part?”

Peter’s eyebrow went up slightly, but he said graciously, “Why, without a doubt, Isaac. You may train them however you wish. As long as they’re trained in the end.”

A grin’s ghost haunted Isaac’s face. Peter noticed.

Isaac wiped the happy from his face and said stonily, “Well then, I guess I should start training them even sooner. Now, if you’d excuse me gentlemen, I must prepare.”

Peter motioned one of his servants to escort Isaac away to prepare the archery lessons.

As they watched the Irishman walk off, Peter turned to Milo and said, “Are you sure this is the man we’re looking for? He’s not just some imposter? Everyone loves to be a legend, even if it’s not their own.”

Milo shrugged, “He looks pretty Irish to me. And when I said he saved me from the boars, I wasn’t lying. He’s a bird that flies on arrows.”

“So you really were attacked by a pack of boars?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Oh.”

Milo continued, "Fact is, I survived thanks to him. He is a different breed of thinking, yes. But he is a soldier first, and my God, we need a soldier."

The day was cool, but Isaac could feel the fire. He hadn't been this excited in awhile, not since that first day when he robbed that earl and plunged an arrow into one of his guards. He was about to teach dozens of men how to become him. If a battle were to kill Isaac, he would still live on in those men. He would never be forgotten. A man would rather die than be forgotten.

Isaac called out over the crowd, "Men! For many of you, you have had the luck of never being in war. Some of you have probably never even see a person bleed. Which is why I am here not only to teach you the bow and arrow, but how to accept it as well."

The castle's garrison was listening to the Irishman's every word. They all had heard of the archer's legends. Who hadn't? But as Isaac felt warmth that day, the men felt a chill. Isaac's harshness was settling like winter over the castle.

Isaac said, "Now, I know that a lot of you aren't interested in killing man. Which is why some of you are having trouble with the bow. You don't want to perfect yourself as Death himself. So today is your luck, men. I have a school in morals waiting for you."

With that said, Isaac turned on his heels and walked to a wagon in the middle of the courtyard. The wagon was draped in several heavy blankets. Curious, the garrison watched as Isaac ripped the blankets off and threw them unceremoniously to the side. At first, everyone was too surprised to say anything. However, one man finally spoke up.

"Chickens?"

Isaac smiled at the absurd. There were several dozen chickens sitting in the wagon, ruffling their wings, their feathers fluttering in the air like some visible wind. They squawked like prisoners who had seen their first light in decades. A few of them jumped out of the wagon and began pecking at the ground around the wheels. Isaac said, "These chickens belong to somebody here in this very courtyard. What I want you to do is kill as many of these chickens as you can, using only your arrows. You have five minutes."

The men immediately protested as one. Almost all of them were farmers. The first question they were asking was important: were they my chickens? Next question: how did Isaac steal my chickens? Next question: what was he thinking, stealing my chickens? The few who weren't farmers – the tailor, the blacksmith, the apprentice – were quiet, asking themselves if they were willing to kill the chickens of one of their friends. You kill a farmer's livestock, you kill them.

Isaac was expecting the outcry. He shouted, "You men are afraid of killing chickens? Is it because a chicken is such a monster? Or is it because you're afraid of how you'll look in your fellow man's eyes? A battle is a struggle for survival, men, not a contest for respect. In battle you either have to let your pride fall or your body fall. You're jealous after your own honor, like any wealth. Honor is nothing but a fleeting opportunity to feel better about yourself. Can you feel better, though, if you're dead and already gone? This is a world of war – survival should be your honor. Life is God's gift to us – I'm sure he would feel insulted if each of us handed our gifts back to him. Your life is wonderful – the enemy's life is lead. And soon the lead is going to come down on all of you like a hammer. The King's men are against love and peace and freedom and equal standing amongst men. Which makes sense to them, since they see the world only through a corrupt King's eyes. Their reality is warped, men. They stopped being men the second they picked up a sword for the King. They are nothing more than evil now, and evil is always fated to be stomped out. With that said, I'll ask of you men once again: are you afraid of your reputation or are you afraid of nothing?"

Isaac went silent and so did the rest of the courtyard. Suddenly, there was the stretching sound of an arrow being pulled in a bow. A whistle, then a squawk of pain as an arrow pushed into a chicken's ribs. There was more stretching, then more whistles. The courtyard became filled with arrows in air. Isaac could see a few hesitate when they realized that the chickens they were killing may very well be their own. They still launched their arrows though – almost as if they were not expecting to survive the siege and come back home.

Isaac smiled at all of this, because he was witness to men shedding their fears. The battlefield was crowded with hate and blood as it was – there was no space to invite fear in.

The wooden storm came to a halt a minute or so later. The crackling thunder of pulled bowstrings ended. Not a single chicken in the pack stirred, wearing arrows like more feathers. Isaac turned to the men and smiled. All of them had pulled an arrow in that minute. All of them had joined in on the mad scheme they protested against just minutes before.

Isaac grinned, "Congratulations. You put your fears aside in the name of killing tonight's dinner. Just to let you know, those chickens actually belonged to me. Wait, let me take that back. Until late yesterday afternoon, the chickens belonged to a nobleman who lives in a manor just south of here. He had so many chickens to begin with, I'm sure he wouldn't notice a few gone. So rest easy, men – I didn't steal your livelihoods just to teach you a lesson. I'm here to teach you how to kill men, not yourselves. That's it for today's lesson. Tomorrow's will be just as interesting. Good day and God bless."

As the men dispersed, chattering amongst themselves about the unusual lesson, Peter was the only one in the crowd left. He had watched the whole spectacle, was impressed by the inspiration Isaac had at his command. Yet the young de Vere was still worried. Isaac was more than just unusual – there was a hint of desperate insanity about him. Peter had brought all of these men to the castle in the name of honor, and Isaac was upstaging him by saying that fair was foul and death was life. The Irishman was twisting into a bloodcurdling monster before his very eyes.

Peter wondered if he would ever have the misfortune of being in front of Isaac's bow one day. He shuddered and thought, I'll just have to keep an eye on him.

After all, a raging lion is only as powerful as the rope that kept it tied down.

Chapter 19

“Fair is foul, and foul is fair.” (Shakespeare)

Peter was afraid, which was why he was walking through the swamp at night. Alone, without a friend to laugh nervously with.

He was heading for Ida’s shack, wherever that was. There were so many questions to ask. Was Isaac of Connacht a good choice? Was his mother safe? Would his house fall?

He was afraid of so many things. And he was more afraid of the answers to his problems. Which was why he didn’t tell Milo he was leaving for the night. Milo was terrified enough by the old witch – hearing bad news might be too much for his quick heart. So Peter did the worrying for the both of them.

He gripped the hilt of his sheathed sword tight. The superstitious were afraid of the ghosts in the area. Peter worried more about the solid ghosts, like the highwaymen and the rogues.

He sighed relief when he saw Ida’s shack looming through the misty fogs. No matter how many times he went there, he was still disturbed. It was like the land wasn’t worldly. He muttered, It’s just as creepy now as it was before.

Peter was about to reach for the shack’s door when it swung open. A bright light flooded Peter’s eyes and spilled into the swamp behind him. Peter called out, “Ida! It’s me, Peter de Vere. I have questions I hope you can answer. I’d be in your debt.”

The light eclipsed. A silhouette was standing in front of it.

“Ah, young de Vere returned with questions posed. I accept your offer, answers I pose. Do come in, young Peter, the night breathes cold. In moments, your answers I will have told.”

Peter nodded and walked deep into the shack. Ida’s voice seemed so warm. Peter had a feeling that was the only part of her that was alive.

The bright light was the dozens of candles lining the shelves. It took a moment for his eyes to focus. Ida was standing in front of Peter. The witch looked as gorgeous as she always did, her raven hair fluttering in the wind. Peter wondered where the wind was coming from. He certainly didn’t feel it.

Ida gushed with her burgundy lips, “Please be quiet, Peter, for a minute.”

“I’ll be quiet as your arts you commit.”

Ida smiled wide. Peter never felt so terrified to have a beautiful woman smile at him.

Ida walked to her hearth. It was recent, the coals on it still glowing a stale orange. She stoked the fire with an iron rod. The flames started to come back to life. Thick wisps of smoke began to billow lazy up towards the roof. Peter could have sworn he saw little figurines running to and fro in the smoke, appearing and disappearing like the smoke they were. Ida was humming a chant in some language. Peter had no idea what she was saying. He heard that tongue before though. He could remember the Celts babbling the same when they traded goods with his late father.

Ida took a deep breath and suddenly went still. Her eyes rolled to the back of her head and she boomed in a dark voice:

“Winter soon approaches, my young Peter
You watch your beloved take to fever
And although wings again grace your sparrow
Release her not, else lose her to arrows.
A man from a land blessed with no serpents –
And laments his soul’s continued descent –
Offers services. It’s wise to trust him.
For he’s strong in heart, though weak in his mind
His arrows prove to be your best ally
As you trick and deceive as evil die.
However, your own good friend will feel death
When he tries to end the devil’s breath.
You...you will be committing the murder

And see the blade of executioner.
World will smile not on you in that moment
But your laugh at death, you would have sown it.”

Ida shuddered violent and fell sobbing. Startled, Peter rushed to help. Ida held up her hand and he stopped. Still crumpled on the floor, she said softly, “Never my dreams have garnered emotions. All I see are souls drowned in dry oceans. Death is a player in this horrid game. Many tears shed for the sake of his name. Goodbye Peter, and may your God bless you.”

“Goodbye to you, Ida, and I thank you.”

A few minutes later, Peter left the shack. He turned around for one last look and his jaw dropped. The cabin – a beacon of light just moments before – was extinguished. The front door was closed shut and there was a heavy padlock on the handle. There was moss growing on the lock.

As if the shack hadn’t been opened in years.

As Peter walked back through the swamp, he was trying to make sense of what Ida said.

He muttered, “Goddamn witches. Why do they have to be such a puzzle?”

He had a feeling, though, that he knew more about what the witch said than he admitted. It’s easier to dodge the truth if you say you don’t understand it. And nothing is more cryptic than black magic and spells and incantations.

Then there was the issue of lies. He didn’t believe Ida’s looks – she looked so beautiful but he had felt her hands before, the bony fingers with moss for arthritis. Who’s to say that her words were more truthful?

But she talked of the Sparrow. She had to have been telling the truth. How else could she know about Isabella?

“And although wings again grace your sparrow
Release her not, else lose her to arrows.”

Peter frowned at the thought. How could he release her if he hadn’t seen her in at least a year? Who’s to say that she would even come back for him? You have to have something to lose it.

And what to make of drawing blood from the English leader? And dying for it? Peter hated Humphrey with all his heart, but he doubted that he would be the one to draw blood. He didn’t have the courage to upend the kingdom. Better to let someone crazier take the sword.

And no one wants to hear about their own death. Peter closed his eyes hard, trying to squeeze the news out of him. He didn’t want it planned. He didn’t want Death telling him what to do. Frankly, he would have preferred the surprise.

Do I really need to die to end all of this? I suppose since it began with me, it might as well end with me.

Chapter 20

“To thine own self be true.” (Shakespeare)

Raven’s Crest

Three Months Later

Milo had recently come back from reconnaissance in London, and the news wasn’t encouraging.

Milo said with a sigh, “Their barracks are a flurry.”

“How bad is it?”

“Real bad. Rumors are going around that they’re breeding a huge army. And that it is going to flock here the moment it learns how to fly. And that’s not all.”

Peter groaned, “That’s good to know.”

Milo continued, “They’re putting together battering rams and catapults. They have been trying to keep it secret, but London is known for her loose lips.”

Peter had kept what Milo said in mind as he walked around the castle. He found that he was paying a lot more attention to all the little flaws in the castle. Every crack in the wall was a door to Humphrey’s catapults. He ordered the castle’s strengthening with a frenzy you would never see in repairwork. Peter did not bother telling his garrison of the mammoth army that was coming to storm the castle. After all, people do not like to know when they’re going to die. And Peter was not interested in his garrison breaking apart before the battle did the work for them.

Not to say he didn’t have faith in his men, of course – it was just that Peter didn’t have much faith in his faith.

Peter leaned against the castle wall, shivering from the cold as he watched a steely Isaac teach the cold-chatterly garrison how to hone their archery even further. Peter had to admit that, despite the Irishman’s psychosis, Isaac was a genius at archery. The men were learning to become naturals in less time than it took wheatfields to grow to harvest heights.

Milo was standing next to Peter, rubbing his hands together to stay warm in the January chill. He turned to Peter and said, “You know that Humphrey will send his army as soon as spring comes. If we aren’t ready by then...”

Peter scowled, “I know, I know. I was in the army once too, you know.”

“I know. I just like to be helpful.”

Peter looked over at Milo and sighed, “I’m sorry. I’m just...”

“Nervous?”

“Sure, why not.”

The friends watched the archery lesson in silence for a few minutes.

Still watching the lesson, Peter said in a clipped tone, “We’ll need food.”

Milo said, “Obviously. A siege lasts only as long as the food does.”

“We’ll start sending the men on raids.”

“Peter?”

“Hmmm?”

“You’re willing to raid your own people for food?”

“Just the ones who are against me. And they aren’t my people. I’m no king. Hopefully, we won’t have to worry about food. Hopefully we can break Humphrey’s back before that moment.”

Milo frowned, “That’s not like you.”

“Not like me to what?”

“To be naïve.”

Peter smiled thinly, “Let me a man dream for once.”

Milo shrugged. He thought to himself how he could never win an argument with Peter. It wasn’t for a lack of trying. Even when Peter didn’t win in a fight, he never lost. Because it takes saying you lost in order to lose.

A guard rushed up to the pair and said to Peter, “Milord, one of your servants has fallen deathly ill. We believe it was because of the cold of last night.”

“Which servant was it?”

“The one who goes by the name of Isaiah, milord.”

Eyes wide, Peter ordered, “I want you to go down to Lincoln immediately. Find someone, anyone who knows about the art of medicine. Bring them back and save Isaiah.”

“Yes, milord.”

Peter snapped, “Now! What are you waiting for?”

“Sorry, milord. Right away.”

The guard rushed away. Milo turned to Peter and asked, “Peter, why are you so worried? It’s just a servant.”

“Please, I don’t want to talk about it.”

Milo doesn’t understand. He doesn’t understand that if Isaiah dies, a part of me dies with him.

It was true, although Jacob couldn’t understand why. All he knew was that when he talked with Isaiah, the talks reminded him of someone else. And as much as it pained him, Peter hung onto the agony like rope on a cliff.

Isaiah was almost Isabella to Peter. Peter hadn’t seen Isabella in a forever. He would have sent for her since coming back to Lincoln, but news was she ran away from her father’s home. Peter thought, She was always the free spirit, always on the lookout for more trouble. The moment was never enough for her. Routine was not her virtue.

All Peter had left of her were memories. And memories were not to be trusted. So he used Isaiah instead. Isaiah, for better or worse, was his Isabella.

If only Peter knew the irony of thinking that.

Anna Snow shivered through her blanket as she walked through the castle. She was there because she was the most experienced physician in town – the doctor before her had ironically died of a simple fever. Although she was a midwife first, she wasn’t surprised when a soldier from Raven’s Crest had knocked on the door of her home, asking for help. The soldier explained things on the way up to the castle. How one of the servants had been foolish, sleeping through the cold night without a blanket or a fire going, how he was catching his death. Anna didn’t know how much she could do, but she had to try. She was, after all, a human being, and this was a cruel world. And she was getting paid well for this house visit, certainly. And her husband was one of the men in the garrison – she smiled at the thought of sneaking in a visit to him while she was there.

She was led into the servant’s room by the same guard who had summoned her at home. When they reached the room – a small and cramped room at that – Anna turned to the guard and said politely, “Thank you for leading me to this man. You may leave – hopefully when you come back, he will rise from his dying.”

The guard said gruffly, “Hopefully that’s the case. Otherwise, de Vere will probably kill me.”

The guard slid out of the room and Anna prepared for work. As she unpacked her things from her bag, she glanced at the room around her. None of the walls were decorated with paintings, the cold stone floor donned no hand-woven rug. The fireplace was thin of timber. It was all bare and uncomfortable. It seemed as if no one had lived there for years. As Anna looked down at her pale patient, that almost seemed true. Anna got a fire roaring in no time; she hoped the flames would rub heat back into the frozen servant’s joints.

Anna peeled back the blankets from the barely-breathing servant. As she got to work, though, she was immediately shocked. Anna almost fell backwards, grabbing onto the bed for support. Shakily, she stepped backwards out of the room, immediately bumping into something. She turned and saw it was Peter de Vere himself.

“Milord! I...”

“I was just checking on Isaiah, to see how he was...what’s wrong, Anna? Did you see a ghost?”

“I...I...”

“Calm yourself, Anna. What happened?”

Anna took a deep breath and said – albeit quivering, “Your servant is, um, in great pains from the cold. He will survive as long as he remains warm and gets rest. Also water – he needs water. Also, um...”

“Yes?”

“He’s a she, milord.”

“Wait, what?”

“He’s a she.”

Peter wasn’t sure what to make of this. He asked dumbfounded, “Are you sure?”

“Yes, milord, I am sure. Judging by her figure, either she is a lady or I am a man. Believe me, milord, I am trying to convince the doubt out of me as much as you are.”

Peter went quiet for a moment. He then nervously instructed, “I don’t want you telling anyone that Isaiah is a woman in disguise, do you understand? I am...I am sure the garrison doesn’t want to know that a woman has fooled us all with a simple disguise. As the wife of a man in this garrison, surely you’ll keep quiet? For your husband’s sake?”

“Certainly. Let’s just say I was never here to begin with.”

Relieved, Peter said, “Good. God bless you. Is he...I mean she awake? Did she say anything?”

“No, milord.”

“Thank you, Anna. If you don’t mind, can you stay here at the castle for the rest of the day? I may need your help further. You may visit your husband while you’re here.”

“I will do that, milord. Thank you.”

Anna left Peter to his thoughts. He turned towards the bedroom, his mind crowded with so many thoughts. He wasn’t sure what to make of all of this. Was this lady an agent of Humphrey’s, sent to spy on the castle? If that was the case, why did Humphrey – a proud, arrogant man – send a woman to assist with the siege? Or was this woman just an adventurer, looking for a stupid war which women were too smart for?

Peter felt fury bubbling deep in his stomach as he realized that – regardless of who it was – they had betrayed him, running his own sword through him. He thought he had someone to confide in, not understanding that you can’t pour truth into lies.

Peter walked into the room and heard the genuine, sonorous voice of the sick imposter. His heart stopped beating.

“Good morning, Peter.”

Peter forgot how to talk. When he did, he croaked, “Isabella? Is that really you?”

The love of his life was lying in the bed, sick and dying. Her disguise was unraveled and she looked the same as she always did, the same beautiful. He now realized why he was so drawn to the Isaiah of before, that the parallels between Isaiah and Isabella ran so deep. He just couldn’t believe he didn’t catch onto this trickery sooner. Isabella was clever, yes, but Peter had known her long enough to see through her mischief.

Despite her puffy eyes, Isabella still drew him in. He was always allured to her midnight eyes; Peter had used to joke that the only time he wasn’t afraid of the dark was when he was looking at them.

Isabella said slowly, “I’m surprised...”

She hacked harsh. She cleared her throat.

Isabella continued, “I’m surprised it took you this long...to figure out that...that it was me.”

Peter drew a chair from the far corner of the room. He sat down next to the bed and grasped Isabella by her weak hand. Peter’s heart broke as he saw how sick she really was. He tried to ignore it through conversation.

“Last I heard, you ran away from your father’s house.”

Isabella smiled faintly, “The same day I ran away...was the same day Isaiah walked into this castle.”

“So you ran away from your house to live in a castle? A castle that is going to be attacked soon? Why?”

“Love is stupid. But I need it as much as you need me.”

Peter laughed softly, “I suppose...Isabella?”

“Yes?”

“You know how much I care for you. That’s why you can’t stay here?”

Isabella asked defiantly, “Why not?”

“Because an army is coming here to kill every person in this castle. That’s why. As soon as you’re recovered – which you will be, so help me God – I want you to go back to your father’s house. You’re the last person I want hurt in all of this.”

As Peter was saying this, though, he was thinking, thinking of what Ida the witch told him before. He still remembered her prophetic chant, how the lines seemed to ring true now:

“Winter soon approaches, my young Peter
You watch your beloved take to fever
And although wings again grace your sparrow
Release her not, else lose her to arrows.”

Peter wondered if this was falling in line with Ida’s prophecy. Isabella’s fever. The looming threat of Isabella’s death. It all made sense though – after all, Isabella’s last name was Sparrow. Should he keep her at the castle then? If he let her go, would she die from being shot with arrows?

Nothing was making sense, but Peter knew better than to question Ida. She had never been wrong to him before. He mulled over his turmoil for a few moments before finally saying hesitantly, “You may stay here. I suppose it’s safer to stay within the castle walls than outside.”

Isabella asked perplexed, “Why do you say that?”

“Humphrey’s men might pillage the town for supplies. I don’t want you to be there when that happens. Mainly because I won’t be there to fight for you.”

Isabella smiled broadly. Peter forgot how to breathe for a moment.

She said, “Oh, my darling is such a knight. But I know a thing or two about fighting. I have gotten scratched up in a few fights before.”

“This is something completely different. I’ve seen what armies are capable of, and I would die if anything happened to you.”

Isabella squeezed his hand, “I’ll stay here with you. For you.”

“And I for you too.”

The things you do for the people you love, Peter thought.

Chapter 21

“Go to the edge of the cliff and jump off. Build your wings on the way down.” (Ray Bradbury)

On the Road to Lincoln

One Month Later

The night came with them.

The ground trembled in fear as they marched over it, grinding the stone to dust and the dirt to water in their wake. Not since the times of Darius’s massive army at Thermopylae has an army broken the earth and scared even nature back into the woods. Alexander the Great himself would have sputtered with a crying joy, seeing such a gorgeous sight – a song without any rests – march by him on the dirt road.

The little moonlight that found its way through the soupy clouds reflected off glinting armor and shields. There was an eerie creaking as whinnying horses carted massive, wheeled machines. The westerly wind that breathed through fluttered the standard at the front of the column. A roaring lion was painted on the standard’s fabric, held up by the royal crown drawn beneath it.

And so the column kept marching, its eyes on Raven’s Crest.

Peter was in deep discussion with one of his guards. Apparently, the guard found out from his brother in town that there was an abandoned farmhouse to the south of Lincoln. The owner was away on business to the west. Rumor had it that the man always kept a healthy stockpile of food on hand. Peter was reluctant to steal his way to victory, but he had reasoned that since he was already in deep enough trouble, a bit of pillaging couldn’t hurt. So he sent a few of his men off to the farmhouse, telling them that they could only come back if they had a wagon filled with food behind them.

As Peter watched the soldiers leave, a guard from atop the gatehouse called down, “Milord! There is a man running towards the castle, demanding entrance.”

Confused, Peter shouted, “What is his name?”

A pause, then the guard yelled, “It’s Tom O’Bedlam, milord!”

Peter groaned. Tom was a bottomfeeder in Lincoln’s hierarchy. Nobody knew where he came from, but everyone was interested in seeing him go. Dressed in rags and always speaking in slurs and halts, Tom was a grimy man to talk with. Perhaps the fact that no one talked with him was what propelled his talks with livestock. The only reason why Peter ever talked with him in the past was because, as a young child, he would stand alongside his father who would purposely strike up conversation with Tom in the town square. That was one of the many reasons why Albert de Vere was so beloved in town – he was willing to love what everyone hated.

Which was why Peter ignored his reluctance and asked, “What does Tom want?”

“He says there is a huge army coming this way, milord!”

When the guard said that, everyone in the castle heard and went quiet. The moment that had always seemed to be months away was suddenly barreling towards them.

Peter wanted to be a skeptic. He couldn’t allow himself to think that his battle was here. He was praying that what Tom said was just another one of his ramblings. Besides, the castle wasn’t ready, his men weren’t ready. They had spent months on something that takes years. It was no wonder that Peter was thinking frantic. So he desperately played the skeptic – he wanted proof.

Peter barked, “Have him enter the castle! I want to speak with him immediately.”

The guard obliged and lowered the drawbridge. Tom straggled and shuffled his way into the castle. Despite his fears, Pete couldn’t help but wrinkle his nose as the man approached. Peter could smell the crazy – and sewage – wafting off Tom. Peter hid his grimace well though and cut right to the chase, saying, Tom, don’t tell me that there’s an army approaching.

Tom squeaked, “Milord, it is true! I saw it with my own eye.”

He pointed at his one good eye for emphasis.

Peter commanded sharply, “Describe the army. As much detail.”

“Well, milord, I was walking from Lincoln to Tattershall to see if I could get a job in a pottery workshop there...”

“Tell me about the army, for crying out loud.”

“Well, the army was encamped near the road leading to Tattershall. They had archers, horsemen, spearmen, even a few of those... God, what are those called? You know, the wheeled contraptions?”

His heart sinking, Peter said, “Catapults?”

“Yes, that’s it. Catapults. They all bore the King’s standard.”

“Tell me, what did the standard look like?”

Say what you will about Tom, but he had an excellent memory. As the madman rattled off the details of the flags, Peter closed his eyes harder and harder. What Tom was describing were certainly the King’s flags. Very few people saw those flags and lived to describe them. Tom had just joined those ranks. Peter could only hope his men joined those ranks as well.

Yet he could still feel his ribs cave in, exhaling all the breath out of his lungs. The choice was now immediate: either to flee or to die. But Peter knew there was no choice. If there was one before, there certainly was not one now.

Peter thought for another moment before calling out to the garrison all around him, saying, “Men! I want one of you to find Milo Rowley, now! You!”

One of the men nearby asked, “Me?”

“Yes, you. Run to the abandoned manor south of Lincoln, tell our men there that they must hurry with those supplies. Everyone else, alert all the garrison in this castle! We haven’t got much time, men, so make the best of it!”

The soldiers took their orders in stride and evacuated the courtyard until Peter and Tom were the last ones standing.

Peter turn to Tom and said, “Thank you, good sir. You don’t understand how much you’ve helped us.”

Tom grinned his sunyellow smile and said, “Your father was a good man, boy. It’s the least I can do.”

Although Tom’s debt to Albert de Vere had been repaid, Peter still saw fit to compensate him for his troubles. When the grizzly madman left the castle, there was a distinctive clinking of gold coins in his pockets.

Peter felt his knees wobble. There was a nervous energy pounding just beneath his skin. He had been a capable, confident leader to now. Starting at that moment, though, was the real test.

After all, it’s hard to be the leader when all of your followers are dead from battle.

“So, what’s this I hear about Death knocking on the door?”

Peter – who had been eating his meal in silence in his room – looked up to see Milo standing in the door. Peter smiled for the first time that day. He said, “Milo, Milo, I need your help with something.”

“Uh oh, what is it now?”

“I need you to take twenty of the strongest men in this garrison and go to the main road.”

“And?”

“I need you to knock down as many trees as you can. We need that road blocked.”

Quizzical, Milo simply asked, “Why?”

“Because it’s hard for them to wheel their damn catapults through if there are trees on the road.”

Milo’s face brightened, “Ohhhh...that makes sense.”

“I talk so much, something I say is bound to make sense every once in awhile.”

“Is this the only reason why you’re friends with me? My bear strength?”

Peter laughed, “No, but it doesn’t hurt.”

“It will for Humphrey’s men.”

Milo left the room and Peter went back to his food. But it was just for a minute before there was another knock at the door. Peter looked up and saw Isabella...at least, to him it was Isabella. He was still asking her to keep up her disguise as being Isaiah in front of the garrison. Peter was afraid it would look bad if the men knew Isabella was there, especially since Peter ordered all the women and children out of the castle a week before.

Peter said, “Isabel – I mean, Isaiah.”

Isabella smiled, “Yes?”

“Have you heard the news?”

Isabella nodded.

Peter hesitated, then continued, “Is there anything you need outside of the castle, before it is too late?”

“No.”

“Are you sure? You don’t want to see your father?”

“Like I said, no. All I need is already here.”

Peter looked at her shrewdly and said, “Is there something you aren’t telling me?”

“Peter, Peter, Peter, you know how much of a rock my father is. Not only does he refuse to leave for the world, but he wants to squash the movement out of me as well. I can never forgive him for all those years he kept me cooped up in that house, but I can certainly forget him.”

Surprised, Peter said, “That’s the first time I ever seen you with malice in your eye.”

Isabella laughed mirthlessly, “A lot has changed since you’ve seen me last.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

Peter slowly ran his finger across Isabella’s cheek and said affectionately, “You’re still beautiful, though, when you’re angry.”

Isabella smiled lushly.

The moment was just that – a moment. He would have loved to stay inside the moment, but Death was coming for all of them. Peter cleared his throat and said, “You may want to return to your room, love. It’ll be the safest place in the castle when the battle starts.”

Isabella nodded and caught Peter off guard with a swift kiss on the cheek. She murmured, “Good luck.” She left the room, confident that there was a confused Peter in her wake.

Chapter 22

“This war, like the next war, is a war to end war.” (David Lloyd George)

A Day Later

Fear clawed at the ground before him.

Benedict Marshall, astride his mighty warhorse that seemed to snarl rather than neigh, went along, confident. Fearless. Almost delighted. He could see the castle far ahead. His armor glinted – he was the lightning.

Behind him was the thunder on the march. Three hundred pike men, their razor spears shining demonically in the late noon sunlight. They walked without exhaustion, amazing when you think they spent the last week rumbling across the English landscape. Behind the spearmen walked another three hundred mace men, their stout weapons nicknamed morning stars because of their spiked ball shape. They too walked the same as the pike men, without fear or tire.

There was also several dozen heavy cavalry striding along, the armored horses' hooves stirring the ground as if they were the Horses of the Apocalypse. The men on the horses were silent, reverent for the battle ahead, but their horses neighed noisily and thrashed their heads about. These horses wanted battle in the way that a normal horse wouldn't.

As if fear wasn't manifest, behind those columns were two hundred infamous English longbowmen, killers to the world. Everyone had whispered about one of those longbowmen, yet no one had ever seen one and survived to confirm the rumors. Even the most well-trained and well-armored soldiers fled when the archers took their stand and aimed their arrows at anyone's heart that was black enough. The only time they lost a battle was when they weren't actually on the battlefield to begin with. Each archer's quiver held fifty arrows – this meant that each archer would kill exactly fifty people. Give or take.

Behind the archers, two dozen engineers lounged atop a series of ox-pulled wagons. The beasts grunted, pulling ten wagons brimming with unassembled catapult parts. The engineers had sweated all through the winter – and it was a cold and bitter one in London that year – to build the catapults. They ignored – or at least tried to ignore – the fact that the catapults would hail death on their own countrymen.

Benedict closed his eyes and breathed in the countryside. We're so close. He had been anticipating the battle heat for a few months now; to feel the carnage so close excited the soldier in him. True, he had a civilized shell, but that was all it was: a shell. He a soldier first, and he knew he would be a soldier last as well.

And more important than the battle, Benedict was curious about his enemy. The young de Vere's exploits since coming back from the Crusades were foolish. Admirable. But still stupid. The nobleman had fought crowds of men, murdered a sheriff, stole from the King's armory, stormed a castle belonging to the King himself. Peter had courage, yes; but he was a hero for the peasants. That was intolerable.

Finally, the army curved the corner and prepared to head down the final stretch of road leading them to Raven's Crest. When Benedict saw the scene before him, he suddenly stopped his horse and gaped his mouth, stunned. The entire road before them was littered with fallen trees.

Benedict muttered to himself, “My God, why would they cut down all of the trees?”

The men behind him were wondering the same. One of them dared to ask their general, “What's the point of this, General?”

Benedict, still looking ahead, muttered, “I don't know. It won't stop us; we can simply walk over the trees...”

Suddenly, Benedict stopped talking. His eyes widened and he swore ferociously.

Benedict realized why they cut down all of the trees. While the men could simply step over the fallen trees, the wagons couldn't. The wagons carrying all of the catapult parts. It would take a good long while to move the trees to the side and bring the catapults within range of the castle. Peter had just bought himself a lot of time. It was simple, brilliant, and Benedict hated Peter for it.

Benedict ordered his spearmen and mace men to put aside their weapons and supplies for the moment. Instead of charging into battle, they were to begin immediately clearing the road of the trees. The soldiers grumbled as they set to their back-breaking work (it is easier to cut a man down than it is a tree). Marshall – along with his archers and horsemen – plunged deeper towards the castle.

As Benedict got closer, though, an uneasy snaked through him. He was thinking unpleasant thoughts. When Peter blocked the road with trees, did he do it out of cunning or desperation? And, really, did it matter? All Benedict knew was that his enemy was getting smarter by the second. As smart as Peter was getting, though, he was doing nothing but making Benedict angrier.

And that thought, more than anything else, made Benedict indignant. His foe had actually underestimated him. He was Captain General Benedict Marshall, one of the greatest military minds to slash and spray blood across English history. He had defeated rebels in Wales, Ireland, Scotland, and so on and so forth. He was the general's general, able to lean battles in his favor simply by being there. Truth wasn't arrogance. He had no time for building ego.

Like hell was he going to run with his tail between his legs. All because of a couple trees felled across the road. The idea was laughable. But it was still insulting to the General.

I will open your throat with the blade of my sword yet, Peter.

“Peter de Vere! Reveal yourself now!”

Benedict's voice lunged out of the thicket, piercing the castle's walls.

The General had made it a point for every battle to show up unaccompanied at first. You know, to discuss the terms of battle and such. He was very concerned about showing his good will and faith. He had an image to hold up, after all. Besides, he always had the hope of winning the battle before it even began.

Benedict had just enough faith in the enemy not hurting him during the negotiations. Still, he was clad in fine Germanic armor – the strongest of blades would brittle and shatter if they ever glanced off the strong iron. The armor was rather heavy and unwieldy – and Marshall nearly sweated to death every time he wore it – he found it was perfect for these little moments.

A voice launched down from the castle wall, saying, “Hello there! I'm Peter de Vere, leader of this fine group of rebels. We're sorry you came all this way when we have nothing to give you. You can tell your King that he has enough homes as it is. Let us have this one.”

Benedict could hear men cheering on the other side of the castle's walls. The General gritted his teeth – he did not come here to be mocked. He came here to be begged to. Still, the General called out good-naturedly, “Young de Vere, I am Captain General Benedict Marshall, trusted general to King Humphrey of England himself. I have been sent here to seize this castle back from you. You have no right to that which the King owns. Your foolishness will cost you and your men dearly.”

Peter laughed loudly and asked, “Are you here to demand our surrender? Before the battle even begins?”

Benedict hesitated and said, “Yes, yes I am. And you would be wise to take the offer. Your garrison will leave here alive, just with heavy fines for their treason. As for your stupid stand against the King, you will jailed for a time King Humphrey will determine. All of this, I add, is more than reasonable. Let the world know that King Humphrey is still a reasonable man even when he doesn't need to be! Take his pardon.”

“What if we don't accept?”

Benedict paused and then called out darkly, “Then I will kill every soul in that castle and level this house of madness to the ground. King Humphrey does not tolerate insults – and neither do I!”

Without hesitation, Peter said, “We have decided – we will rather fight!”

Benedict cried out, “Preposterous! Do you want Death to graze your throats with his scythe? Why not think this over and accept this generous bargain laid out before you?”

“Because, Marshall...”

“General Marshall.”

“My apologies... Marshall. See, we've already decided because I know you've already decided on how to deal with us. We leave this castle, and your archers will pump us full of arrows. You can only set an example through our deaths. If we're going to die, we're going to die for ourselves and not for you or your King.”

He's stubborn – but impressive, Benedict thought. It was rare to find courage and bravery amongst men. Shame there is such a fine line between bravery and stupidity. Benedict was about to write off the negotiations

and turn back to his army when he thought of something. He asked, "What made you think that a bunch of fallen trees would stop me from bringing my catapults any closer, young de Vere?"

Peter laughed, "If you think your men could just haul the trees to the side, think again. Those trees are thick and heavy as sin in summer. I would be amazed if your entire army with all the arms could haul away even one tree."

Benedict scoffed, but he could feel fear nagging at him. What if the fool was right? Still, Benedict said indignantly, "How dare you think that a few trees could stop the greatest army to shake England's earth to dust since Caesar's legions themselves? The only thing that can stop this army is myself."

"What about your King Humphrey?"

"Him too. Your castle's walls may be mortared with a desperate denial, but even that can crack under enough weight. I will break you yet."

Peter said amusedly, "I wouldn't expect anything less from you, Marshall. Perhaps when we meet on the battlefield, you'll give me the credit that I'm obligated to."

"Perhaps."

Benedict tried his best to calm his flaring tempers. He could already see the weakness in Peter, even from so far away. Benedict had brought down great rebels and generals before. He had seen the same blind trust in them that he was seeing in Peter now. The boy had nothing but luck, and not even kings and queens are rich with that. It was only a matter of time before either Peter crumbled or the castle did.

Still, Benedict was unnerved, seeing Peter sitting so comfortably atop the wall. It was almost as if Peter wasn't human, but a mirror to the general himself. He couldn't help but wonder if he would have to kill himself in order to kill the young de Vere.

Benedict didn't know it, but as he was turning to leave, Peter was wondering the same things.

Everyone does share the same genius after all.

Chapter 23

“I want my food dead. Not sick, not dying, dead.” (Oscar Wilde)

Forest around Lincoln

Lieutenant General Richard Norton hadn't been this thrilled since he was a little boy.

The greasy weasel of a man had been put in charge by Benedict of searching the countryside around the castle for food and other supplies. After all, they had hundreds of men under their command and starvation would defeat them long before Peter de Vere's garrison ever did.

Perhaps we should explain this man who was stealing food from his countrymen for the sake of his country. Norton was the son of a pardoner – this is still a poor excuse for being parasitic, but it is still an excuse. Norton spent his childhood traveling with his father through the villages of their native Wales. He had seen his father trick money out of humble Catholics for the sake of a quick salvation. Just think, you can go straight to Heaven all for this cheap indulgence. The indulgences bore the generic Biblical images and were supposedly commissioned by the Church itself for sale. The people were used to giving the Church money through tithes, so they weren't suspicious about these trinkets. Not at all. And even if they were doubtful about the slimy man selling them these indulgences out of a wagon, they were too terrified to question their salvation. Norton had watched his father make money off fear for so long that he couldn't think of any other way to live. His life was all there was, and he simply traded other peoples' lives at the market as if they were cheese.

Unfortunately for Norton, he wasn't as blessed at conniving as his father was. Each time Norton spoke, he could see everyone in earshot flinching slightly. If grease could make a sound, it would be Norton's voice. So he took to joining the army – he understood that you didn't have to be a public speaker to kill. Norton happened to join during a rare moment in history, though, when there wasn't an immediate war and the soldiers lounged around. So Norton decided to make things convenient and confuse his friends with his foes. He rose quickly through the ranks, his superiors suffering a series of unfortunate events. It took less than two decades for him to reach the second-in-command. He would have gotten even further, but Benedict – smelling the vice in Norton – was too wary and wise to fall to Norton's plots. So the two became dogs, circling each other, waiting years for the chance to bite at the other's throat.

All of this explained why as Norton watched his troops pillage the countryside, he felt a familiar tremble in his soul. The tremble made its way up and twitched into his lips as a smile. He had burned English villages before in the name of food, and he would gladly do it again. It was getting to the point where the England he swore to protect began to hate him. The ungrateful little bastards. He didn't know it, but while the noblemen played their part and were courteous to Norton, they insulted him behind his back. Norton was known in many circles as The Flea and The Weasel. Perhaps that was why he would always be chosen to lead raids – he had no reputation left to salvage.

For the task at hand, Norton was in command of twenty archers and fifteen or so pike men, all of them sober and stoic. They had been searching for well over an hour without much luck – and food. The forest had been stripped bare. It was apparent that the rebels had been through the area and scavenged as much as they could before the battle.

Norton swore to himself and muttered, “Benedict is such a fool, thinking we could find food out here.”

As they marched deeper into the forest, however, the trees and rampant vegetation suddenly gave way to a clearing. In the middle of the clearing was a huge manor, looking recent and shining. It was built of the finest wood. Norton suddenly realized why there was a sudden clearing in the middle of the forest. The Weasel smiled devilishly to himself, imagining how much food could be hidden away in such a gigantic home. He motioned for his men to follow him towards the front door. He could see smoke billowing from the chimney the closer they got.

Norton obnoxiously banged his fist against the door. He knocked for a good minute until he finally heard loud footsteps from just beyond the door. Someone called out, annoyed, “Okay, okay! I heard you the first time.”

The door swung open. Norton looked up to see a giant brute looming over him. Norton's first thought was if this man built the house with his own bare hands.

The bear growled through his thick and knotted beard, “What do you want from me?”

Norton felt uncomfortable from tilting his head so far up. He asked, “What is your name?”

“Jon Sparrow. Who are you? Why are you bothering me?”

“I am Lieutenant General Richard Norton, second-in-command of the grand English army that is laying siege to Raven’s Crest. I assume you have food here we can use?”

Sparrow snorted, “Nonsense! You’re getting nowhere near my food – without paying a mountain for it.”

Norton shrugged as he motioned his men closer, “Suit yourself. But since you need to disagree with me, I have no choice but to...”

Sparrow roared and lunged at Norton. Both men fell to the ground as Sparrow punched Norton’s wiry face apart. Blood was spraying fountains everywhere. Norton screamed through his mangled mouth, Seize him!

The soldiers rushed forward and grabbed Sparrow off of Norton. The general feebly got up, his body shaking, and he said through bloody lips, “As I was saying, you vermin, I have no choice but to take your food. And since you dare attack the grand English army, we must make an example of you. After all...”

Norton paused to spit out blood. He could see a tooth lying in the grass. He swore.

He continued, “After all, that is why we are here. To make examples of you rebellious souls. Is there anyone else in the house?”

“No one.”

“Is that so?”

Sparrow rumbled, “I had a daughter, but she ran away a long time ago. And my servant is away, recovering from her sickness.”

Norton shrugged, “All the better for them. I would have killed them if they were here. They were rats smelling the water flooding into the ship, I dare say. Men...?”

Norton ran his finger across his throat in an unmistakable gesture. His soldiers held down Sparrow and held a fierce dagger to his throat. At the last moment, though, Sparrow yelled out, “I have information you may need!”

Norton said, amused, “Is that so?”

“Yes. There is an old lady. She lives in the swamps around here. She’s versed in the art of black magic and prophecy. She can help you and your men.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

Sparrow sputtered, “I wanted that damn castle! When I heard the old baron died, I wanted to buy it from his wife. But his son had to step in and ruin matters. If I can’t have the castle, he can’t either.”

Norton smiled, “Thank you for the information. Now men, what are you waiting for?”

Norton made the gesture across his throat again. Sparrow tried to protest, but it was too late – the soldier was already running his blade across the throat. The brutish man died a horrible death, his life falling out of him and drenching the ground under.

Norton sighed and wiped the blood from his mouth. He turned to his soldiers and snapped, “As soon as we get the food from his house, we’re paying this witch a visit. Also, burn this place to the ground. Make it quick.”

When Norton found the witch, however, he found a frail woman who was more stubborn than that Sparrow gentleman proved to be.

“What do you mean, you refuse to help me?”

Ida frowned, “I mean I refuse. I can’t speak to you.”

They were standing outside of Ida’s shack in the swamps. Ida had been washing clothes in a water barrel when the men approached. Norton had to admit that he wasn’t expecting to find an actual witch out in the swamps. He half-thought that Sparrow said that as some bargaining chip for his life. Yet still, the curiosity won out over the doubt and here Norton was, standing just feet from the first witch he ever met. And he found it curious that the witch looked reminiscent of his own mother, with her silvery hair and high cheekbones. Norton also had the naïve hope that the witch would be as kind as his mother was. Not so much.

Norton insisted, "I will pay you whatever price you want. Just tell me how to kill Peter de Vere and bring his castle down."

"Young Peter is a great man, my dear sir. Me betraying him will break my word. Why should I hurt him if he had helped me? To put gold over him is selfish to me."

"Listen, you fool! I can kill you right now, you know that? I have killed stronger men before and I am not above destroying a woman."

Ida scoffed, her long hair bristling. She laughed bitterly:

"You cannot kill what is already dead.
You cannot cut what has already bled.
You can't say words that are already said.
You can't feed a mouth that's already fed.
Listen, General, your words are mere waste.
Peter is my friend; trust stays in its place.
You try to kill me, but you won't succeed.
But these words of warning, you must take heed.
At end of battle, one stands and one falls.
One who stands will be whispered of in halls."

"Silence, you fool! I am tired of your puzzles! The only thing you're good for as a witch is wasting my time. I ought to destroy you and burn your godforsaken shack, do you hear me?"

The haughty smile vanished from Ida's face. She growled, "What is this you say, you doubt my talents? For your idiocy, I deal malice. Before I do, though, please this let me ask: why'd you kill your father many years past? I do look like that whom you desire. So if you come to see me not as your mother, then you are a liar."

Ida ended her revelation and slid back into the shack, leaving behind a shocked Norton. Legs trembling, the general turned and walked back to his soldiers, who were standing back a little distance. They were the superstitious kind.

"What do you want us to do, General?"

Norton mumbled.

"What's that, sir?"

"Burn it. Burn it down, now."

The soldiers obliged and took their lit torches towards the shack. They ran the flames over the walls, thinking that surely the kindle walls would burn at the touch. But the shack was stubborn and refused to catch fire. Norton grazed his fingers against the wood. It was soaking wet, but there hadn't been a drop of rain since they got into the area. Norton, feeling terror well up inside him, shouted, "I want you to try harder! I want this shack to be no more!"

Fearful of the general's wrath, the soldiers indeed tried harder when they suddenly heard a clap of thunder. They looked up just in time to see a bolt of lightning arch across the sky, ripping the dusk apart. The heavens opened up and a sheet of icy rain came tumbling down, immediately drenching the men and dousing the flames on their torches.

Terrified by the witch and her talents, the soldiers turned and fled through the swamp. Norton was tempted to rally his men, but he did not want to be there any longer either. So he ran with them. As they made their way through the swamp, Norton thought that he could hear a cackling, crazed laugh over the rumbling thunder.

Chapter 24

“Study the past if you would divine the future.” (Confucius)

Next Day

As Benedict ordered his army to fan out around the castle – in hopes of cutting off any access the garrison had with the outside world – he was growing worried. Not for what he faced inside of the castle, but outside of it. He was not fond of his lieutenant general, but he was terrified of Norton’s absence. The damned fool should have been back by now with his men and food. And the forest felt uncomfortable, crawling almost. He could not afford to lose anyone or anything he had to mystery. And there was something certainly mysterious about this town, and the realist buried in Benedict could not understand it.

That is why as Benedict looked down the lonely road and saw Norton stumbling over the fallen trees with his tiny regiment of soldiers, the general felt rushed with relief. Even from a distance, though, he could see that Norton had a paler face than normal and that his greasy hair was even messier.

Benedict called out, “So I assume you found some food out and about?”

Norton nodded solemnly and point to his men, who were lugging bags of grain, vegetables, and meat towards camp. Norton continued past Benedict without saying a word.

Curious, Benedict turned to one of the soldiers who had accompanied Norton and asked, “Why is Norton acting the way he is?”

“Sir, you would not believe us if we told you the truth.”

“We’ll see.”

“Well, sir...we came across the strangest sight in the forest not too long ago.”

It was with that that the soldier slid into the odd story about Ida the witch. When the soldier finished, he stood at attention, a nervous, silent attention.

Benedict questioned further, “Did you hear what Norton and the hag talked about?”

“No sir, we couldn’t hear a word of the talk. Whatever she told Lieutenant General Norton though, it must have been quite a shock.”

Curious as to what the witch said that humbled the arrogant Norton, Marshall frowned and sent the soldier on his way. If the general had time to ask away the mystery of it all, he would. But he had a siege that he had to win at the moment. So he swatted the puzzle away.

Night had arrived without much incident.

The battlefield had been quiet since they got there. Benedict had ordered his army not to launch the first wave of attack until the next day. He still had a little, tiny hope that the garrison’s arrogance would give way under its own weight as they realized the futility of the struggle. Benedict was not eager to wash his hands with blood. There was a compassion to the general, yes. But he also realized in his career that you can win much more reputation with the battles you didn’t have to fight, more than the battles you did fight.

There had been a brief thunderstorm earlier in the afternoon, the rain just enough to cool Lincoln’s hot, beating heart. The humidity was gone and now the English countryside was shivering through the night with a chill. Benedict’s army was huddled around their campfires for warmth (and also to be able to keep an eye on the castle through the night). The crackling fires warmed their noses, but their backs froze and cracked. Still, the soldiers chattered and laughed amongst themselves as they ate their fill of bread and soup. Talking of family back home, how the weather was ruining the crops they couldn’t tend to, how they wished the siege would end sooner than they hoped.

Talk around the campfire always ended with thoughts of home.

The wind was beginning to pick up speed, though, drowning out their small talk. The greening leaves of spring rustled noisily in the breeze. The trees were all in a sway, the wooden brutes having only their roots for anchors in the rolling green seas of land. The wind built up to a roar and the huddled men wondered for a second if they were in the mouth of the lion, although none of them had ever seen a lion before.

The wind suddenly died, though. The campfires were silent, listening. There were now echoing whispers that bounced about the forest bark. The whispers were just that, the mumbles all sounding the same.

The men were becoming nervous, inching closer to the fire although they were twitching from the close heat. The whispers were mocking them, laughing at how an army couldn't shake off something as airy as a mutter. All the soldiers could do was shake and shiver, both from the cold and from the terror.

The forest chatter slipped away just like the wind did. All was quiet as death in the woods.

The men tried to get back into their earlier talk and there were sounds of nervous laughter coming from the English encampment. However, their faith in England as their home, the place where they knew all the nooks and crannies, was stuttered, even if it was just for a moment in time.

Benedict – who had been inside his tent at the time but had heard witness to the whole event – did not know what to make of it. All he could do was shrug it off along with all the other strange things that have happened in his life. He had no understanding for divining omens. Still, while it wasn't his place to make sorcery, it was his place as a man to be curious. So he shouted out, "Richard! Come out of that tent. I need to ask you something."

Norton – who had the tent next to Benedict's – popped his head in and asked, "What do you want?"

Benedict queried, "What do you make of what just happened? Do you think that witch you spoke with earlier today had anything to do with it?"

Norton's eyes widened. He said hurriedly, "I don't know what you're talking about, Benedict. I didn't cross paths with a witch today."

Benedict spat, "Quit your lies. I know the truth. One of your soldiers told me you found a witch while looking for supplies. He told me that was what spooked you like a horse earlier. What did she tell you? I'm interested."

"None of your business."

"Yes, yes it is my business. If you anger a goddamned witch, she may curse our battle out of our hands. Your conversation with her means everything in the world. At least tonight it does."

Norton was silent for a moment before saying bravely, "I cannot – in any good conscience – say what."

Benedict was even more curious. He didn't think that Norton had a good conscience to begin with. Still, he frowned and waved Norton away. He had dealt with the weasely man enough for one day.

As Norton left the tent, a beautiful falcon floated in the sky above them.

Norton tossed and turned as he slept through the night. His mind was a hollow earth, and all of his evils were gushing out through the cracks. What Ida had told Norton earlier seemed to trigger the wave of despair that was unrelenting on his drowsy mind. His dreams that night weren't nightmares, but hell.

It belonged to a time when he wasn't Richard Norton, Lieutenant General to the English Army, one of the most powerful men in the entire kingdom. He was Richard Norton, a spindly man who was only walking for eighteen years now. He was sitting in his room, listening to his father roar at his mother in the next room. Talk of how she kept other lovers while he was away for his trade. She denied it. He said that good neighbors have good ears though. The commotion tumbled into the main room. Father was snarling, pulling his wife by the hair towards the fireplace. His sheathed sword was laying on the ledge above. Father never reached it. He dropped his wife suddenly. He moaned in the agonies and tried to clutch at the gaping wound in his back. But it was in an awkward spot where no one's hands could reach. Richard was standing there, his face curdled in rage, as he held a large hunting knife in his hand. Blood was drip-dropping from the blade. His father collapsed under a wave of stabbings, as Richard crunched the blade into his ribs again and again and again. Blood soaked deep into the floor and Richard's face.

Richard finally tired, dropping the hunting knife and sitting down hard on the crimson floor. He stared vacantly at his mother, who was huddled in the far corner, terrified of the murder. Richard struggled to get up, struggled to walk across the floor on his weak knees towards his mother. But she breathed, "Don't you dare come any closer, Richard. Don't you dare!"

Richard stared at her, surprise written in his whitepage eyes. His face drenched in tears, he pled, "Please, love me, mother. Love the son who killed a man to save you."

"No, no. I can love no son who would kill his father. Do you hear me? Do you hear me? Leave me now, Richard. Leave this home that you have ruined!"

Richard's mouth dropped. He looked down slowly at the knife on the floor and back at his mother. He did this for a long moment before turning and left the house. As soon as he cleared the cottage door, he broke into a run, lunging across the fields coming alive in the wind, his tears streaming down his face like baptismal waters. He was becoming reborn, eighteen years after the first try.

Richard came to with a start. His face was drenched in a dewy sweat. He looked around wildly, wondering if the nightmare woke up with him. But he was all alone in the tent. He collapsed back into his thin blanket. He wanted to scream out his troubles, but it wasn't worth waking the army and causing even more trouble. Instead, Richard – his eyes squeezed shut – took to cursing the horrible witch. The witch who dredged up his past and was rubbing his nose against the grindstone of it.

Chapter 25

“Action expresses priorities.” (Gandhi)

Next Morning

Blood was meant to spill on that miserable March morning.

Benedict had his forces all laid all like chess. The soldiers were surrounding the castle in a wolfish fashion, ready for what they hoped was the end of Peter de Vere. Benedict had ideas for the first wave, having his archers move up from the forest edge towards the meadow straddling the castle. Their orders were to unleash several volleys of arrows in hopes of distracting the enemy garrison. Meanwhile, the spearmen and mace men would launch an all-out assault on the castle. He had the ladders ready, the far-reaching kind that Jacob could only have dreamt of centuries before.

Benedict could have saved his men the trouble by crushing the castle with his catapults. But the catapults were still a good distance down the road, the tree trunks still in their way to the battle. Benedict could have waited until the road was cleared. But every day he waited was a day he wasted. More time for his men to run out of food. More time for his men to become sick and die. More time for the locals to rally to Peter’s cause and ambush the English camps.

No matter, though. All is not lost. We can still salvage a victory out of Peter’s distractions. Nothing can stop our might. Nothing.

A slight arrogance was creeping into his mind as Benedict ordered the first assault. However, he was not counting on Peter thinking – not one step ahead – but the same exact steps as he.

Peter was expecting a bloodrain sometime soon. He had posted several of his men along the castle wall throughout the night, their eyes on any possible troop movement. When they hurried to him that morning to report seeing soldiers assemble in the forest’s shadow, Peter knew that the time had come.

As his garrison hurried to their positions, Peter shouted, “Okay, men! Look lively! This is what all those months of preparing were for! They’re going to hit us with everything they have!”

If Peter was confident in his garrison before, he had an utter faith in them now. They snapped to their spots around the castle, ready to defend everything the castle stood for until their last drop of breath. They held their bows and quivers of arrows as if they were the men’s own children. Their swords were securely sheathed to their sides. The men assembled on the wall were forewarned of a possible barrage of arrows, so they hid behind the crenellation that lined the curtain wall, the decorative stone patterns being their only guard against the arrow tips. The crenellation was a godsend – the gaps in the decorations being just wide enough for the garrison to squeeze their bows and arrows through. No wonder when the castle was built so many years before, Peter’s father needed a license from the king to build the crenellation.

The garrison did not have long to take their positions, either. The sunlight immediately flickered out like a candle on the last bit of wick. Peter was hoping for an eclipse, some sort of omen against Benedict’s men. But it was nothing of the sort. He looked up to see a massive flight of arrows floating almost serenely in the air. Later on, Peter would ask himself why he never felt the urge to dive for cover. It may have been because he had never seen death look so beautiful before. Time crunched to a halt as the hundreds of arrows laid suspended in the sky like drops of water from a gulf splash. As time began to yawn and stretch its arms, the arrows began to fall back down to earth. Gravity was going to try and kill them all that day.

Peter roared, “Take cover!”

Luckily, his men had already heard the arrow whistle and took his advice before he even said it. The men along the wall pressed themselves against it for protection. Those caught out in the open in the courtyard were already scurrying for a solid roof. Not even a few seconds afterward, the sky fell down in slivers of wood as arrowheads buried into the ground like gophers. Peter closed his eyes hard, praying that when he opened them, he wouldn’t see any of his men run through with an arrow. He was expecting with a sigh for some of his men to die under his cause, but he didn’t want it to be so soon.

So when he heard moans of pain, he couldn’t help but shudder. Still he opened his eyes, reluctant, and glanced around the courtyard, expecting to see the dead. He could see some of his men clutching at their arms

and legs, grunting as they pulled arrows out of their limbs, but no one was dead. Or even mortally wounded. As far as Peter could tell, that moment had been a miracle to his men.

The handful injured limped back to their positions. They would have to look forward to after the battle to get their wounds dressed. Peter ran up the stairs along the wall and glanced over the side of the castle. He could see silhouettes ghosting about in the forest. Peter was wondering what Benedict meant by that volley. The general wouldn't waste a barrage of arrows for nothing, unless...

Peter's eyes widened as he looked wildly around, hoping to find Milo or Isaac amongst the drumbeats for battle. He could see Isaac a ways off, sitting lazily atop the wall near the gatehouse. He seemed oblivious to all of the arrows that were flocking past him just moments before. Peter sprinted along the wall, yelling at Isaac, "The volley of arrows is just a ruse!"

Isaac turned and with a frown asked, "What?"

"It's a ruse! The arrows were a ruse! They're going to storm the castle!"

The seconds after proved Peter right in ways he was afraid. He could hear bowstrings being pulled in the forest. He could also hear a loud and rousing battle cry that rippled the grass.

Peter roared, "Get down!"

Again the arrows came. This time, though, the garrison was better-prepared. The courtyard behind them, though, was beginning to look like a waving field of arrows. At the same second, hundreds of men poured out of the woods, running towards the castle.

Peter ordered over the din of battle, "Prepare to aim..."

Isaac, his eyes bulging, screamed, "Don't shoot! Don't shoot! Our arrows are useless against them!"

The Irishman pointed frantically at the charging army and Peter understood what Isaac meant. Each every in the advancing formation carried a pavise – or tall shield – in hand. Arrows were useless against it. Usually, the pavise was a distinction solely for archers whenever they reloaded in battle. It was obvious, though, that Benedict was willing to think from the outside and make sure all of his men were guarded in the charge.

Peter and the others could only watch with panic as the army surged forth. Peter could see glimpses of long ladders in the crowd. He watched his deep moat become useless as the soldiers laid the ladders down as makeshift bridges across the dirty water. Then they began climbing up, the soldiers making sure to keep their shields above their heads in case the garrison lobbed arrows down upon their heads. Peter found himself at a loss for words in the first time in his life. After months of planning, he was about to be defeated less than ten minutes into battle. The brilliant Benedict had managed to outwit and embarrass every man in Raven's Crest.

Peter's shame gave to despair and his despair gave to a cold fury. He wasn't going to let Benedict carry the day so easily. He was going to make the general pay for every step his men climbed up on the ladders.

Peter screamed, "Push the ladders off the wall! Push the ladders off!"

The garrison tried their damndest, but they couldn't. The weight of the English soldiers on each ladder was just too much, the angle at which the ladders were propped up just shallow enough.

Peter commanded, "Get your swords ready, men! Be prepared to repel them!"

All along the wall, the soldiers nodded and unsheathed their swords, wanting to be ready. Even in the battle heat, Peter almost cried in pride at seeing his men standing with him until the end.

But it can't be the end. The beginning cannot be the end.

"What should we do, Peter?"

The shout shattered Peter's thoughts. He turned and saw Milo standing before him, looking too steady.

Peter yelled over the shouts of the rushing battle, "I have an idea!"

"I sure hope you would."

Peter begged, "I need fire!"

"Fire?"

"Yes! Torches, candles, anything lit! Hurry!"

Milo grabbed two of the nearest soldiers and roared, "Help me find torches!"

The men – startled by the bear shouting orders at them – ran down the steps with Milo towards the castle.

Peter heard cries along the wall's edge and knew that the enemy troops had scaled up, that the melee was flooding all around him. The English soldiers were tossing aside their bulky shields, hoping that their

more-agile armor would hold. It didn't take long for them to regret tossing their shields down the ladders, though. They were met by hell itself as the rebels clanged sword against sword along the parapet walk. The English soldiers were scrawny men, strong only as the iron armor they wore. Peter's men were blacksmiths and wore armor made of the finest muscle. The fight was even.

The rebels were busy, too busy to see the other English soldiers climbing the ladders still. Peter – his eyes wide – could see more scampering over the top of the wall. The damn army was overrunning his castle the way birds overrun cornfields.

Damn it. Damn it all.

Peter breathed hard and shook the feeling of general off him. He was meant to lead, but he was more meant to fight. He rushed and dodged between the fights and tackled an English soldier who was about to bring his mace down on a rebel's head. Both crunched to the unforgiving stone. The Englishman was monstrous, growling as he tossed Peter to the side like a letter of bad news. Peter hit the crenellation hard, the shock jolting through his body.

In the pain, Peter forgot that he was human. Full of a pure hatred, he lashed out with his arms, grabbing the surprised Englishman by the ankles. Peter pulled with all his might, catching the soldier off guard as he fell backward, landing with his head just inches from the edge. Peter reversed his motions and pushed with a wheeze. The English brute was an overturned turtle, too awkward to get up with all of his armor on. The armor was even more of a problem by how well it slid across the stone, like water against water almost. It all happened so quick that the soldier never had time to cry out, his body disappearing over the edge. Peter had no time to look over, but knew that the man was dead, his spine mangled from the long fall into the courtyard.

Peter turned and saw a soldier lifting his sword high above his head, preparing for the swing. Peter was ready, but his men were ready quicker. Several of the rebels leapt on the Englishman, dragging him down to the stone while pummeling him with their weapons.

Milo appeared at the top of the stairs. Through the battle along the parapet walk, he shouted, "I have the torches!"

Peter could Milo and the other couple rebels awkwardly holding onto a whole bushel of lit torches, the flames licking at their chins. Peter pointed over the side of the wall and yelled, "Drop the torches around the ladders!"

Shocked, Milo asked, "Why? You want to catch the castle on fire while you're at it?"

Peter screamed, "Just do it!"

Milo knew better than to argue with a ferocious Peter. He hurried his fellow rebels along as they made their way through the battle. When they reached the crenellation, they unceremoniously dumped the torches over the side. Peter was hoping that the tall, swaying grass around the moat would play along. He could still remember all the times as a child when he saw the servants carry the moatgrass in, using it as a sharp start for the cooking fires. He prayed that the thunderstorms the day before hadn't wetted their lips too much on the grass – wet grass was useless grass.

If Peter had the time, he would have found that he had been praying a lot lately, and for all the things you shouldn't be praying for.

The fire was a quick one, luckily. It roared through the grass like a lion. When it was done with that, it moved onto the ladders. The soldiers holding on to the ladder bases as their comrades climbed up didn't notice the hungry fire until it was too late. The fire was becoming a seething monster and was demanding sacrifices. The Englishmen panicked at the fire all around them and they jumped into the moat, the only refuge against it all. Their armor and shields wore them down though as they swam across in the confusion. Some men didn't mean it, but they pushed their fellow soldiers deep into the water as they struggled across. Quite a few died, crushed beneath the weight of the crowd and the waters.

There were still Englishmen caught up on the ladders. And the fire was still growing larger, lashing at the wood that held the ladders altogether. They looked down in a panic at the only thing keeping them up in the air vanishing before their eyes. Many of them jumped, hoping to make it into the moat rather than the hard ground. Some made it, some didn't. For the others, the ladders made the decision for them. There was the sound of wood snapping and the ladders tumbled down with the soldiers. They landed hard in a pile of broken bones and splintered wood. Meanwhile, the fire was still aglow, merrily crackling in its sadistic way.

The battle was turning towards the rebels. The Englishmen who had made it over the wall were finding themselves outmatched and their reinforcements retreating over the moat and into the woods. Some tried surrendering.

Peter yelled, “No quarter! Not enough food to feed the bastards!”

And down the Englishmen went.

As the battle wore down – almost to a standstill – Milo turned to Peter and asked, “You don’t think the fire would hurt the castle, do you?”

Peter shrugged, “It might. This castle is all stone though. Never seen fire destroy stone.”

“If the fire’s strong enough, it can eat anything.”

“I doubt it.”

But Peter didn’t doubt it. He was worried that the fire could have melted and ruined the cement that held the wall together. He would have to send his engineer out later in the evening to inspect the damage. The things you have to ruin to save things.

As Peter mulled things over, the rest of the garrison couldn’t help but peer over the wall, seeing the bodies of the men floating in the moat and tangled in the burnt grasses. The English army had paid dearly that day, winning only a few scars with their earlier barrage of arrows. The garrison could see the rest of the English army sulking back into the shadows. They would lick their wounds and come back, this time angrier than ever.

But that would be later, and this is now. Now, the rebels cheered and whooped. Peter could feel all sorts of emotions welling up inside of him. Benedict may have the experience of countless wars and the command of equipped soldiers. But Peter had his men, and that was all he needed to win.

Chapter 26

“At the touch of love everyone becomes a poet.” (Plato)

That Evening

Absolutely, it was a night for celebration.

The rebels – understandably eager at having survived the battle – held a victory banquet of sorts in the keep. True, there wasn't an extravagance of food available. Despite being all smiles, Peter insisted that they not waste their limited supply of food – no matter how good the news was. But they did crack open a few barrels of ale. Of course.

Peter warned his garrison not to make too much of a ruckus. He was afraid of the English army hearing the party going on and deciding to crash the celebration. Still, Peter couldn't help but get caught up in the festivities and enjoy the good moment. The road ahead was long, after all, and there weren't going to be too many good nights like this for a good while.

Phillip Killigrew – always in heart the jester for the late Albert de Vere – was trying to juggle a bushel of apples while saying unprintable jokes to the drunken crowd gathered about him. Everyone laughed, but that may have been more of the ale laughing than anything else.

Eventually, though, Peter felt it was all too much. Parties and such always stifled him. Maybe it was the smell of alcohol hanging heavy in the air. Or the crowds leaving a claustrophobic feeling. Whatever it was, it made Peter leave for the fresh air in the nighted courtyard.

Torch in hand, Peter took a walk in the cool evening, letting the air graze his face, letting his body shiver with the joy.

The chill in the air froze the scene like a painting. The moon slid slow across the canvas like dripping paint. The freeze brought out the colors in the stars too until they looked like angels – Peter wanted to believe that they were getting closer to comfort him.

Still, Peter didn't want to get too wrapped up in the beauty of the night. There was still a massive army camped outside of the castle walls, waiting to kill him if given the slightest opportunity. His death was waiting just outside of his home. Peter had to admit that he was terrified by the idea, every moment he thought about it. And he thought about it a lot. But he was just a man, and don't all men think about death? If they're not thinking about death, then they're trying to think of everything but death.

A gorgeous voice startled him out of his thoughts, asking, “It is a lovely evening, isn't it, Peter?”

Peter turned and saw a smiling Isabella standing before him. She was still dressed as Isaiah – the ruse persisted on for none of Peter's men would tolerate a woman on the battlefield. Peter couldn't help but feel awkward – he never really had a chance to talk with her since he discovered she was in the castle. Sure, they spoke. But they never really talked. And when Peter thought of all the hurried preparations he had made for the siege and such, he realized that there wasn't much time for those good things. It shamed him.

Isabella suddenly spoke up, “I actually found myself worrying about you today.”

“You sound surprised by that.”

“You know what I mean.”

“No, no I don't.”

Isabella sighed, “I wished I didn't have to worry about you. No one should have to worry about the people they love.”

Peter was silent and Isabella continued, “I do care for you. You may be a man to others, but you'll always be that little kid I grew up with, Peter. Love never grows old. Love never dies. You know what I'm talking about, though? Like when you rescued me from that boar so long ago? When I was picking flowers in the meadow? You stared death in the face so I wouldn't have to. There was no worry to you when you did that.”

“I was a little kid. Little kids are stupid.”

“But bravery is so close to stupidity. Why was I so worried when I knew our love would carry through? Why can't we be invincible anymore?”

“We'll always be – even if I'm not.”

Peter could see that Isabella was getting ahead of herself, like she always did. She had that poetic rage about her. Peter unexpectedly leaned in and hugged her tight, hoping to squeeze the fears out of her. He whispered softly, "I can't be killed. I have too much work to do. I will fall only after every English soldier outside these walls falls first."

Isabella, muffled, asked, "You promise?"

"As much as I can, yes."

Isabella wrapped her arm around Peter's waist and they walked as one across the courtyard. There was some risk to this of course. People would probably be wondering why Peter was walking around, half-hugging Isaiah as they went. Not that there's anything wrong with that.

As they walked, Isabella ruined the mood by asking, "Do you have a grudge against me still?"

"What would give you that idea?"

"We haven't really talked since you found out I was here."

"I've been busy, Isabella."

"I know, but still."

Peter sighed, "But no, I don't have any hatred towards you. And why should I?"

Isabella said simply, "Because I called you a fool after war."

"I joined the Crusades to safeguard our faith."

Isabella frowned doubtfully at him. She said, "When have you ever followed your faith? You were the boy who always snuck out of church during mass."

"Okay...well, maybe I just wanted to get out."

Isabella said sadly, "We could have stayed together. We could have been free together."

Peter waved his hand all around them, replying, "But I would have still been here. I would have still been trapped in England. The whole island reeks of dungeon."

"But you're back now, aren't you?"

Peter looked over at her and smiled mirthlessly, "Yes, I guess I am."

"You're back and you have nothing to show for it but a year lost from us."

"I know, Isabella. I'm sorry."

Isabella flared slightly, "I don't think you are. You don't know what it's like being a woman. When you were gone, I didn't know if you would be gone a week, a year, a lifetime buried in the Holy Land's sands. And now you're off again, fighting the whole might of the English army. Don't make me a widow before we grow old, Peter."

Surprised, Peter asked, "What's this talk of marriage?"

"We'll talk about it more...after you get us out of this castle and past that army, that is."

"Ah."

They walked in silence for a few minutes.

Peter confessed, "I did miss you when I was away."

"That so?"

"Every day. Every day I wanted to walk back over my mistake and come for you."

Isabella broke into a slow, wide smile and said, "I dare say I'm rubbing off on you, love. You were a stern little boy when we first met, I remember."

"Well, don't tell the other men what I've become. They won't look at me the same ever again."

Isabella laughed, "I won't. For now."

"So, have your travels through Europe cultured the English out of you?"

"I have, actually."

"Do tell."

Peter and Isabella had climbed the steps and were now leaning against the crenellation. They could see the English campfires in the distance.

Peter coughed and said, "Well, I picked up some poetry."

"Really?"

“Really. I’ve actually started working on a collection. I’m titling it Brutus and Fortuna. It’s a group of sonnets...”

“Sonnets? What are those?”

“I was in Italy a little bit, in a place called Arezzo. There was some drunk merchant singing these poems he called sonnets. And that’s where I got them from.”

“What are yours about?”

“Around an old man reflecting on his life. He’s talking about meeting a lady while in his youth. At first, he doesn’t appreciate her beauty and charm, but over time he grows to love her.”

Isabella smiled and murmured, “Hmmm, the perfect love story.”

Peter said hastily, “It’s still a work in progress. I still have time to turn it into a gory epic about war if I want.”

Isabella rang out with laughter and Peter’s heart rose like the sun in morning. He remembered again why he always tried to make her laugh.

And the moment seemed perfect. So Peter leaned in and so did Isabella, their lips gracing the other’s with that love that doesn’t know how to die. And even after the moment was gone, they couldn’t let go. They had forgotten how not to kiss.

What finally ended it was a voice saying embarrassingly, “Um Peter? Is this a bad time? It’s a bad time, isn’t it?”

Peter winced and turned to see a bewildered Milo standing there. Milo, of course, had his mouth open. While Peter knew that it was Isabella under the guise of Isaiah, Milo certainly didn’t.

Peter said cheerfully, trying to ignore what happened, “Milo, what brings you up here on such a chilly evening?”

Milo said slowly, “Please tell me you were trying to exhale some demon out of Isaiah’s mouth there.”

“Milo, Milo, this isn’t what it looks like. This is...”

“Isabella. Milo, it’s me, Isabella.”

She said this, dropping away the masculine voice and speaking in her genuine sweetness.

Milo was silent for a moment. He then stammered, “So, um, Isabella.”

Isabella smiled, “Yes?”

Milo shrugged and said, “It’s been too long. How are you?”

Isabella laughed and said, “I’m doing fine, Milo. You asked me that about a half hour ago though.”

Milo reddened and said, “I asked Isaiah that, not you.”

“A rose by any other name smells as sweet.”

Milo asked, “What? You were always the weird one.”

Isabella said slyly, “You have to be cultured – and not English – to understand that. But anyway, I am glad to meet you again, this time as the real me. I am sorry you weren’t in on the joke sooner.”

Milo shrugged, “All’s forgiven. How can I not forgive an old friend?”

“You’re a wise man. Now, if you don’t mind, I think Peter and I were talking before you came up.”

Milo snorted, “Of course, of course. Peter, I’ll tell you what I was going to say later. Isabella, always a pleasure. Peter...?”

Peter – whose face was blushing by the second – simply nodded his old friend goodbye.

As Milo walked back to the keep – Peter was sure he heard him stifle a laughter in the distance –

Peter and Isabella scurried away to find a quieter spot around the castle.

Meanwhile, a falcon screeched high over their heads, flapping towards one of the few darkened windows in the keep.

Chapter 27
“I dig all kinds of competition.” (Randy Castillo)
Next Evening

Peter couldn't help but feel that he should be wary. Although the English army was still reeling from their humiliation the day before, now taking to stalking the forest like ghosts. Peter could see forgetful glints of their armor through the leaves, the burning sun betraying their motions.

There wasn't a cloud in the sky that day and the sun was melting and sloshing over everything. The rebels holed up in the castle, though, didn't care. They would rather pick a fight with the sun than the English army. True, they did send the enemy running yesterday. But behind their gloat, they knew that good times die young.

As Peter looked out at the world from the curtain wall, he wanted to be ready for something. An ambush, an assassination, something. But the day was too hot, and he was too tired.

You're naïve, thinking the Englishmen are still licking their wounds like the dogs they are.

And Peter was right in chiding himself. Indeed, he could hear grunting and sawing of trees down the main road. They were trying to clear the fallen trees off the road to move the catapults closer. The only thing that separated Raven's Crest from being completely leveled were now just a few dozen trees. So while Benedict might not be in the mood to kill Peter today, each day was a growth spurt. It won't be long before the catapults matched Benedict's rage.

The evening sweltered in. The bare breeze during the day had passed away – not even the grass, which can bend quicker than paper, budged an inch. Everything seemed suspended like portrait, the only movement was the heat that made the world swell and shrivel like a slow heart.

While the night was heavy, it was peaceful, blanketing the entire castle into slumber. Even the guards who patrolled the walls were reduced to a shuffle. Only Isaac was wide awake, and even he yawned as he stretched his eyes while standing on the parapet. He had trouble sleeping, but he always had trouble sleeping.

The only thing that could smooth him down was looking deep into the forest. It must have been the hunter in him, reveling at how the forest came alive when it thought no one was looking. How the branches curled their fingers without the wind there to help. How the birds chirped in their sleep. Isaac saw in it the closest he'd ever get back to home in Ireland.

Overhead, he could hear a sharp shriek. He looked up to see a silhouette of a falcon against the crescent moon. Isaac thought about how he had seen that falcon fly over the castle every night. He also thought about how he had never seen a bird like that in this part of England before.

Isaac watched the bird fly off into the forest. He would have wished that he could be like that, always floating from one place to the next, getting lost in it all. But he couldn't wish for what he already was.

And that was when something caught Isaac's eye. It was at the forest's edge. He thought his eyes were playing tricks on him. But that's impossible – an archer has too much faith in his eyes for them to fail. A god can't die. So he looked closer. And closer.

That was when his eyes widened in shock and he almost stumbled backwards. He turned and ran down the stairs, towards the keep, through the halls, to where he knew Peter was deep in the library.

When he reached the door, he didn't bother knocking. Instead, he swung open the door with a fervency, startling Peter who was reading some philosophy book. Surprised, Peter asked, “What's the problem?”

Isaac took a few moments to catch his lost breath. When he could, he gasped, “They're digging.”

“Wait, what?”

“They're digging. Benedict's men are trying to dig under the goddamn castle!”

Peter groaned, “I can't believe they brought sappers with them.”

Isaac said, “Well, no one wants to believe that.”

It was five minutes later. Peter and Isaac had dragged Milo out of sleep and they all took to the curtain wall. They had to see the tunneling with their own eyes – which, of course, is easier said than done. A good tunnel is hard to see after all.

But they could hear the soft clink of shovel against dry dirt. They could see little chunks of earth being scooped up into the air. While a tunnel is hard to see, making a tunnel is hard to miss.

Milo asked, “How many men you figure are working on that right now?”

Peter shrugged, “Probably a dozen. Couple men digging, while the rest are shifting the dirt back.”

“How could they start the tunnel without our guards noticing?”

Isaac offered, “Maybe they started earlier this evening. Or last night even. Although the moon’s out, it’s darker than hell out here. Night’s a camouflage. It’s a miracle I saw that myself.”

Peter, to no one in particular, said softly, “I’ll give them a couple days at the most before they dig across the clearing and under the castle.”

Isaac added, “Once they dig over here, the siege is over.”

Confused, Milo said, “But we know they’re coming. When they dig up, we’ll be waiting for them.”

Peter shook his head, “That’s not what we should be worried about.”

“What should we worry about, then?”

Isaac answered, “When they dig under the castle, they’ll have to move the earth away. Move enough of the dirt, and you take away the support for the walls. The ground will cave in and take a good part of this wall with it. Hard to defend a castle when there’s a gaping hole in the side.”

“Oh. I can see how that would be a problem. Shouldn’t we alert our men then?”

Peter said quickly, “No. We can’t.”

“Why?”

“Because there’s nothing they can do against the sappers. Nothing we can do. I don’t want the men to panic over something they can’t fix. Besides, if Benedict finds out that his tunnel is exposed, he’ll just start a new tunnel. And this time, he’ll make sure we don’t know which direction he’s coming from. No, we have to play stupid.”

“Well, that’s a smart way of doing things.”

Suddenly, Peter thought of something. His face curled into a broad smile.

Milo saw the smile and knew what it meant. He groaned, “Don’t tell me you have a bad idea.”

Peter said defensively, “It’s not a bad idea. It’s worked before.”

“But I thought you said there was nothing we could do...?”

“Never mind that. I just remembered something I heard about while in France. And like I said, it has worked before. Now listen carefully, because if we want this to work, all the little things behind it have to work too.”

The garrison was bleary-eyed and standing in the early morning. The sun was just beginning to creep up, but all of the torches around the castle were still lit and crackling.

They grumbled amongst themselves about the early wakeup, wondering why their leaders had shook them all out of bed. Suddenly, Peter, Milo, Isaac, and several other rebels came out of the keep, awkwardly carrying a few dozen shovels along with some pots and kettles. They tossed the tools into a big heap before the garrison.

One of the rebels was brave enough to ask, “Milord, may we ask why we’re up so early and why you brought out all of these shovels and cookware?”

Peter announced, “Because I want you to dig, that’s why. I want you to dig and dig as fast as you can.”

“Why?”

Peter was getting tired with the questions. They had no time. Still, he said patiently, “Because the English army currently has sappers digging towards our castle. If they reach here, not only could they attack us within, but they can make the curtain wall fail and collapse.”

The men whispered anxiously amongst themselves. As Peter suspected, their first thought was panic. Another called out with a moan, “What can we do? How can we fight men we cannot see?”

“We dig. That’s what we do.”

“But how can our digging stop their digging...?”

“Quiet.”

Peter’s voice was a tremble now, earthquaking with a cold fury. The protests and questions from the garrison withered. Peter let the silence reign for a few moments before continuing, “We’re wasting time. You will see a method to my madness one day. But not now. Now I want you to dig.”

Peter handed the shovels and cookware out to the men and directed them where to dig. As the garrison feverishly started to work, Isaac tapped Peter and Milo on the shoulders and said softly, “I need to speak with you two in private.”

Milo blurted out, “Why?”

Isaac rolled his eyes, “Then we might as well talk where there’s a thousand ears.”

So Peter and Milo followed the stoic Irishman back into the keep. They headed for the library. As soon as Isaac closed the doors behind them, he hesitantly said, “I think there’s a traitor in the castle.”

“What?”

Peter was shocked. He should have expected something like this – after all, there were dozens of scared men trapped in the castle with the enemy knocking on the gates – but he couldn’t bring himself to think that someone would be scared enough to turn traitor.

Isaac said, “The night before the first assault took place, I saw a falcon fly over the castle several times...”

“Oh, I think I saw that same bird,” Milo said, interrupting.

Isaac glared at the break in his words. He continued, “Well anyway, the next morning, not only did Benedict’s army attack, but they attacked early. If we hadn’t been vigilant enough, they would have easily scaled the walls and stormed the castle. Now, I may be wrong, but I don’t think falcons normally live around this part of the kingdom. Especially falcons who fly solely between this castle and the English camp.”

“So you think that someone is sending messages by the falcon to Benedict?” Peter asked.

“I don’t think – I know. A trained falcon is as good as a messenger.”

Peter asked sharply, “Isaac, if I can ask you a favor, the next time you see this falcon fly back, see where it lands. If we’re right, its nest will be the traitor.”

Milo asked, “Wouldn’t we already know if someone here was keeping a pet falcon?”

Peter shook his head, “As far as I know, no one here does. That doesn’t mean they can keep it stowed away in the cracks of the castle. This home can hide a lot of secrets. And Isaac?”

“Yes, Peter?”

“Thank you for keeping such a sharp eye on things. If it wasn’t for you, we wouldn’t have known about there possibly being a traitor in the castle. And let’s not forget you were the one who spotted the sappers. We owe you our lives several times over.”

Isaac flashed a rare smile and said, “Thank you. Hopefully, though, I’ll be able to do much more than just that. Now, if you don’t mind, I have some business to tend to.”

“Certainly.”

As Isaac turned and left the library, Milo turned to Peter and said quietly, “Do you think what he’s saying is true?”

“Unfortunately, we’ll have to. He may be a quiet man, but silence is the only thing that speaks truth.”

“I know, I know, I’m just saying...he’s an unusual man, Peter. I find it hard to trust a man like that.”

Peter smiled thinly, “I know you do. And yes, there is something different about him. But he wants to live as much as anyone else in this castle does. If he thinks someone is out to get us, I won’t ask why but I’ll ask him where he thinks the man is at. We have to trust each other – there is no doubt about that.”

“Even if one of us is a traitor?”

Peter’s eyebrow rose. “Are you saying he might be the one?”

“No, no, no. It’s just...like I said, I have a hard time trusting someone who is...”

“Different. Yes, I know. Just try for once.”

Chapter 28

“A single rose can be my garden...a single friend, my world.” (Leo Buscaglia)

Baron Thomas Kent’s Castle at Nottingham

Same Day

It was beautiful spring, enough to give Kent a chance to stroll his estate. He was just now beginning to relax and enjoy his power as a baron. His father the widower died two winters before from the chill. And although Kent was an old child, it had taken time to wrangle his way into the family job. Father never told him of the responsibilities that came with it. The people you had to oversee. The investments that you had to keep shrewd. The gold you had to hold onto. Many of the peerage around English were crumbling, their eyes being larger than their gold plates, and Kent was doing all he could to keep his head above water.

Which was why now he was loving this moment of nothing. To be able to walk through Rushcliffe Castle had its charm. The castle had no moat, but it was on the banks of a river that snaked by Nottingham. Kent had recently ordered the old wooden bridge running the river to be torn down. In its place he had a stone bridge – which was supported by a series of arches – put up in its place.

He was walking along the river, looking longingly at his castle. His castle. It was beautiful but chiseled, a crafted mountain overlooking the river like a giant about to take his morning drink. But while Rushcliffe was monstrous and foreboding, the life that bustled inside was warm and cheery. Over a hundred servants, cooks, and engineers scurried about the castle, making sure that life kept on. And not only were there people running the castle, but they also brought their children with them. Some peerage refused to allow their help to have their families in the castle. But Kent knew that having them happy made him happy. So yes, there were countless children running around the castle’s grounds, laughing the sunlight in. He could hear their giggling the whole way from over here.

It was all wonderful, a relaxation to all of the nonsense. That was why Kent groaned when he saw Lady Margaret de Vere approach him, two servants of hers in tow. Kent ambled about as Margaret excused her lady-servants and walked up to him.

“It’s a lovely morning, isn’t it?”

Kent said stiffly, “It is, Lady de Vere. May I ask why I’m enjoying your company?”

Margaret frowned, “Well, if you want to discuss business first, so be it. But I think you know why I’m here.”

“Listen, Lady de...”

“Please Thomas, we’ve known each other’s families for long enough. Margaret.”

“Okay, Margaret, listen, we went over this when you came here last month. I can give you food and I can give you shelter while your son is fighting the King’s men. But that’s it. I can’t spare anything more.”

Margaret asked, “Why’s that?”

Exasperated, Kent said, “Because, Margaret, simply because. I have my own troubles to tend to.”

Margaret motioned around them and said calmly, “It looks as if you’re doing fine.”

“It’s all a trick. Behind all of the hand-waving, this magician is going through the throes, as much as anyone else is.”

“So surely you can appreciate what my son is going through right now.”

“I can appreciate it, but that’s all I can offer.”

Margaret was silent for a moment before saying stoutly, “Albert and I helped your father when he was in need so long ago. When all of the crops on his estate failed, who gave him food? We didn’t lend our stores, we gave. Surely you remember that.”

“I do. But listen: you can’t just bring up old debts like that...”

“And why not?”

Frustrated, Kent said, “Because it’s not proper. You can’t hold someone down with the ball and chain of their past.”

“I’m sorry, but I was under the impression our families were friends.”

Kent was silent for a few moments. He glared at Margaret before turning his eyes back on the river.

Finally, Kent said, "It would be different if you were having troubles with money. Or with another noble. But we're talking about the bloody King here. The King! It takes more than a friend to fight and die against that much power. It takes a lunatic. I told you this the last time."

Margaret sighed, "I was hoping that if I gave you time, you would change your mind. You always did that."

"You know I think too much."

She smiled thinly, "Yes, you were always afraid of yourself."

"That's not the reason. I'm afraid of doing something stupid. If I help you and the King wins, I lose everything. Everything! My castle, my servants, my lands, my life. All of this matters. Why won't you let me have that?"

"Because you wouldn't have had that if it wasn't for Albert."

"My God, not this talk of debt again! My father made those debts, not me. Margaret, you can't hold me up to my father."

"I apparently can't. Your father would have helped us without my even having to ask."

Kent snapped, "Well maybe you should go to the family cemetery and dig him up!"

They were both silent again. This time for a good several minutes. Kent took a couple stones and skipped them across the river waters. It was obvious that he was thinking hard about things. Margaret just stood patiently, standing her ground before him.

"So where have you been staying since you came here last?"

Margaret said, "I've been staying with cousins of mine just south of here a few miles. They have a beautiful estate and were more than glad to share it with me."

"What are you trying to say about me? I offered you a roof over your head. Why take them over me?"

Margaret cleared her throat gently and said, "I would have taken you up on your offer, but it felt as if I wasn't welcomed in your home."

Kent laughed mirthlessly, "If that's the impression you got, then so be it. I just don't want to be a traitor, that's all."

"Are you saying that my son is a traitor? For fighting King Humphrey? For wanting to save our family's home?"

"Not at all. Peter's a good man. But just because I won't call him a traitor doesn't mean that Humphrey won't either."

Margaret said, "Then if you don't see him as a criminal, then why not help him?"

"My Lord! I'm sorry Margaret, but you're being ridiculous."

"Am I?"

"Yes, yes you are."

"Are you afraid that Peter will fall and you will be left, holding onto the dust?"

"No, that's not it. Stop putting words into my mouth. You're making me out to be some coward who's only worried about his future."

Margaret frowned and said, "Let me tell you a story, Thomas."

Kent sighed and said, "Okay."

They began walking along the river. Margaret began, "About ten years ago, I remember a man. His name was Simon de Montfort, and he was the bravest of them all. He tried to remove Henry of Winchester from power. Of course, Simon failed and so King Henry tried to kill Simon. Henry – like his son, Humphrey – was terrified of anyone that walked against him. It was your father – yes, Thomas, your father – who gave Simon a boat to escape to sanctuary in France. It was your father who convinced Simon to return two years later and defeat King Henry in battle. Once he did that, Simon tried to restore the power to us, the people. He gave us a parliament. He was a good man for England..."

"Until the King's men wiped him out at Evesham. They cut him up into pieces, if I can remember."

Margaret shrugged and said, "Well, yes, he did die. Very painfully. But he died for England, so that England wouldn't have to die for him. You seem to have picked up your father's talent for making money, Thomas. But you haven't picked up his love for humanity. Perhaps you will one day, but you certainly don't have it within you now. If you did, you would help us."

Kent was silent.

Margaret turned away and said, "I'm going to leave soon. I wish to go back to my cousin's house before it turns dark. I will send a servant back here in a week for your answer. I hope it's a good one. Good day, Thomas, and I hope you enjoy the rest of your walk."

So she left Kent to his thoughts. He couldn't enjoy his moment of calm now. It was hard to enjoy the day now that he could hear his father's whispers in the river trickle. He could hear the whispers snapping at him, asking if a friend can truly be worth only thirty pieces of silver.

Chapter 29

“A traitor is everyone who does not agree with me.” (George III)

Raven’s Crest

Two Nights Later

Isaac felt like an idiot, looking for the bird against the night. Usually the only time he was looking out for a bird was to kill and eat it. It was a waste of a time otherwise.

It was all for the cause, though. He had to admit that much. They were trying to stop a traitor after all. And they were going to catch him soon. They had to make it soon, mostly because the longer they waited, the more likely they would all be killed.

The night was peaceful – for the most part. The air was still, but he could hear grunts coming from the courtyard below, where the rebel soldiers were busy with digging their tunnel. Isaac gasped suddenly – surely if there was a traitor in the castle, then they would have relayed the news of the tunnel to Benedict? It was a thought no one considered, mainly because no one wanted to. It would simply have to be a bad bit of news he would share with Peter tomorrow.

Isaac let out a powerful yawn. He was never one to sleep, but even night calling him to bed was too gorgeous of a temptation. So he figured he would lay his head against the wall and take a quick nap. A nap never hurt anyone. As soon as he closed his eyes, though, he was already dreaming.

He was running across the familiar emerald knoll outside of the village. The green around him was shocking the decay out of him. He wasn’t just feeling younger, but lighter too. As if the years simply tacked gangrenous fat to his bones like medals.

It looked like winter was settling in. He could tell because the grass was a shade pale. Even the winters at home were green. Everything was always harlequin. He always confused that with spring and life. He wouldn’t mix the color with sick and death for awhile now.

She was walking up to him, all smiles. He loved when she laughed – it brought out her eyes. Those seafoth eyes. Her strawberry-blonde hair. Her winterbright smile. So much about her was warm and vibrant. And she laughed. Well, at least she made the motions. She was struck mute. And Isaac was panicky, trying to remember what her laughter sounded like. But he forgot, he somehow forgot. And they say that the sound of a lover’s voice is the first thing you forget...

Isaac awoke with a start and pounded his fist against the stone, tears welled up in his eyes. He was cool around death, but the thought of her brought out tears that nothing else could. He tried his hardest to stifle his sobs, but they still broke through his clenched teeth.

“Juliet, Juliet, Juliet...”

I don’t know what to do, Lord, I don’t know. I can’t keep walking without her. It’s too much. All too much.

Suddenly, he heard a flutter above him. Isaac glanced up and saw a shadow floating towards the keep. It was the falcon with all of its bad omens. Desperate, Isaac kept his eyes on it, following its flight. He kept watching, breathless, as it floated to one of the windows high up in the keep and...

“No, that’s not...no, that’s impossible!”

Isaac couldn’t believe it. He knew whose window that was. But even what you know you can’t believe at times. Still, he rushed through the courtyard, ignoring the confused rebels glancing at him. He burst into the keep and headed straight for Peter’s room. And that was where he found the young de Vere, trying to get some sleep in bed.

Startled, Peter called out in the dark, “Who is it? Who’s there?”

“It’s me, Isaac.”

“What’s wrong, Isaac?”

“I know who the traitor is.”

“Who?”

When Isaac said the name, Peter was silent. Anxious, Isaac asked, “So, what should we do?”

Peter growled, “What should we do? We should kill him, that’s what we should do.”

When Peter found out who the traitor was, he went through a few phases. First came shock. Then came confusion. Then came a sweeping sense of betrayal. This betrayal then gave way to a seething rage, which set fire to Peter’s sinews.

Together, the two grabbed Milo out of his sleep and they dragged the drowsy giant with them, explaining what was going on along the way. Milo certainly woke up when he heard the news. Together, all three strode through the winding halls, their feet magnetized to the traitor’s chambers. When they reached the door, Peter didn’t bother knocking. He simply knocked the door open.

It was a small, cozy room complete with fireplace and a tiny bed. And there was Phillip Killigrew – the longtime jester – scribbling on a parchment at his writing desk. He looked up, startled.

Peter snarled, “How dare you! How could you betray us?”

He rushed over and dragged a kicking Killigrew off of his chair.

Terrified, Killigrew squeaked, “I...I don’t know what you’re talking about!”

Milo grabbed the letter that Killigrew had been writing and, after a long moment of reading it, said, “It seems you do know what you’re talking about. This letter is addressed to Benedict himself. You were about to send him a message about our sappers.”

Killigrew’s mouth opened, but no words came out.

Still keep a firm grip on Killigrew, Peter snapped, “If it was up to me, you would be dead already.”

“Please, don’t kill me! I’m sorry, I’m sorry!”

“You almost ruined us with your words! It’ll take more than those words to redeem you!”

As the men were arguing, Isaac heard a ruffled screech in the corner. He knew what was making that sound. He walked over and gingerly held the bird up on his sleeve. It was a moment of serenity for him amidst the fire of shouts.

Suddenly there was a crash. Isaac turned and saw the chaos. Killigrew had broken free and tried to run for the door. Milo leapt and tackled the jester, sending both men tumbling to the ground. Milo recovered first and pinned Killigrew to the ground. Sweat poured down Killigrew’s face as he pleaded, “Please have mercy on me! I don’t wish to die!”

“I won’t kill you now, Killigrew,” Peter spat, his words merciful but his voice not. He turned to his old friend and said, “Milo, take him to that jail cell my father built in the food cellar. We’ll keep him there until we figure out what to do with him.”

Milo nodded and roughly dragged the weeping jester out of the room. Peter sat down heavily on the desk stool and rubbed his eyes. Killigrew had been with the de Vere family as long as Peter could remember. He was family, and he betrayed them all.

Isaac coughed and said, “Peter, you may want to take a look at these.”

Peter turned and saw Isaac standing there, the falcon perched on his left arm. In his right hand, Isaac held a bundle of letters.

“Where did you find those?”

“They were hidden under the desk. You may want to read them. I doubt you’ll like what you read, though.”

Peter slowly took the letters and hesitantly glanced through them. He wasn’t surprised that they were correspondence between Killigrew and Benedict himself. Peter wanted to know what secrets were shared between the two, although Peter was terrified of what he would find. Each of the letters were short and to the point. Although Benedict’s handwriting was cramped and hard to read, Peter could make out most of what was written, like in this letter:

I am planning on launching the first attack early tomorrow morning. If Peter de Vere is prepared for such an attack, let me know.

General

Peter realized it was a letter just before Benedict had launched his first assault on the castle. Peter was still furious, yes, but he couldn't help but smile a little, thinking of Killigrew eagerly writing back, saying that Peter would be unprepared for the attack that early in the morning. If only Killigrew knew how much of a disaster that would turn out for him, saying that and all.

He shuffled through the rest of the letters, smiling to himself at the irony of it all. So much naïve hope in the letters got lost in translation during the fights. As he worked his way back through the letters, though, they grew longer and longer. And they were getting older. Some were dated a few months back, some even a year before. And for the older ones, he noticed that they bore the royal seal itself. The royal seal? Was Killigrew actually talking with King Humphrey? Impossible. His betrayal couldn't possibly run that deep.

But that would explain the roots of it all. It would explain how Benedict first knew about his man on the inside.

Then he got to a letter that wiped his smile away. Fear began prickling up his back as he read through. When Peter finished reading it, he was shaking so hard that his tears trembled off his face. He threw the letter to the side and stormed out of the room. The letter – one of those from some months beforehand and bearing the royal seal like so many of the others – went as such:

Your master still has a firm grip on life – and his home – despite being so old. I would like you to slip some crushed hemlock into his drink. That would be the only quick way for him to end. I would pay you two years' worth of gold for this deed. It is selfish of a man to hold onto his castle for as long as he has.

Milo had just shackled Killigrew and locked him in the cell. Milo hadn't even put the cell keys back in the drawer when Peter burst into the room.

“Peter? What in the world...?”

Peter rushed towards the cell. He roared and shook at the bars, trying to knock the whole thing down.

Milo did the only thing a friend could do. He jumped on his friend's back and crushed him to the ground.

“Peter, Peter! What are you doing?”

Breathless and pressed against the floor, Peter said, muffled, “That man...he killed...father.”

Milo asked, “What? Did I hear you right? He killed your father?”

Peter didn't answer. Instead, he burst into tears, the stress of everything finally getting to him. Milo had never seen him cry before. He slowly got off his friend's back and sat down next to him. He couldn't think of anything else to do but pat Peter on the shoulder.

“I didn't...I didn't ask for any of this.”

“I know.”

“I didn't! I tell you!”

“No one ever asks for this.”

“You know...I've kept myself together. I saw men die all around me in camp. Die from the plague and all. I never cracked. When I heard from Warwick that father died, I didn't crack. When Benedict has tried beating down my door all this time, I've never cracked. Why now? Why?”

Milo glared at Killigrew – who was cowering in the corner of his cell – and said calmly, “Because everything has a time.”

Peter looked up, his eyes red and salty, and trembled, “You hear that Killigrew? Everything has its time. You bastard, your time to die is just waiting for you!”

“How do you even know that Killigrew killed him? Surely it's a mistake?”

“It’s not. I saw the letter. He was paid a good pile of gold to kill my father with hemlock.”

“Peter, listen to me. I knew your father for a long time. Almost as long as you have. He was an honorable man. He would expect the same of his son. And honorable men don’t kill out of anger. Honorable men kill when it’s their duty. Think about it, Peter – would killing Killigrew get you any closer to killing Benedict? Or King Humphrey?”

“No. As much as I want it to.”

“Right. Well then, good.”

Peter sighed and said tiredly, “Well, what should we do with him then?”

“Well, I was thinking as I dragged him over...but no, that wouldn’t work...”

Peter looked over and saw the marks of a mad scheme hidden away in Milo’s eyes. Peter forgot to despair for a moment and asked shrewdly, “What?”

“It’s nothing. It’s the kind of plan you would come up with. God, I’ve been your friend for far too long, Peter.”

Milo looked over at Killigrew before whispering in Peter’s ear, “Why bother killing him if you can get someone else to do the dirty work?”

Chapter 30

“If you can’t convince ‘em, confuse ‘em.” (Harry S. Truman)

Two Days Later

Benedict could feel the triumph squeezing at his heart as he looked out at Raven’s Crest. It had only been a day before when one of the rebels had shouted from the curtain wall, saying that Peter de Vere wanted to speak with the General in private. Benedict thought that was madness, that Peter was willing to leave the castle in the middle of a siege just to speak with him. But Benedict wasn’t going to argue with that.

Although he didn’t hear a reason behind the talks, Benedict could only assume that Peter was looking for terms of surrender. Benedict smiled, hoping that the past few weeks had humbled the rebel. Peter’s arrogance had been grating from the start. But if Peter was looking for a nice surrender, Benedict was going to feel lazy. After all, he had already offered the rebels a chance at surrender before the battle even started, and they squandered it. So as much as Benedict wanted to keep up his reputation as general, he wasn’t willing to be accommodating anymore.

If Peter thinks that being nobility will save him this time, he’s mistaken. Peter would join the long line of noblemen who have been executed in England, their severed heads planted on spikes along London Bridge as warning.

Still, despite Benedict’s glee at maybe bringing down Peter, he was still wary. The rebels had been lucky so far, but they have been clever too. They had outwitted him at every turn and he didn’t want to be their next victory. So he picked Richard Norton to lead the negotiations instead. If someone had to die that day, he guessed it would have to be Norton. Of course, Benedict didn’t talk about his fears. And Norton, as slimy as he was, didn’t ask. All Norton could think about was being the person who negotiated with the rebels and ended the siege. If that didn’t win Norton some favor with King Humphrey, he didn’t know what will.

After waiting for a good while, Benedict could finally hear the groaning. The drawbridge was being lowered, inch by inch, over the murky moat. As it thumped down, Benedict turned to a nervous Norton and asked, “Are you ready?”

“Of course. More than ready.”

Benedict doubted that. Even though Norton was completely drenched in armor, Benedict could still see him shake like the wind inside of his suit. Benedict smiled to himself when he saw that. To think, Norton – a snake of a man – could be afraid. He saw it in Norton’s eyes the night that the forest came alive. To see it again was just as comforting.

As Norton shakily walked out of the forest and towards the castle, a man dressed in armor and seated on a horse traveled across the drawbridge and into the clearing. The man seemed to be calm, forgetting the fear that he should have had. Richard wanted to look the man in the face, but the mysterious man was wearing a helmet.

While the armored man approached, Norton called out, “Are you not Peter de Vere, heir to this castle and the fool who dares to challenge the King of England?”

The man merely nodded.

“Well then, I’m Richard Norton, second-in-command of the English army. I’m here because you wished to negotiate a surrender – at least, that’s what we presume?”

Benedict was still behind the tree from earlier. Listening in on the conversation, he started to become more and more nervous. He couldn’t help but wonder why Peter wasn’t talking. It wasn’t like the rebel not to spout some defiance at his foes. Benedict glanced at several archers he ordered to hide in the nearby bushes. He motioned them to raise their bows. He had been expecting something to go awry, and it looked like that was going to be the case.

Meanwhile, Isaac was leaning against the curtain wall, his own bow and arrow in hand. He had been keeping an eye on the negotiations for the past minute or so and it was electrifying just being there. When he

recognized Richard Norton, Isaac became gleeful and his hands trembled slightly as he aimed his arrow at the Lieutenant General. He had been waiting for this moment forever, and still he wasn't expecting it. He only had one chance to get it right. One shot is all I need though.

Isaac had been expecting Benedict to show up. But it figured that Benedict had no faith in the rebels. When Isaac saw him the first day the English army arrived, Benedict struck him as being a man too proud to die. And this man right here, this Norton, he matched the description so well that Isaac had been carrying around in his memory. Norton looked every bit the monster that Isaac's neighbors described so many years ago.

Isaac was going to kill the first snake that had ever dared step foot in Ireland since St. Patrick's exile.

It took only a few seconds to aim his bow at Norton, but he spent a good minute debating about where to hit him. It wasn't that Isaac was worried about Norton's armor. The General's armor was stronger, but Isaac's arrows were sharper. No, he was taking his time because he wasn't sure what wound would cause the General the most agony.

Should I shoot him in the shoulder and have him bleed to death? Should I aim for his head? His heart? Regardless, Norton was going to die. Isaac just wanted to be greedy with something for once.

Isaac breathed, "This is for you, Juliet."

And he let go.

It took less than a second for the arrow to leap from the wall and strike Norton. The arrow's bodkin point – looking like a tiny lance on the end of the arrow – sheered through the back of Norton's helmet. The chainmail that Norton wore underneath was just as useless. The arrow cut through the weak links and crunched into his neck. Norton's scream was immediately cut short as the arrow severed his spinal cord and jabbed through his windpipe.

It was at that point that Richard Norton – a man who was hated by everyone he ever met – died a horrible death. He was cut down in the same country where he killed innocent men, burned down villages, and stole food from the poor.

Benedict saw through the trees his second-in-command dying brutally. He yelled to his archers, "Kill Peter! Kill him!"

The archers were immediate. A storm of arrows shot out of the forest and tore into Peter, who was still sitting atop his horse. Peter never made a sound as he collapsed to the ground, several arrows porcupining from his chest. His horse – terrified by the chaos going on all around it – took off for the woods, galloping as fast as it could. Benedict watched Peter slumped dead on the dirt. He saw Norton dead just a few feet away from him as well. He shrugged.

Killing Peter was more than worth Richard.

A half-hour before the negotiations took place, trickery was being birthed in Raven's Crest.

Milo and Isaac were tying up Killigrew and dressing him up in a suit of armor. As they set him on the horse, Peter snapped, "If you dare do anything, we will kill you. Understood?"

"Please, Peter! I've been your family's jester for all of these years. I've made you laugh so many times. Surely you can remember those times. Surely you wouldn't kill me!"

Peter slapped Killigrew across the face and snarled, "Shut up! You will live as long as you do as I say. Besides, if you do die today, it'd be the least you deserve."

With that said, Peter motioned to Milo. The giant nodded as he wrapped a piece of cloth around the jester's mouth, gagging the traitor. They then tied Killigrew's feet to the stirrups. They couldn't trust the jester enough.

As Milo led the horse and Killigrew towards the gatehouse, Peter turned to Isaac and asked, "Do you remember what I just said to Killigrew? How he would live as long as nothing went wrong."

"Aye."

"Make sure something goes wrong. Killing Benedict is worth a traitor's blood."

Isaac just smiled.

Chapter 31

“I didn’t attend the funeral, but I sent a nice letter saying I approved.” (Mark Twain)

Next Morning

The English sappers were breaking down from the hours upon hours of digging towards the castle. Not only did they have to pick apart the hard dirt, but they had to discreetly bring it back and dump it at the tunnel’s entrance. They were afraid that the rebels would find out their plan (not knowing, of course, that the rebels already knew). But they were getting closer, shovel by shovel.

They noticed, too, that the further along they got, the softer the soil felt. They must have been getting closer to the moat. Only water could turn dirt to mud. But while their work became easier, it became more dangerous. There was now the constant risk of tunnel collapse. So they hastily cut wooden beams as support for the dirt above their heads. It wasn’t enough – they knew that – but they had no other choice except to move quickly. Maybe if they dug through fast enough, the tunnel would collapse only after they reached open air on the other side.

That’s why they were paid in gold, and lots of it. Not many would risk death for the sake of their country, but many more will take the job if it meant getting paid well.

And so they pushed on, ahead of schedule.

Meanwhile, two dozen spearmen – given the thankless task of clearing the main road of the fallen trees – were making just as much progress as their underground comrades. They sawed the trees into pieces, but they still grunted and wheezed as they chucked the sections to the side of the road. It had taken them the better part of a week and there were still so many trees left. They wondered how the rebels could fell so many trees, not realizing that it is easier to cut down a tree than it is to move it.

Behind the spearmen were the wagons filled with catapult parts. As soon as the trees were cleared, the men were ordered to setup the catapults immediately and wipe out the castle. At the pace they were moving, the day of judgment was just a few mornings away.

“Peter, you know they’re going to crush us soon. I’m not much of an expert, but I say it’d be a week, tops.”

“I know, I know,” Peter said irritably. Peter and Milo were standing on top of the curtain wall. They could barely see the spearmen off in the distance, clearing away the last few logs on the road.

“And I guess we can’t forget about the sappers either.”

Peter snapped, “You think I forget things so easily?”

“No, no, not at all. I’m just saying...”

“What?”

“Well, what if our plan doesn’t work? What if our ambushing the sappers doesn’t turn out the way we want? Not only would our men die, but then their sappers would have a clear path to the castle.”

“It will work. It’s worked before.”

Milo looked cautiously over at his old friend. He had seen Peter angry before, but not like this. This was something new, as if his frustration was curdling into venom. Milo didn’t want to be the person that Peter bit.

Peter mumbled, “Need a new plan, need a new plan, need a new...”

His voice trailed off and he looked pensive for a few minutes. Suddenly, he became startled and looked quickly over at Milo, saying, “That’s it, that’s what we need to do.”

“What do we need to do?” Milo asked, afraid of what Peter’s next mad scheme would become.

“Does Isaac still have that falcon that belonged to Killigrew?”

“I think he does, but what does that have to do with anything?”

Peter smiled mischievously, “It has to do with everything. That damn falcon is going to defeat the entire English army. Follow me.”

Milo had no choice but to trail his friend through the castle. Upon reaching Isaac's quarters, they found no sign of the Irishman. However, they did find the falcon, perched at the end of Isaac's bed, a hood over its head. Peter grabbed a piece of parchment and sat down to write the most important letter he ever wrote.

General Marshall,

I wish to apologize for the anguish I've been causing you as of late. True, I was the one who convinced Peter de Vere to his death. But I didn't know that his death would cost you one of your generals. For that you have my sincerest apologies. I have found a spot of redemption for myself, though. Tonight, I will sneak through the castle and lower the drawbridge. Once I do so, your men can swarm into the castle and wipe out the rebels in their sleep. We can put this matter all behind us before the sun even rises tomorrow.

Milo looked over the note and said, aghast, "Are you seriously going to lower the drawbridge and let the English army kill all of us?"

"Am I going to lower the drawbridge? Yes. Am I going to let them enter the castle? Yes. Am I going to let them kill us? No. At least, I don't think I am. Just think about it though – if we can end the siege tonight, then it wouldn't matter about the sappers or the catapults. Because they won't have an army left to use them. Besides, what point does it make if we die tonight? It's either we die tonight or we die a week from now. No difference."

"Says you."

"Are you against my idea?"

Milo frowned, "Well, what if Benedict already knows that Killigrew is dead? Do you think he believes in dead people sending him letters?"

"I doubt he knows. Killigrew was dressed in armor from head to toe. Not to mention the helmet. It would have been impossible to see him. That is assuming that Benedict even met Killigrew outside of a letter before. And besides, Benedict hasn't ordered his men to retrieve the bodies around the castle yet. Until he does, I doubt he'll suspect that anything is afoot."

"So, I'm pretty sure you've thought this far – and I hope you have – about what happens once they get inside the castle?"

"Oh, I have. Trust me. You do trust me, right?"

Milo sighed, "It's either I trust you or I trust myself. Frankly, I'd rather trust you."

"Excellent!" Peter said brightly, "Then let's go and prepare for the fight of our lives."

Chapter 32

“When the battle’s lost or won.” (Shakespeare)

Late That Evening

Hiding behind a tree, Benedict could feel the excitement lightning all around him. He had seen so many battles in his life, yes, but it was going to be this that shunned them all. This siege had been the fiercest he had ever seen. Enough blood had been shed to flood the castle over. And tonight it would be over. If not over for the castle, then over for his army. It was all a gamble – perhaps the feeling Benedict had was more terror than excitement. He ignored the thought though.

He couldn’t ignore the fact that the rebels had been so clever though. They had taken down Norton after all. It was an assassination that Benedict condemned, yet he still applauded on the inside. The rebels had done what Benedict had always wanted to do. And Benedict couldn’t help but be amazed that even after Peter de Vere was killed yesterday, his men were still fighting valiantly. He had seen many rebels over the years who would turn and run as soon as they saw their leader fall. It was as if all the men in that castle had transformed into their own leaders.

Benedict wished he had the chance to use his catapults. He loved those machines, how they could hurl death down on anyone. But there they were, still unassembled and in the wagons. There were still a couple logs on the road after all. If only Peter had given them another day, those logs would have been cleared and he could have unleashed his catapults. Oh well. The siege would end that night, and that was all that mattered.

The letter from Killigrew was encouraging. The jester had said that that garrison wouldn’t expect an attack that night. Despite the fact that Benedict had lost respect for Killigrew – considering all of the failures the jester had embarrassed him with as of late – Benedict had no choice but to believe his traitor on the inside. What else was there to believe?

There was no moon that night. Good. The guards along the wall wouldn’t see the advance. From here, Benedict could see the flicker of the lit torches lining the curtain wall. He smiled – the torches were lighting his way home. It was going to be a glorious night. He just had to wait for the drawbridge to be lowered. All of his men were behind him, holding their breath for that moment as well.

Come on.

Come on.

Suddenly, there was a loud groaning. Benedict looked up and saw the silhouette of the drawbridge as it creaked over the moat. He couldn’t hear any sounds of alarm in the castle and assumed that Killigrew had actually done something smart for a change. None of the rebels knew at that moment that they were going to die. Good.

As soon as the drawbridge settled against the moat, Benedict strode out of his hiding place in the forest and walked brazenly towards the castle, dressed in his finest suit of armor. As he flicked down his helmet’s visor, his heart thundered as he heard hundreds of soldiers step out with him, their armor clinking with each step. He had made the choice to keep his archers back at camp. No point in having them slaughtered in the hand-to-hand combat that would arise. He made a rare mistake before involving that. No more. And he could have brought his cavalry with him, but he had sent them to Lincoln. There was word of unrest in the town, and Benedict didn’t want to fight a rebellion so soon after ending another. And besides, what good is a horse when fighting in the halls of a castle?

It was going to be a night busy with blood. Through the metallic footsteps, Benedict could almost hear the Grim Reaper sharpening his scythe against stone.

As the English marched towards the castle, Benedict couldn’t help but feel apprehensive. Everything was going too well, and it scared him. He could only recall two other times in history where the enemy was able to sneak in through a castle: those times were Troy and Antioch. Benedict had an abundance of faith in himself, and still he doubted whether he would be the third great besieger.

It is too late to back out, though. Not when we are about to cross the drawbridge. Too late.

As they crossed the bridge, Benedict's anxiety soared. He glanced back to see his men were becoming nervous too. The whole castle was shrouded in silence. No one had bothered even to challenge them yet.

As they walked into the courtyard, several of his men muttered with disgust as they tramped into something slick and smelling. Benedict ignored the grunts as he looked around, curious. He didn't see a single guard patrolling the castle's grounds. Surely Killigrew didn't distract all of the guards or even, dare he say, kill them?

He didn't give a damn for Killigrew at the moment, though. He wanted to know why he hadn't seen a rebel yet. It was eerie, the silence.

That was when the silence died. It was the first thing to die that night, and it sent a shake up Benedict's spine.

He could hear a loud rustle from up on the parapet walk. He looked and saw almost a hundred shadows standing atop the wall, holding flames in their hands. How could they hold fire without getting burned? And that was when he realized something terrible: they weren't holding fire.

But their arrows were.

As one, the archers released their arrows, the fiery tips aiming straight for the ground all around Benedict. The courtyard immediately burst into flames. The slimy liquid on the ground had been pitch, and pitch burns. Dozens of English soldiers screamed and died in an instantaneous burst of light, their armor roasting them alive.

Thankfully for the English, the rebels didn't have enough pitch on hand to blanket the whole castle. Benedict still had more than enough men to level the castle. But it was hard when they were walking on the sun. Benedict screamed to his remaining soldiers, "Charge up there and slaughter the lot of them!"

The men could do little less than oblige. They would rather take the fight to the archers on the wall, where at least it was cooler. So hundreds of men – armed with everything from swords to maces to pikes – charged up the thin stairwells leading to the parapet walk. Benedict could see rebels holding fast to the stairwells. They had been anticipating an uphill charge as well. Meanwhile, arrows kept raining down through the inferno. One arrow killed a soldier right next to Benedict, the arrow sticking fast to the side of his skull.

For a brief moment – and it was the only moment in his career – Benedict thought that he was going to die. And he was terrified of it.

It had only been a short time beforehand that Peter had begun the second phase of his plan. After tricking Benedict into playing along with his plan, that is. It wasn't hard, though; it was easy enough to write a letter disguised in Killigrew's hand and sending it off by bird. From there, he had his soldiers pour any oil they could find on the courtyard. He didn't care if it was oil they found in the kitchens or pitch they found in the keep's storage chamber. From there, Peter gave his men a cheery speech and had them hide on the parapet walk on the curtain wall. He gave them orders to hide until the English army had fully entered the castle. From there, they simply had to catch their arrows on fire and launch them at the ground. Hopefully the oil would burst into flames and take the Englishmen with it.

Of course, there was the persistent nag that things wouldn't work out. What if Benedict caught on to the plan? What if Benedict brought his archers and they wiped out his own? What if Benedict's men were able to reach the parapet and slaughter Peter's rebels? And even if Peter won that night, there was the problem of the fire. An oily fire could easily annihilate the keep, which, unlike the curtain wall, was partially crafted with wood. Peter wondered if you had to destroy your home in order to save it. He wondered if his father's ghost could forgive him if that did indeed happen. But as he looked and saw Isaac and Milo standing on either side of him, he realized that it would all be worth it. Perhaps not at that moment. But it will be.

Peter cleared his throat and asked, "Isaac?"

"Yes?"

"Go and give the order for the drawbridge to be lowered."

"But of course, Peter," Isaac said graciously and walked off to the gate. As Peter watched the mad Irishman leave, he couldn't help but be concerned. Ever since Isaac assassinated Richard Norton, Peter couldn't help but notice that Isaac was more upbeat. And that made Peter uncomfortable for some reason, and he didn't know why.

Milo asked, "So, Peter, are you ready?"

"Of course I'm ready. Ready as I'll ever be..."

Peter went silent for a moment, then asked abruptly, "When was the last time you saw Isabella?"

Milo scratched his head thoughtfully and shrugged, "Not sure, sorry. Don't worry, though; I'm sure she'll be fine. She's likely hiding somewhere in the castle. She was always the smart one out of all of us...hey, where are you going?"

Peter had took off running along the parapet, towards the nearest staircase. He had no time to explain to Milo why he needed to protect Isabella. He had no time to explain just how much he loved her.

A few moments after Peter ran off, Milo could hear the drawbridge being lowered. A couple seconds after that, he could hear a massive metal monster stepping out of the woods, marching towards the castle.

"Isabella! Isabella! Where are you?"

Peter was running everywhere in the keep, trying to find his love. He looked in the main hall, her private room, the kitchen. She was nowhere to be found. Well, there was one more place. The same place where they hid when, as mischievous children, they hid. So Peter raced up the winding staircase towards the highest floor. It was where the private library had always stood guard. And Peter was praying that the library was guarding Isabella as it had for all of those years.

And that was the case. Isabella was huddled in the corner of the room, her arms wrapped tight around a Bible. Her eyes were wide and her lip trembled with fright. She knew that Death was coming for all of them. Peter held her gently and said, "Don't worry, love, everything is going to be all right. Just follow me. I'll hide you until this is all over."

Isabella refused to move, though. She even refused to speak, her mouth silently moving as she pressed herself harder against the wall. Peter tried to move her again, but she shook her head fiercely. He knew there could be no arguing with her, even at a time like this. And it was then that Peter realized he too couldn't leave, even if his men were dying in the courtyard below. If he had to fight for Isabella's sake, he would.

Peter heard voices echoing up the staircase. He was going to have to fight for Isabella sooner than he imagined. He rushed to the heavy door and pushed it close. He looked around wildly. He spotted a cabinet in the far corner. He turned to Isabella and said quickly, "I need you to hide in that cabinet right now, Isabella."

Isabella forgot to be mute and simply asked, "Why?"

"Because I don't want you to see what I'm about to do next."

She heard the voices from beyond the door, and she saw Peter unsheathing his sword. And she understood. She clambered into the closet and, before closing the door behind her, said, "Please don't die on me, Peter. I can't lose you."

"I'm living for no one else but you, Isabella."

She smiled weepily and closed the door.

Peter turned and faced the entrance. He could hear the soldiers outside struggling to knock the door in. As he waited, he couldn't help but think. About the time when he saved the Jew in Norwich. Peter was about to try his luck again, but this time it was against soldiers with swords and armor. Steep odds for any hero.

There was a heavy thump against the door. Then another. Then another.

The door caved in. Several soldiers were standing in the doorway, their armor glinting the candlelight coming from the hall. They saw Peter standing there, sword in hand, and they replied in kind with their own swords raised in the air. They warily crept towards Peter, knowing better than to just charge in. They circled him like vultures. Peter turned about, trying to make sure that his back wasn't to any of them. He could see the circle tightening around him, inch by inch. It was suffocating.

And that's when Peter decided he'd rather breathe.

He fainted as if to attack one of the men to his right, but suddenly spun and jabbed his sword at one of the men immediately charging from his left. He caught the soldier off guard as Peter's sword dug under the soldier's armor and buried into his belly. Now all of the soldiers were rushing Peter. There was a flurry of swords clashing against one another as Peter frantically dodged every blade. He dove to the ground as soon as a sword – whose swing was aimed for his neck – swished overhead.

As Peter ducked, he darted for an opening in the confusion and dashed out of the crowd. As soon as he made it out of the frenzied herd, he ripped his sword along a soldier's back. The soldier cried as he fell, his hands grasping at the hard-to-reach wound that was oozing blood. The other soldiers crowded Peter once more, their swords clanging like terrible thunder in the room.

Isabella looked through a crack in the cabinet door at the carnage. She watched as her love – a man who she still remembered as a kind, though stubborn boy – was jumping about, plunging his sword into the soldiers and reaving their lives. She watched in horror as one of the soldiers ran towards Peter's back, trying for a coward's answer to the problem. She wanted to scream out to Peter as warning, but Peter was expecting the sneak attack. He ducked and the soldier tripped over him. Peter lifted the soldier with a grunt and heaved him into the other soldiers, causing the whole group to fall to the ground.

Peter swung his sword in a mighty arc, the blade whistling eerily as it sliced through another man's skin. A soldier jabbed his sword forward, but Peter just barely blocked the blow and punched the soldier in his sword hand. The sword clattered to the ground as Peter threw a hard punch to the soldier's face, collapsing him to the floor.

There were only two soldiers left. If they weren't wary before of Peter, they certainly were now. They backed away just a foot, but Peter noticed. He laughed tiredly, "Come on. I know you can do better than that." "As a matter of fact, they can. I am the best they have."

Everyone turned to see a stocky man dressed in heavy armor standing in the doorway. The English soldiers immediately snapped to attention.

The man motioned to the soldiers, saying, "Go out into the courtyard. The others need you more than I do."

"But General..."

"Just do it!"

"Yes General."

The two soldiers rushed out of the room, leaving behind the man, Peter, and the hidden Isabella.

Peter turned to the man and asked, "May I assume you're the Benedict Marshall?"

Benedict nodded and asked politely, "Yes, and who, may I ask, are you?"

"I'm Peter de Vere. I don't know if you remember talking with me before. I seem to recall you asking for my surrender."

Benedict sputtered, "No...no, that's impossible. I saw you die!"

Peter shook his head, "Nope, it was all just an act. A very good act, now that I think about it."

Benedict stepped over his fallen soldiers, saying calmly, "So, we meet face-to-face. Finally. There's no more wall for you to hide behind."

"And there's no more troops for you to hide behind either."

They began circling each other.

"So, Benedict?"

"Yes?"

"Tell me, do you wish for nothing more than to see me die?"

Benedict smiled, "I would love that moment."

"Good, because that will make me feel less guilty about killing you!"

And with that, Peter lunged towards Benedict, his sword hissing in swing.

Chapter 33

“The contest for ages has been to rescue liberty from the grasp of power.” (Daniel Webster)

Milo was having the time of his life, stopping time for others' lives.

The executioner from his past was coming back, haunting his giant arms, his ferocious roar. As he swung his axe in a huge swoop, he thrilled at how it whistled in the air. It was like talking with an old friend.

The English soldiers were strong, yes, but Milo was an army stronger. He was holding one of the staircases leading up to the parapet. If the English soldiers reached the wall, they could cut down the rebel archers entrenched up there. And there was no way in hell that Milo would let that happen. He stood on the narrow stairs, swinging his battleaxe at anyone who dared to step closer. He suddenly realized what the Spartans felt like at Thermopylae, holding off the entire Persian army. He forgot the ending to that story though.

His axe wasn't always for slashing limbs though. It was meant for a woodcutter, not an executioner. But it felt so light in his beefy hands, and it glistened the sunshine so well, he couldn't help but be drawn to it. No wonder people thought he was an animal, an executioner solely for the fun of it. He defended himself, saying the pay was good and the hours were better.

But he looked more animal than anything else as he bellowed a warcry and knocked an English soldier off the stairwell with the broadside of his axe. The soldier screamed as he fell twenty feet to the smoldering ground below.

Milo stole a quick glance at the other stairwells. He was horrified to see that his comrades weren't faring as well. The English were flooding those steps, almost reaching the parapet. Once they did that, all that Milo was holding onto was for vain. And Milo figured there were about two, maybe three minutes before that happened.

That quick glance was costly. The English soldiers saw Milo lose his focus and so they charged. Milo turned like lightning and crunched a rushing soldier with his axe blade. The axe shattered the man's armor and snapped several of his ribs. The axe got stuck in the soldier for a moment. Milo mightily wrenched it out and kicked the soldier all in one motion. The man fell back into the crowd of jostling soldiers, pushing the men down several steps.

At that moment, the wall went silent. It was an odd sound. Milo realized with terror that meant the rebel archers were out of arrows. As high up the castle as they were, they just dug their hole even deeper.

The Englishmen – cheered by the fact the rebels ran out of arrows – surged upwards, catching a surprised Milo off guard and off balance. He fell back before the rush of armor and arms. He could see a mace raised in the air, ready to come down on his head. Milo closed his eyes and waited for death with clenched teeth.

Death forgot about him though. Milo opened his eyes and saw Isaac blocking the mace with his longbow. The bow was crackling under the mace's fury. Isaac grunted and – grabbing the dagger at his belt – lashed out with the blade and stuck the soldier in the eye. The man screamed in pain and fell back into the arms of his armored brothers.

“Thanks, Isaac!” Milo yelled, standing up and slashing at the English soldiers with his axe once more.

“We've lost!”

“Tell me something I don't know!”

“No, no! There's more men running here! Must be reinforcements for Benedict!”

Milo shouted, “Shit!”

But the army that charged through the gates didn't belong to Benedict. Hundreds of men, all bearing standards from the reaches of England, poured into the courtyard and charged the English army from the rear. Benedict's men – not expecting this at all – were promptly split up into groups and hacked down. The rebel army – seeing the pendulum somehow swing for them – charged down the stairwells, their swords up high and swinging.

The remnants of the English army, panicking that they were surrounded with no easy way out except for death, immediately began throwing down their arms and surrendering.

It took only a few minutes after the new army's arrival for the battle to end, but those minutes were brimming with carnage. Not only was the grand English army demolished for the first time in memory, but it was all due to some ragtag army of peasants. The peasants gloated in this as they assembled their prisoners of war and gathered up the English weapons.

The siege was over. They had stopped a mighty war machine all because Peter was more genius than the English were strong. The men didn't know it, but their victory would echo down the ages. The siege's ghost would haunt every English civil war from then on out.

But like all good things, they had to pay for it. Milo and Isaac looked out across the courtyard. They saw all of the dead and dying men from all sides of the fight. Was it all worth it? Was their freedom worth those lives?

Yes. There was no other answer.

As Milo and Isaac walked slowly through the courtyard, two men on horseback approached them. One asked Milo, "Do you know where I can find Peter de Vere?"

Milo blurted out, "Who are you?"

Milo wanted answers more than anything else at that moment. He wanted to know what was the mysterious army that came to their rescue.

The man cleared his throat and announced, "I'm Baron Thomas Kent."

He then pointed to the man next to him.

"And this is Lord Simon Kelsey. We're here to repay an old debt to the de Vere family."

Minutes before, as the battle raged in the courtyard, another battle was going on in the keep. It was just between two people, but just as epic.

Peter and Benedict were trading blow for blow, their blades clanging off the other's. The men were fighting for an eternity of five minutes. It took them that long to realize that there was going to be no winner in this. Still, neither man backed away. And neither man said a word. It was no time for chivalry and manners.

Peter had never felt more terrified in his life. He never fought someone who was his equal before. The fear clouded at his eyes. He swung his sword and put too much of his weight into it. Benedict ducked just in time and rushed forward, ramming his shoulder into Peter's stomach. A surprised Peter tumbled backwards, hitting the cabinet in which Isabella was hiding. Peter hit the floor and so too did the cabinet, which fell on its side and splintered from the fall. Isabella clawed her way out of the wreckage.

Benedict didn't expect this to happen. Peter, his mind blurry from the fall, cried out, "Isabella...run..."

"Ah, Isabella you say?" Benedict smiled demonically. He reached down and snatched Isabella up by the neck. Isabella tried to resist, clawing at Benedict, but the general ignored it. He said conversationally, "So I can see why Peter here would hide you away in a closet. Doesn't want his treasure carried away, now does he? You know, Alexander the Great married the widows of the generals he killed. Maybe I should continue the noble tradition?"

Peter pulled himself up through the pain and snarled, "If you do anything to her, I will kill you harder than I would have before."

Benedict laughed, "I'm sorry if I'm not afraid."

Suddenly, they all heard a strange noise out in the courtyard. Curious, Benedict strode over to the window, his hostage still in tow. His smile vanished and his face ashen, Benedict turned and flung Isabella to the floor next to Peter. He said, "It would appear God's on your side tonight."

Through his gritted teeth, Peter snapped, "He's always on the side of good."

"So he is. But your men are winning the fight and I have run out of time. We will meet again though. That much I know. Farewell, and may you still be alive long enough for me to cut you down next time."

With that said, Benedict swept out of the room. Peter was not ready for the general to flee. He drunkenly got to his feet and stumbled for the door. His head was still spinning from when he hit the cabinet. Still, he managed to pull himself into the hallway. But Benedict was nowhere to be found.

A minute later, there was a splash as a man jumped into the cold moat around the castle. If anyone was along that wall at the time, they would have seen Benedict swimming for the other bank.

So cowards can swim after all.

Chapter 34

“The story of love is hello, goodbye.” (Jimi Hendrix)

Next Day

Raven’s Crest – or what remained of it – was still smoldering in the sunrise blaze as people gathered in the courtyard. Peter looked out over the ruins of home and couldn’t help but feel the pangs of guilt. He destroyed what his family had built. It would take a long time to rebuild. It would take even longer to forget. But if he had to do it all over again, Peter knew that he would paint the castle in blood if it meant saving England from itself. No country should have to fall to its own greed. If it has to break for something, it might as well be honor.

Lord Kelsey and Baron Kent were already preparing for the long way back to their castles. A grateful Peter couldn’t think of any way to repay their kindness than to say goodbye. At Peter’s side, Milo, Isaac, and Isabella stood, united in a teary gratitude.

Peter said genuinely, “As heir to this castle, I can’t help but feel an obligation to you.”

Kent smiled, “You say that as if shocked, Peter. Your father was a kind and generous man. I would have gladly repaid his years of goodness with all my blood if need be. Besides, you are growing into his image. So who can call themselves friend and still say no to a face like that?”

Kelsey nodded and added, “And now that you’ve dragged us into this mess, Peter, keep being the rascal your father always was. Baron Kent and I aren’t too keen on risking our names…”

Kent muttered, “Nor our necks…”

“…for a man who grows lazy fighting darkness. What happened here, at this castle, did not end with last night. King Humphrey won’t forget it, and neither should you.”

Peter said, “Believe me, it will take much more than time to make me forget the injustices wrought against us, all of us. I already have plans for Humphrey.”

“Oh? Is that so?”

Peter nodded, “Yes. I want him to know what it’s like to have your home swept out from under you.”

Both Kelsey and Kent grinned mischievously. Kelsey said, “Well, good luck with that.”

“Thank you.”

“And remember, if you’re ever in need of our services again, we are always a letter away.”

“I will keep that in mind.”

They had their goodbyes and so they left, the noblemen going back down the road, their caravans kicking up dust behind them. The castle felt emptier now. After his garrison had disposed of the bodies stinking up the castle, Peter gave them permission to head to town and take their old lives back. He could still feel those tears stinging at his eyes when he thanked the men for every drop of service they gave. But Peter knew that all goodbyes lead to hellos. And like what Kelsey said just a few minutes before, Humphrey won’t forget the rebellion staged against him. The King’s men will come back. But every time they’d round the bend in the future, they’ll have Peter’s men waiting, their bows at the ready.

That was why he had to bring the fight to Humphrey first.

He turned to Isabella and, clearing his throat, said, “Would you excuse us for a second? I have to talk with Milo and Isaac for a moment.”

Isabella nodded, her raveny hair soaring in the strong breeze, and said, “But of course.”

He waited until Isabella was out of earshot before turning to his friends and saying, “Men, we have to finish this.”

Milo groaned, “I had a feeling you would say that.”

“Well, certainly you agree?”

“Oh, I do. Doesn’t mean I don’t want to avoid it though.”

Isaac was pensive then said, “You’re right. We must end this fight with the King. To do that, we must end him first.”

Milo asked, “So, what’s the plan then? Storm his palace and lop his head off?”

Peter said, "Something like that, yeah."

Milo sighed, "I should have known better than to question you. You always give me an answer I don't want to hear."

"Does that mean you don't like it?"

Milo shrugged, "No, no, no. I like it. I just don't like having to die in the process."

"No one's going to die."

"Except for the King."

Peter smiled, "Except for the King."

"Well, I'll take your word. I'm in. How about you, Isaac?"

Isaac said seriously, "I would love nothing more."

Peter clapped his hands together and rubbed his palms. He said, "Well then, now that we're all in on the mad conspiracy, let's begin the preparations."

Milo said slyly, "You know, after all of your crazy schemes, it starts to feel more like a ritual than preparation."

Peter laughed, "Well, here's to more decades of that nonsense."

Under Milo's jokes, though, he was worried. He realized he never told Peter about Isaac's demand, that he only wanted to be paid with the lives of Norton and Humphrey. And how could he bring himself to tell Peter – who stuttered with bloodlust for the King – that he had to step to the side and let the mad Irishman take the credit? All Milo could do was thank God that Isaac never said more than a couple words at a time. Because Milo needed all the time he could get to break the news to Peter.

"You're leaving? But why?"

Peter and Isabella were standing alone in the library. When Peter broke the news, she looked as if she was going to burst into tears at her love leaving again. Peter had to look out the window. Seeing her heartbroken tore him up as well.

Peter sighed, "We have to go to London. We have to kill King Humphrey, else he'll keep sending armies up here. We have to kill him so we can live."

"We can just run away."

"Us two?"

Isabella nodded frantically, "Yes. We could run to Scotland. Or Ireland. We can live long and in each other's arms..."

"Isabella..."

"You don't have to do this. No one said you have to."

"It's expected of me."

"Since when did you ever listen to what people told you, Peter? For christsakes, you fought the English army because you wouldn't listen to them. You're not even listening to yourself right now, are you? Are you?"

"Isabella, I have to fight. I have to free England from itself. It's decaying, love, it's decaying. I can't stand by and watch that happen. My conscience would be so heavy it would drown me. I want to show our countrymen what it's like to live in a world that is not a tyrant's paradise. I want them to live by no one's demands but their own."

Isabella pleaded, "Please, please promise me that you'll come back home."

"I will."

"Not in a coffin?"

Peter was silent for a moment, "I will come back."

He looked at her longingly, trying to remember everything he could about her. Although he wasn't the most Christian of men, he did believe in a Heaven. And like the Greeks he read so much of, he believed in a Heaven crafted of only the good memories. And he wanted to remember this moment for that Heaven. Because the tears slipping her eyes right then brought out her night irises – they looked like ink sloshed against parchment. She somehow looked even more gorgeous when she was sobbing.

"I will come back. You know why?"

"Why?"

“Because I love you, Isabella. I would come back from the dead just for you. I love you.”

Peter took Isabella in his arms and kissed her hard on the lips. He turned and swiftly left the room. He didn't want her to see him cry as well.

Isabella stood blankly in the library, not blinking a budge. She said softly after the silence, “I love you too, Peter.”

She then collapsed to the floor and wept bitterly, as if Peter was already dead.

Chapter 35

“Betrayal is the only truth that sticks.” (Arthur Miller)

Sheen Palace

Week Later

Humphrey was pacing the floor, alone in the throne room, trying to keep balance in his crumbling world. It had already been a few days since he was heard about the defeat at Raven’s Crest. A few days, and still he felt the shock every time he thought about it. To think, he actually lost. Against a rebel. A rebel who wasn’t even half as old as he was.

He nervously twisted his curly hair with one finger as he stared blankly ahead. He knew it would only be a matter of time before all of northern England was up in arms, enflamed by de Vere’s courage. They would see how Peter’s small group of rebels had defeated the English army, realize that if their numbers swelled by a few more thousand, they could storm the entire countryside. With half of England in revolt, it would only be a matter of time before the nobles would be – at the least – calling for Humphrey to step down. At the most? He didn’t want to think about that possibility.

Humphrey snarled to himself, “For God’s sake, Rose Forbe’s army was three times larger than Peter’s. Three times! I crushed her without a problem.”

But Rose didn’t have a castle to hide behind, did she? No. If I had smarter men under my wing, than Peter wouldn’t have gotten that castle in the first place. And what about Benedict? When people start calling for my head, they’re going to turn to Benedict for leadership. The rabble loves a smart general – and they’re going to love him more because his defeat is causing all this trouble.

A voice broke into his musings by saying fearfully, “Your Highness?”

“Yes!”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to barge in. It’s just that Captain General Benedict Marshall is here to speak with you.”

Humphrey was surprised. He wasn’t expecting Benedict to show his face around there after his embarrassing defeat. Still, he stammered, “Bring him in, now. I need to speak with him as well.”

The servant obliged and hurried out of the room. Benedict appeared a minute later, his hair ruffled and his tunic still splattered with dried blood from the battle.

Benedict approached Humphrey gingerly and said, “Highness, I am so sorry to fail you. I don’t know what happened...”

“Silence! You were in command of a grand army and you led them to the jaws of defeat! How could you miss it? What am I supposed to do with you?”

“I’m sorry; it won’t happen again...”

“Of course it won’t happen again! Because I am forcing you out of your position as general!”

Benedict was caught off guard by this. Startled, he asked, “What is to become of me then?”

“Well, since you’re no longer general, you have no purpose for this kingdom. So this kingdom has no purpose for you.”

Benedict laughed bitter, “So what are you going to do? Kill me and shove my corpse into the corner for the rats?”

Humphrey shivered, hearing the cockiness in Benedict’s voice. This isn’t a man who realizes his end is near.

With pure triumph in his eyes, Benedict strode towards Humphrey. The general said quietly, “I only lost the battle because you were the commander. Do you think I would ruin things for the sake of my reputation? No, I only did that for your reputation.”

Humphrey gasped, “You betrayed me?”

“You wanted to be the commander so badly. You forced me to take orders from you. You wanted all the glory of victory. Now you know what it is like to lose. Tell me, how does it feel losing a battle? I’ve never known the feeling.”

“I don’t...I don’t...”

“What, understand? Why would you? It’s hard to look at yourself from the outside. All anyone knows now is that the King lost against some measly rebels. See, when I fled the battle and made my way back here, I had a lot of time to think. A lot of time. And I. Just. Couldn’t. Bear to have a defeat. I can’t ruin my good career. So I thought, well, what if I made this defeat another victory? Not even Hannibal himself could achieve such a glory! So the way I see it, if you were the commander, then my hands have been clean the whole time.”

“Nonsense! This isn’t about the battlefield, is it? You’re just greedy for my power!”

Benedict chuckled, “Fancy you should mention that. You know, I would have gotten here even sooner, even with all my thinking. But see, I was visiting several noblemen along the way. They too have heard about your embarrassment, and they have grown rather tired of you. They want some new change, they want a spring to end your winter. And they think that I am up to the task.”

Humphrey, his stomach plummeting, asked weakly, “You? But you aren’t of royal blood...”

“Oh yes, I’m well aware. You think I don’t know that? But who said anything about becoming King? No, no, I have different plans for where my life is going. It is possibly for someone to rule a kingdom without God giving them the right. I’m sure you remember there being a Lord Protector ruling this kingdom in our lifetime.”

Humphrey remembered all too well. He was seven years old when his father died from the plague. Until Humphrey himself was deemed old enough to rule, one of his father’s close advisors took the reins as Lord Protector. As Humphrey looked at the power-mad Benedict before him, he realized that his reign had begun with a Lord Protector and would end with the same.

His knees shaky, Humphrey asked, “What are you going to do with me?”

“When I become ruler of this fine land, I can’t have you around. People get confused too easily. There can only be one ruler at a time. We must have a...smoothness – yes, a smoothness – to the way this country’s run.”

Immediately, Benedict lunged forward and plunged a jagged dagger deep into Humphrey’s chest.

King Humphrey Osbert of England – a man who was always too terrified of his enemies when he should have been afraid of his friends – gasped and collapsed to the ground. He clutched the sucking wound in his stomach. He could feel the warmth pouring out of him.

Humphrey whispered, “I hope you meet a worse end. Traitors always do.”

Benedict smiled down, “How can you call a hero a traitor?”

As Benedict left the throne room, he wiped his bloody dagger on his tunic. Several guards halted in front of Benedict and snapped to attention. One of them said, “General, we searched the castle for any of the King’s supporters. There were several, but we cut them down quickly. Queen Eva was already dead when we found her though. We think she may have stabbed herself.”

Benedict mused, “She must have known her time had come. Anyway, I wish to thank you all for keeping your loyalty to me, the right man. You will be remembered for this and you will be handsomely paid in the days to come.”

“Thank you, General!”

Benedict smiled. He couldn’t help it.

Chapter 36

“I met a hundred men going to Delhi and everyone is my brother.” (Pope Paul VI)

Road to Sheen Palace

They were just a few miles away from Sheen Palace when they decided to stop for the night.

Peter gathered firewood while Milo and Isaac scavenged for food. An hour later, they were all huddled around the crackling fire, eating wildberries and some vegetables that Isaac claimed to have “borrow” from an unsuspecting farmer.

An owl hooted somewhere east of them. The nightly breeze drifted the lullaby past them. The men were quiet, taking in what may have been their final night.

Peter cleared his throat, “You know, you men can turn back at any time. I won’t look at you any different, and I’m sure no one else would. Because, let’s face it, we will probably die tomorrow.”

Milo muttered, “Thanks for reminding me. I feel cheered up already.”

“I’m serious though. I want King Humphrey dead so that no one else will have to die. I’m tired of having good men’s deaths weighing down my conscience. It’s not healthy.”

However, Milo and Peter were both quiet. None of them dared to move. Peter expected that – and a tiny part of him was hoping they actually wouldn’t leave him. It’s lonely facing death. He wanted his friends by his side more than anything else.

Peter smiled a little and said, “Well, since you men are crazed enough to join me, I have no choice but to accept your...”

Isaac suddenly said, “Peter, I must ask you a question.”

Put a bit off guard by the interruption, Peter asked, “What is it?”

“If you don’t mind me taking a bit of the glory, I wish to be the one who ends King Humphrey’s life.”

Peter asked, surprised, “Why do you want the responsibility?”

“It was the deal I made with Milo here.”

Peter turned to Milo, who said sheepishly, “Sorry Peter. When I recruited Isaac to help with training the garrison, all he wanted in return was a chance at killing both Richard Norton and King Humphrey. Who knew we would have gotten this far?”

Peter was silent a moment, then laughed, “It’s okay, old friend, I would have done the same. As long as the King is dead. That’s all that matters in the end.”

He turned to Isaac and asked, “You mind telling me why you wanted to kill Norton and Humphrey so badly?”

Isaac sighed. He somehow looked years older. Looking out into the darkness beyond the fire, he finally gave his story:

“Years ago, I was happy. I had a beautiful wife. Her name was Juliet. She had hair the color of the sun. She had a laugh that was rain on the roof. We lived with our little family in a village in Connacht. I had a job as a Fletcher, making arrows for the local hunters. We had a few short years of peace. That is...before the English came. Humphrey wanted to expand his kingdom at the cost of my homeland. My fellow countrymen resisted bravely against the English army’s iron might, but it wasn’t enough. We didn’t have much beside bows and arrows, which couldn’t cut through the English armor. All of the little kingdoms throughout Ireland fell. It got to the point where even my own village was threatened. Word had it that the armies were just a few days’ march from us. I wanted to get my family out of there, but I needed supplies. I rushed to another village to pack up on food and such. When I got back though, it was too late. My village was in flames. It was during the...it was during the battle that several soldiers broke into my house. They killed my three sons, my two daughters, slitting all of their throats. And one of the soldiers, he dragged my wife out into the middle of the village and he raped her before slitting her throat as well.”

Isaac was silent for a moment. In the pale firelight, Peter was sure he could have seen a rare tear falling down Isaac’s cheek. The Irishman continued, his voice shaking with a freezing anger:

“My neighbors witnessed the massacre. They saw what my wife’s attacker looked like. They told me about his ghoulish face, his slicked hair, his shiny armor and tunic. So, I began hunting him, like the animal he was. When he left Ireland, I was on a boat coming right after him. I tried tracking him here, but it was too difficult. He was always on the move, and he was always with countless guards. So, I decided to make myself a nuisance. I knew that once he heard there was an Irishman causing problems and robbing nobleman, he couldn’t resist it. He would have to find me. I made myself a trap for him. That man was Richard Norton. I am proud to say that I am the reason why he is no longer Norton. Now he’s nothing more than a skeleton getting dirty in the fields. I want that demon of a King to keep the slimy bastard company. I want to kick them both down to hell.”

Peter couldn’t blame Isaac for vengeance. He knew he would have done the same thing if anyone laid a hand on Isabella. Still though, the sympathy didn’t stop Peter from shivering a bit when he saw the manic glee of revenge in Isaac’s eyes.

Chapter 37

“That vile name to perish on my sword!” (Shakespeare)

Sheen Palace

As Peter, Milo, and Isaac walked along the Thames bank towards Sheen Palace, the Irishman broke his common silence and asked, “Perhaps I should have mentioned this before, but how are we to get inside of the castle? Doesn’t he have guards? Lots of them?”

“Probably.”

“So...?”

Peter said conversationally, “So royal guards aren’t likely to go after one of their own, are they?”

Milo stopped walking and said sharply, “We’re dressing up as guards?”

Peter smiled, “Exactly.”

Milo asked, “So, how exactly are we to get the guards’ garb? I think we would need that to pass off as one of them.”

Peter smiled at how Milo spat out that last word. Peter said, “I have an answer.”

“I would hope so.”

Peter pointed in the distance and said, “My plan involves that.”

Milo and Isaac turned and looked. They were both silent for a few moments, then Milo said sheepishly, “Well, I would have thought of the same thing if you gave me enough time to think.”

The guard barracks were a good five-minute walk from the palace. The barracks would have been closer, but King Humphrey was disgusted by the architecture. He didn’t want it to cloud the beauty of the palace so he had the barracks built out of sight and out of mind.

Peter had a twinge of confidence in him now. He knew everything would be uphill from here. But at least the madness had a promising start to it. Although promising starts didn’t often have Peter and his two friends hiding in the bushes near the barracks door.

Peter whispered as they crept closer to the barracks, “There are probably only a few guards in there. Most – if not all – would be guarding the king rather than the barracks. This area is quiet too. They’ll never see us coming.”

Milo was aghast that his friend could surprise him constantly. He asked softly, “How do you know all of this?”

“During the Crusades, we marched across the mainland to Salerno to catch the boats going to Tunis. During the march, I talked with a man who once guarded the palace here. He had loose lips and they were even looser when he drank.”

“Oh.”

Peter said, “We have to trick the guards stationed at the door.”

“So it’ll be like when we broke into the armory in Lincoln?”

Confused, Isaac asked, “When did that happen?”

Rushed, Peter said, “Long story. We need a new act though. We can’t pretend to be a bunch of drunks. Not in the daytime anyway”.

“So what will it be this time?”

Peter just smiled.

The two guards inside of the barracks were bored silent. The day’s fishnet drag didn’t help matters any either. They were just some of those paid – they were uncomfortable with the word bribed – by the Captain General to stay behind in the barracks the day of the fateful coup. Although the men were somewhat troubled by the bloody rise to power, they never really felt any sense of loyalty towards the late monarch. Besides, any guilt they had for being part of the conspiracy was relieved when they remembered that Benedict was their leader now. Benedict, the veteran of battles across the land and the victor of every soldier’s spirit. And the fact

that Benedict was competent surely was a startling change for the better. Benedict was already promising higher wages for his guards and the rest of the army. The soldiers knew better, though – they knew the quickest way to a peoples’ heart was through money. Lots and lots of money. When the coffers go dry, that is when the revolt clamors.

Unfortunately for the guards, the bloody coup the other day was the only thing that was exciting for them lately. Hardly anyone had the brains or pure courage to shatter the royal aura of Sheen Palace – well, except for the general himself.

Well, take that back. There was that one drunkard who stumbled onto the grounds unaware a few months back. He begged for mercy when he sobered up, saying he didn’t know what he had gotten himself into. They sent him dragging and screaming to the Tower of London still. No one will see him in any of the taverns ever again.

That was why the guards were curious, in a suspicious way, to see a trio walking up to the barracks. The men didn’t look familiar, and the locals knew better than to be anywhere remotely near the palace.

As the men neared the barracks, the two guards noticed they were drenched in mud and fatigue. As the travelers staggered closer, the guards stepped forward and one of them demanded, “What is it that you men want? This is the royal guard barracks. We don’t deal with petty affairs around here.”

One of the strangers suddenly started sobbing in his hands. One of the others – a towering mountain of a man – explained, “We were going on a pilgrimage to Canterbury when our party was suddenly attacked on the road by a pack of highwaymen. My two friends here and I just managed to escape with our lives, but our fellow travelers were not as lucky. We have been tramping through the forest ever since, lost and without any money or supplies. It was only by a twist of good fortune that we have stumbled upon these barracks in the middle of nowhere. All we ask is some water to drink and directions to the nearest monastery where we can seek sanctuary until we can get back on our feet.”

The guards looked at each other and back at the poor pilgrims. Finally, one of them sighed and stepped into the barracks to get a bucket of water for the men. The other guard – reluctant to smudge his glinting chainmail on the pilgrim’s mud – gingerly told them how to get to the nearest monastery for charity.

The guards were just being good Catholics towards their fellow men. Kindness, charity, a hope that every good deed would cut their time spent in purgatory. It was the Catholic way, and it was catholic.

The guard who went in for water came out a minute later, saying, “We haven’t much water, but this will do...”

He stopped dead in his tracks. His fellow guard was knocked out cold, the lanky pilgrim pinning him to the ground in case he came to. The other two pilgrims were walking confidently towards the remaining guard. They were crackling their knuckles noisily, hungry for blood in the water.

The guard dropped the bucket and drew his sword. He snapped, “Is this how our goodwill is rewarded?”

The huge pilgrim explained, “Our goodwill is better than yours.”

The guard leapt forward, ready to attack the leaner man with a grizzly, golden-brown beard. Unfortunately, this man was too fast for the guard, already ducking out of the way of the sword swing. The guard tried his damndest to slash a gaping wound in the man, but failed each time. The man turned a swift fox and grabbed both of the guard’s hands, which were wrapped around the sword’s hilt. He pulled the guard’s hands over his head and pushed the guard against the wall of the barracks. The stockier man leapt forward and threw several solid punches to the guard’s stomach.

The guard’s eyes flew wide open for a moment before woozing drowsy. He slid down to the ground, limper than paper. Peter turned to Isaac and Milo, saying, “Clean yourselves off and grab their clothes. I’ll see if I can find anything for myself in the barracks.”

Milo asked, “Shouldn’t we all go into the barracks?”

“Why?”

Milo shrugged, “There might be guards in there.”

Peter smiled, “If there are, I’ll be sure to let you know.”

Peter slipped into the barracks and the two tried on their garb. Milo strained into his clothes – which were just too small for him – and Isaac grinned, “I’m surprised the seams haven’t come loose yet.”

Milo snorted, “Well, at least I wasn’t crying the whole time so I wouldn’t have to talk to the guards.”

“You try talking with an Irish accent, see how far you get in the world. Why do you think I hardly talk?”

Peter called out from the door, “Okay, that’s enough, you two.”

Milo and Isaac turned to see Peter standing there, dressed in the same uniform as they wore. It was a seablue tunic that flowed like a monk’s robes. The helmet shone brilliant – it was simple but durable, missing a faceguard but protected on all other sides by a heavy steel. Milo could feel excitement ripple over him as he saw the sword Peter had sheathed to his side. After all of these months of fighting the tyranny in their land, they were taking the fight to the beast’s lair. They were going to stamp out the monster, and England would be able to live with itself again.

Peter barked, “Let’s go.”

It took all of fifteen minutes for the trio to break into Sheen Palace. Well, not so much break in as they did walk in. As they marched through the halls, Peter felt that same confidence, that his plan would work. Still, he was amazed by how far they had gotten so far. Every guard that walked past them gave the group a curious look, probably wondering why so many guards were clumped together the way they were.

Peter thought, If I had known it would be so easy to break in, I would have killed Humphrey months ago myself. If I had done that, then the siege would have never had to happen. But hindsight is flawless while foresight is blind.

And Peter should have been worried. They were in enemy territory, where everyone wanted to kill him. But he looked on either side of him – seeing his good friends marching with him – and he could feel his morale blush up into his face. If he had to die today, it would be with those men.

They snaked through the corridors until they finally came across a huge oak door that seemed to chew up the entire wall.

Peter inhaled sharp and announced, “This must be it, men. Let’s finish what we started.”

The others nodded silently and stepped forward without a hair of hesitation.

Peter plunged his hands forward and grimaced as he swung the heavy wooden door open himself. A wave of chilled air breezed around him and the men – despite what they were going through – couldn’t help but silently gasp at the magnificence of the cavernous throne room. Peter had only heard rumors in the past of how lavish it all was, but as he looked around, he realized that the rumors weren’t enough. There were the rich tapestries covering every wall, rugs from the Far East drenching the stone floor. In the middle of the room was what stopped Peter’s heart the most though.

There had to have been two dozen guards standing at attention in a square formation. Peter’s panic at being so overwhelmed by numbers gave way to the realization that their backs were to him. They didn’t know Peter and his friends were there, at least not yet. Peter took advantage of this by yanking Milo and Isaac with him behind one of the tapestries.

Peter motioned that they were to wait. Hopefully, most – if not all – the guards would clear the room eventually. During this, Peter was praying to himself that the guards wouldn’t notice three pairs of feet creeping from under the tapestries. Although Humphrey had paid enough for the fancy patterns to reach almost from the ceiling down the floor.

Suddenly, Peter heard a side door opening into the throne room. There was the sound of heavy boots marching on the rugs. The steps halted and – for the second time since they got there – Peter’s heart froze solid.

“Guards! I have brought you here today to announce that I – Captain General Benedict Marshall of the grand English army – have been elevated to the honorable rank of Lord Protector, leader and defender of all that’s right and good with England.”

Shocked, the trio traded bewildered glances, not sure what to make of the news. Peter wondered wildly, If Benedict is the Lord Protector of England, than what happened to King Humphrey?

But Benedict continued talking, and he took away their questions.

He announced sharply, “A few days ago, I confronted King Humphrey about his failure to capture Raven’s Crest. How he had failed his people once more. Humphrey became insane at hearing this truthful charge leveled against his weak honor. He at once tried to murder me, strangling me with his mad hands. I bravely defended myself against his insanity, and during the struggle, I stabbed him. He died a short time later

and I can safely say that, given his history of selfishness and incompetence, his death was the best sacrifice he ever made for this kingdom. With the king dead and the queen having immediately committed suicide afterwards, I have determined that I myself am the most worthy of leading this country. I shall do my best to be fair and judge every man righteously, erasing our past mistakes. We will rise from the ashes of Humphrey's neglect and we shall become new, a land..."

Isaac screamed, "How dare you!"

Peter and Milo snapped to the side and saw their friend leave the tapestry and walk defiantly towards the throne. Isaac ignored the looks of the surprised guards, who were now drawing their swords and rushing towards Isaac. Benedict threw up his hand and yelled, "Stand back! Stand back! I want to know who this man is before you cut him down!"

The guards – always loyal to the general – stopped on command, their hands still itching on the sword hilts though, ready to sink blades into the heart of the mad Irishman. Benedict demanded of Isaac, "Who are you and what are you trying to attempt by challenging me?"

"I am Isaac of Connacht. I was once a highwayman, robbing from the noblemen of this kingdom. I fought in Raven's Crest not too long ago, where I defended the rights of freemen everywhere by fighting your army. Dozens of men have met death at my arrows, Lieutenant General Richard Norton being my most favorite killing."

Even glimpsing between the tapestries at a distance, Peter could see that Benedict blanched at that last sentence, remembering all too well how Norton died. Meanwhile, Peter and Milo were silently begging their friend to turn and run before he got all three of them killed.

Isaac continued bravely, "I came here today to murder King Humphrey. You have taken that joy away from me. For that you will pay. I will kill you!"

Isaac ripped his sword from the hilt and charged the throne. Benedict screamed, "Kill him!"

The guards swarmed Isaac. The Irishman whipped his sword around in a wide arc several times, slashing and hacking away at any man who dared come too close. As Isaac flailed around, though, he was in too much of a confusion to watch his back. Several guards slipped in behind him and slashed him several times across the back, causing the valiant Isaac to roar in fury and face his cowards. Isaac was brilliant with an arrow, and just as much a genius with the sword. He chose what man would die in that second and plunged his sword into the chest of the doomed guard.

When Isaac did this, the sword unfortunately stuck fast to the guard. He couldn't get the blade out. He desperately pulled and heaved in his moment of weakness. It was a moment too late, though, as the guards took their chance and rushed in. Isaac got pummeled from every direction with blades as he received his final honor – dying in the fight.

While this was going on, Peter and Milo were quietly arguing with each other behind the tapestry.

Milo whispered harshly, "We have to help him! We were supposed to fight together!"

Peter somehow kept a grip on his giant friend and snarled, "I don't care. It's too late for him. If we rush out now, it'll be too late for us. Besides, we have something more important now."

"What's that?"

Peter growled, "Kill Benedict."

Milo stopped struggling and asked sharply, "Then what are we waiting for?"

"I'm waiting for you to leave."

This confused Milo. He asked, "What?"

"Leave, now. I need you to go back to Lincoln. Watch the castle, watch my mother, watch Isabella. I need you to do this for me, and nothing else."

"I refuse to let you die today!"

Peter said evenly, "Who said anything about dying? Just go. We'll meet again. Just look after the things I love until I get back. Please."

Milo exhaled hard and looked carefully at his old friend. He could see the angry conviction in Peter's eyes. He had never seen Peter with that stare and be wrong about something. Still Milo was hesitant when he said, "Be careful, damn it. I won't be here to rescue you this time."

Peter smiled thinly and ran out from behind the tapestry. The crowd of guards were still focused on killing Isaac, too distracted to see Peter approach the throne. At the same moment, Milo – praying that he wouldn't be branded a coward – snuck out through the throne room door, making the long way back to Lincoln.

Benedict was watching the Irishman making a spectacle of himself when he noticed Peter out of the corner of his eye. Benedict was surprised – if just for a moment – before pulling out his sword. He was already tired of playing king – the soldier was buried too deep in his psyche.

Benedict snapped, “You think that just because I'm playing king I've forgotten swordplay?”

Several guards noticed Peter and rushed to subdue him, but Benedict shouted, “No! Stand back! I will kill this man. I owe myself that much.”

The guards stopped and hesitantly held back. They were loyal to Benedict to the end, but they weren't sure if the end was supposed to be that day. Still, they stepped back under the weight of their obligation. With Isaac dead, the guards loosely encircled Benedict and Peter like vultures. They had their swords at the ready just in case.

Benedict – his sword pointed at Peter's heart – said calmly, “Why are you here, Peter? Here to kill me like that madman just tried doing?”

“We simply came here to kill a tyrant. You'll do just fine.”

Benedict smiled cold and asked, “So, we're going to finish our fight from the other week after all?”
“Yes.”

“Well, this time I will finish killing you!”

Benedict lunged forward, the tip of his blade zooming in on Peter's chest. Peter swung his sword up and barely blocked the strike. He grunted as he pushed Benedict's sword down and kicked the general in the knee. Benedict stumbled back a few steps, more out of surprise than pain. Benedict glared at Peter and asked quietly, “You know how you broke the siege?”

“Because you can't fight ragtag rebels to save your life?”

Benedict whispered in a snarl, “No! I let you win.”

“Wait, what...?”

Benedict suddenly slashed through the air, his sword coming in horizontal to Peter's neck. Peter held his sword up as his shield. The attack was just a ruse though; Benedict angled the sword down and cut a shallow gash in Peter's chest. Peter didn't have time to feel the pain. He spun around and rammed the broadside of the blade into Benedict's shoulder. The general inhaled with pain. Peter was sure he could hear the bone in Benedict's shoulder crunch.

Peter smiled, “I hope you don't use that arm a lot.”

Benedict – his face worked over with an unearthly fury that didn't match him at all – said with a tremble, “I let you win. It was the only way I could bring Humphrey down for his idiocy.”

“I don't understand.”

“How can you not, you fool? I needed to lose the battle to win the war.”

Peter – who had been lowering his sword during the past few moments – felt a sickening spasm of anger. All this time he thought he had been fighting King Humphrey. But Peter was nothing more than a pawn, and it was Benedict who had been playing the game of chess all along.

Peter asked, “How could you? How could you put yourself above all the people who love you?”

Benedict sneered, “They don't care. As long as there's someone throwing money at them, the mob doesn't give a damn who's who. I'm as good as anyone else, if not better. Do you really think I was meant to die on the battlefield? The battle wasn't going to be my end – it never was. It was going to be my means. My means to this throne. All I needed was time. And you, apparently.”

Peter slowly recoiled with disgust and said, “You're a monster. Your soldiers died for you, and this is how you repay them? With a political career?”

“I am not a monster. Don't call a thinking man a monster. Would you call Caesar a monster? Hannibal? Genghis Khan?”

“Yes. And time is the hero that kills all monsters. It will kill you too.”

Benedict smirked, “Is that so?”

“Absolutely. But you know what else is a hero?”

“What?”

“My sword!”

Peter bravely leapt forward, bringing his sword down on Benedict’s skull. The general blocked the attack with his own blade. Benedict swung low at Peter’s legs, but the young de Vere parried that swipe as well. It took a few minutes for both of them to realize that they were equally-matched. Equal in strength, equal in genius. Still, Peter knew that Benedict would win if the battle stretched on for long enough. Peter was already beginning to tire – he only had a couple more minutes of fight left in him.

Peter had to think of something quick.

For some reason, the first thing he thought of was being eight years old again.

He was sitting in the courtyard. His father was sitting in the grass next to him. They were watching the sun set. Peter’s mind ambled and he was picking at the grass. He saw a praying mantis, cloaked by the green, getting ready to pounce on an unsuspecting frog. The frog was croaking merrily away, not knowing it was playing its own funeral march. The mantis rubbed its legs together slowly for a moment, then it jumped. It didn’t take a second for the mantis to rip the frog apart, limb by limb. Soon, the mantis was chewing away on the fatty meat of the frog.

Father said, You see that, son?

Peter nodded.

That frog thought that nothing would attack it, since it was such a big frog. But the bug didn’t kill it – the frog’s arrogance killed it long ago. The arrogant men in the world don’t look out for things. They aren’t aware. Have your foe’s weakness be your strength.

Yes, father. I will, father.

The elder de Vere smiled and ruffled Peter’s hair.

Peter thought of that, and that was when he started studying Benedict’s moves. He realized quickly that the general was comfortable with swinging his sword high in each attack. He was too comfortable, and the sword was swinging too high.

Peter suddenly took several steps back. Benedict pushed forward with his strikes, gleefully putting more and more strength into each blow of the sword. He could see sweat pouring down Peter’s face, he knew that victory was walking to him. Benedict suddenly stopped and whispered with a grin, “You’ve troubled me too many times. You know what I am going to do once I kill you?”

“What?”

“I’m going to wipe Lincoln off the map. I will kill your mother, wherever she’s at. And as for your lovely damsel? The possibilities are endless.”

Like lightning, Benedict raised his sword up – both hands on the hilt. He was going to bring the blade down and gut Peter right down the middle.

Peter was hoping he would do that.

De Vere lashed out with his free hand and grabbed the hilt of Benedict’s sword. With his other hand, Peter drove his sword through Benedict’s exposed armpit as hard as he could. Benedict’s scream was instant and carried through the palace quicker than sunlight. But the pain didn’t stop there. Peter’s sword continued digging, going through the weak skin of the armpit, rupturing the artery that ran just beneath the skin, piercing his windpipe, and jutting out the side of his neck. The blood gushed out of Benedict’s body. His throat caved in, Benedict turned mute. His eyes immediately glassed over with silent tears. Peter grabbed Benedict by the shoulders and snapped, “Now you can never hurt Isabella. Never.”

Peter let go and Benedict fell to the ground. He was dead before he hit.

The guards rushed in and Peter threw his hands up in surrender. He was expecting to be killed on the spot. But the guards pulled him by the arms out of the room. Peter knew immediately where they were dragging him.

They were going to take him to his execution.

Chapter 38

“I have always preferred the reflection of the life to life itself.” (Francois Truffaut)

Tower of London

It had only been an hour since the guards had tossed Peter into his cell in the Tower, and already the condemned was thinking of his execution. It was a miracle he was alive in the first place to ponder his soon death. It is rare to outlive the coup you stage.

Peter looked down at his hands. They were still crimson with Benedict's blood. He saw a bucket of dirty water in the far corner. He dunked his hands in the water, hoping to scrub off his sin. Peter flinched a little when he saw a dead rat floating in the water. He picked up the carcass and tossed it to the side. He turned back to the water and cleansed himself. The water took on his troubles in the end – turning an eerie red – and Peter collapsed on the ground and closed his eyes. He was still shaking like mad from the day, and he wanted to calm himself out of it.

How do they kill an assassin? Torture? Burning at the stake? Decapitation? Drowning? Hanging?

No, Peter couldn't think of such things. He couldn't spend life wondering about death. He couldn't let doom conquer him this quick.

So he thought of other things. First thing that came to mind was Ida. Her predictions had all held true to the end. Everyone had their doubts about her, but she was leading them all by the strings since the very beginning. Peter thought of Milo and how much he was going to miss the old brute. Peter's life was going to be a small one, but Milo was a large part of it. He could only hope that Milo made it out of the palace alive and was already on his way back to Lincoln. He had to be – who else could he trust to look after Isabella?

Peter felt a stab of pain at the thought of Isaac's heroics in the throne room. It would be easy to write him off as a madman. But there is always a fine line between bravery and insanity, and Isaac had to cross it in order to rush up to Benedict and his guards. But when you've lost everything you've ever loved, what else do you have to lose?

And Peter thought of all the things he still had to lose, and he wondered why he was sitting where he was.

It was true that Isaac had ended Norton's life awhile back, justice for the Irishman's murdered wife. But Peter could always see it in Isaac's eyes, that the vengeance was never enough. The Irishman wanted Humphrey, but Benedict beat him to the punch. Perhaps that was why Isaac rushed out into the throne room earlier – it wasn't out of bravery or insanity, but out of frustration. Frustration of losing your final chance at everything.

And Peter thought of his own life and how it was going to end soon. He had tried so hard to preserve his family – he had tried so hard to defend his father's home. His trying ended with all of the threats against Peter's life dead and gone. But what point was there to Peter's life now? His execution was a when and not an if.

Peter stopped thinking and he silently mouthed prayers he thought he had forgotten. He was muttering them for Isaac's sake, hoping that his afterlife was better than this life. He hoped that Isaac's wife was waiting for him on the bank of the River Styx with a smile in her eyes.

And Peter knew that he will be dead far sooner than everything else. That he would have to wait for his family and friends in the afterlife. Peter was glad that at least Isaac would be there to keep him company until then. It was going to be a long wait.

He was being too optimistic about the whole matter, in a way that no one should or would. It didn't take long for the feeling to vanish though. The second he thought of Isabella, and how he would never again hold her in this world of senses so strong they lingered in memory, he broke down crying, the weeping sloshing about his cell.

Chapter 39

“You can kill a man but you can’t kill an idea.” (Medgar Evers)

Two Weeks Later

As the cell door squeaked open, Peter knew he was meant to die that day.

Today was the day because instead of hearing a bowl of murky soup slide across the cold floor, he heard the soft thump of boots. Peter couldn’t make out who it was in the cell with him, but – judging by the silhouette amongst the shadows – it looked like Death himself.

A voice growled, “Up, you.”

Rough hands reached down and harshly jerked Peter to his feet. Peter didn’t bother resisting – a few weeks before he would have fought with his teeth bared. He didn’t know if it was because of the weeks inside this depth of hell, the bitter food, or the fact that he knew he was going to die soon.

Peter – awkwardly hunched over because his hands were shackled to his feet – shuffled through the dim dungeon, his guard gruffly leading the way. It had been two weeks here. Two weeks since he dug his sword into the late Benedict. Two weeks since he last saw his friends. Peter fervently hoped there was a truth to all of that heaven talk – he didn’t want to have to say he would never see his friends again. And all of this sad talk made him hate Benedict more for what he had done to the world. And all of this hatred for Benedict made Peter glad that he had turned assassin, if not for England’s sake, then his own. If Peter had to do things all over again, he would gladly carve up Benedict for the dogs.

The darkness suddenly vanished. Peter winced and blinked away the sunlight flooding his eyes. He wanted to lift his hand to block the sun, but he was still shackled together. The pain will be over soon. Don’t worry. He realized with a sadness that this would be the last time he would ever see the sun.

Peter could just make out that he was being led through the gates. Out of the Tower of London. Towards the barren strip of land that straddled the shore. He looked out at the Thames and realized that this would be the last time he would ever see water.

Peter could hear a cawing above his head. He awkwardly glanced up, could see a flock of ravens hovering high above his head. He knew that they were waiting for him to die, that he was nothing but a next meal to the vermin. Still, Peter couldn’t help but smile a little at the sight, and he didn’t quite know why.

Peter was being led towards the infamous Tower Hill, the chunk of land reserved for the public beheadings. It was a holy spot made sacred by the king’s enemies, their blood baptizing the ground in fountainous spurts. But it wasn’t church for the dying, though. It was a game to most, the poor peasants who couldn’t afford entertainment beyond the free public execution.

And the poor masses were out in force today. They were taunting and cheering Peter onwards to his death, hoping that he would put on a good show for them. Peter heard before that legendary criminals – he assumed he was one of those now – had their executions announced well in advance. The people wanted to see some excitement and the leaders wanted to set an example.

Peter looked straight ahead, not daring a glance at the crowd. He couldn’t bear to see the scornful faces. He could feel them pelting eggs and pieces of rotten vegetables at him, the food stinking of death. He could feel a kick at his side and he tumbled down. The crowd cheered higher.

Peter pushed himself up from the mud, roaring, “I am dying so that you may live! Can’t you see?”

His guard pushed him on and shouted, “No talking! We have no time for that nonsense.”

Up ahead, Peter could see the chopping block sitting on the hill. The crowd around the block seemed to pulse like a pulsing heart. As Peter inched closer, he could see a deep groove in the top of the block – it was where the condemned had to rest their head.

Someone spat in his face. Peter grimaced as he rubbed the warm stuff off with his shoulder.

They finally reached the chopping block. The guard pushed Peter down, his head resting on the splintery wood. Peter felt his bravery dip as the deep ridge in the block scratched and bruised his face. He saw that the grass around the block was stained a deep burgundy. Peter knew what caused the stains. He knew that very soon, he too would be helping to make the grass grow. Blood makes for a great fertilizer.

A man yelled, “Be quiet! Be quiet for a moment!”

The crowd’s shouting died down just enough for the man to shout out the charges, which went as such:

“Peter de Vere, son of the late Baron Albert de Vere! You are guilty for the following. High treason against King Humphrey for fighting his forces in battle! Assassination for killing the late Lord Protector of England, the great Benedict Marshall! Burglary for breaking into the royal armory stationed in Lincoln and stealing the King’s weapons! Breaking and entering the Lord Protector’s living quarters at Sheen Palace! Impersonation of an English soldier and a guard at Sheen Palace! Associating with known enemies of the English crown and conspiring to overthrow the Kingdom of England into anarchy! And criminal conversion for stealing a castle belonging to the King and using it to fight the glorious English army! For these crimes, you are ordered to be executed by decapitation. Your body and head will hang from London Bridge for the length of two months as warning that treason and defiance do not have a home here in England. Your family will lose their coat of arms and anyone with close ties to you will be arrested and executed promptly.”

Peter breathed, “My father will be proud.”

He could feel a monster eclipsing the sunlight above him. He knew it was the executioner. Peter called out, “Sir! I have something to ask of you.”

The executioner knelt down – Peter could feel his warm breath pressing against his ear. Peter said, “Sir, I have a few coins hidden in my pockets. I pray your blade is sharp and that your arms are strong enough to kill me in one swipe. I deserve a swift death. Nothing more, nothing less.”

Then came the words that Peter would have never expected.

The executioner whispered, “No worries, Peter. Also, Isabella sends her love.”

Peter’s eyes widened. He couldn’t help but break out into a grin – he had almost forgotten how to smile. His angel of death was an angel first.

The executioner stood up and a hush came over the crowd. The axe swing was moments away. As he heard the whoosh through the air, Peter felt a sudden horror. Was he imagining things? Was he really about to die, just when he thought he would live? He heard a scream and thought for sure it was his own. That he was losing his head.

It took all of two seconds for him to realize that the scream wasn’t his. He dared to look up and was shocked by what he saw. The man screaming was the guard who escorted Peter to the chopping block. He was screaming because he had an axe plunging deep into his chest. The executioner had tossed his black hood to the side – it was Milo. The bear was already taking out a sword, hidden in his black robes. He was swinging the broadsword at anyone who dared come near the two. Milo screamed, “Peter! Get the keys!”

Peter scrambled over the guard and fumbled through the bloody pockets. Finding the keys, Peter hurriedly unlocked himself free from the shackles. He grabbed the fallen guard’s sword and rushed to his friend’s help. There were dozens of guards pushing their way through the crowd towards the old friends.

Milo swung his sword at a guard’s head, cracking the skull. He shouted to Peter, “Come on! We have to get to the river! I have a boat!”

Peter grunted, “Be there in a minute.”

Peter was being distracted by a fight of his own. The guard he was fighting put too much strength into the swing of his sword and lost balance. Peter ducked and launched up with his own blade, the tip ripping through the guard’s rib cage and sheering his heart apart. Peter tried to pull the sword out of the body, but the blade was stuck in the ribs and Peter couldn’t free it.

Peter gave up and decided it was time to run. He tore off towards the river. He could hear brutal gasps behind him and knew the ragged breathing belonged to Milo. He was a strongman, but he never had the lungs for running.

He could see the boat resting on the shore. It was a tiny craft, just large enough for the both of them. Peter made the mistake and looked over his shoulder. The guards were almost on them.

Milo shouted, “Get the boat into the water while I hold them off!”

Peter crashed into the side of the boat and strained his muscles against the hull. The boat was small, but it was a thick, heavy wood. He was a skeleton after weeks of living on soup, but panic liquored through his muscles. He grunted and wheezed as the boat began wading in the waters.

Meanwhile, Milo had already turned and was facing off against the guards that gave chase. Like a cornered bear amongst wolves, Milo snarled and brandished his sword as the guards warily closed in on them. They had strength in numbers, yes, but Milo had strength, period. One guard made the mistake of closing in too early. He tried bringing his sword down on Milo’s arm, but Milo swirled and easily blocked the advance. With

a glide, he pushed his sword forward, knocking the guard off balance. Milo snapped downward and clutched the guard by the foot. The man went straight down to the ground. Milo's sword jumped after him, the blade landing with a sickening crunch deep into the man's chest.

Milo roared to the other guards, "And that was without trying!"

The guards – seeing one of their own so easily destroyed before their eyes – backed off, terrified. Still, when Milo boarded the boat, which was now firmly in the water, he didn't dare turn his back on the Englishmen.

They started down the Thames and just in time too. Peter looked back at shore and saw at least a dozen more guards just reaching the water's edge. Their boat hit the current and they swept down the dark river. For the first time in a long time, Peter closed his eyes and sighed long and hard. He turned to Milo and said with a smile in his eyes, "Thank you, old friend."

"Don't mention it."

"I think I'm going to have to every time I see you."

Milo, his eyes on the river ahead, said gruffly, "Don't embarrass me."

Peter added, "I remember, though, saying you weren't supposed to come back and rescue me."

Milo shrugged, "Well, you owe me. I can't let my debtors die on me."

Peter asked, "I owe you? Since when?"

"Since I just saved your life about five minutes ago."

"Oh."

"Yeah."

Peter was looking at his reflection in the water. He looked gaunt and scarred. Milo took a look over and said, "Oh, and I'm a much better swimmer since my youth. So you won't be able to repay your debt that easily."

With a tiny grin, Peter asked, "Oh? So you did learn something when we were children?"

"Yeah; that I shouldn't go swimming in a pond in the winter."

Peter laughed for a few moments, then turned abruptly serious. He frowned, "You know, the English army is going to be chasing across clear across the countryside?"

"I figured."

"Not only am I responsible for treason and assassination, you're now condemned for rescuing me. They'll be calling for both of our heads soon."

Milo smirked, "Well, I heard there's a castle north of here. We could try hiding there."

"That so?"

Milo nodded, "I heard, though, that the castle is falling apart. It just had a siege, you know."

"I didn't hear about that one."

"There's also a lunatic in the woods who thinks she's a witch. And there's a gorgeous damsel-in-distress who has a thing for idiots."

Peter asked innocently, "This castle, it isn't in Lincoln, is it?"

Milo – sporting a mock shock – said, "I thought you said you didn't hear about it?"

"Lucky guess. So we go to this castle, fix it up, and use it to fight off the English army?"

"It's worked before. Who says it can't again?"

Peter said, "Well then, it's back to Raven's Crest."

As they headed further down the river, London diminished until they were back out in the countryside. Suddenly, Milo shifted course and began rowing the boat towards shore. Peter asked, "Why are we stopping here?"

Milo pointed to shore and said, "Because someone decided to be nice and bring us some horses to get back home."

Peter turned and saw to his delight that Isabella was standing on shore, holding onto three horses by the reins. He could see the smile in her eyes the whole way from there.

Peter turned to Milo and said, "I think you're wrong. I think I'm already home."