

# Notice On The Draft

I'm glad you looked forward enough to my book to pick up this unpolished version. I feel bound to warn you, however, that there are spelling mistakes, confusing parts, stylistic problems, and other issues with this draft that I know are there, but have not taken the time to remove due to the fact that I will not be publishing this book.

I should also warn you that the reason I am not publishing this book is because it came to my attention that different people read this story very differently. This is due to my fault in picking a style for this story that did not work very well. There is a chance you may totally love this story, but there is also a greater than average chance that you may dislike this story or find it flat.

# Notice On Content

While I do not consider this a dark book, nor was my intention to make it edgy in any way, it is a fact that certain details strike readers as dark that others do not consider so at all. I feel obliged, therefore, to make a general list of content that could seem dark or edgy to certain readers.

Violence would be the most prevalent issue. Violence and death occur fairly often in this story, though not more than would be common for an action adventure novel. I do not go into great detail on deaths or injuries, but I regularly go into one or two details. There are also one or two lines that I could particularly see people finding gruesome, though I do think it will only appear so to a minority.

As far as language goes, there are only a handful of instances with the worst being one insulting use of the word bastard. Many of the other instances might not even be considered language.

Finally, there is some consumption of alcohol, though only occasional and not leading to drunkenness.

There is no sexual content in this book and nothing occult.

If this list makes you wince in any way, then it is possible that this book is not for you.

Now, onward!

# Chapter 1

## The haunt of the mad scientist

Trevor Allen ducked behind a rubbish bin as he surveyed the open square before him. Darkness had settled over the city, but floodlights lifted the load in this area. The buildings surrounding the square were covered in graffiti and the one dead tree in the middle rattled whenever the wind blew. Three girls stood beneath the tree, chatting. Trevor took a quick look over his shoulder and, seeing no one there, sprinted toward the girls. "Kayce," he said, stopping beside her, "we need to leave Hereford right now."

A girl of seventeen with light hair and a dancer's stance and figure turned from the company of the other girls. She flicked her hair aside and let a mischievous smile slip across her face. "What? You get a job finally?"

The other girls stopped chatting abruptly and stared at the newcomer with hollow eyes, but ones which sparkled and flashed like glitter. They cast glances at each other. "What's up, Trevor?" one of them asked in a tone of superiority.

"Come," he ordered under his breath. He looked the other direction and rudely jerked his sister by the hand.

"Woah!" she shouted, following like a pedestrian pulled by a dog. She craned her neck back toward her friends. "See you girls later. Brother's got something to tell me."

Trevor headed straight for a dark alley a block down. Over top, a thin dome of smog from a nearby factory drifted across like a sign advertising: "Welcome to 2050. The age of scientific advancement and comfort."

Prancing beside him, Kayce glanced into his eyes. Her own looked alive, almost too much so, and their brightness stung. "Something happen to you, Trevor?" She flipped her expression from jocular to that of one swallowing a lemon.

He didn't answer, but looked behind him, then darted off through the alley, took a turn, and cut across a strip of overgrown lawn and past a sprawling junk yard. Only streaks of red on the horizon showed that the sun had been there that day. Blaring lights of the city kept the inhabitants alive and restless and tainted the world with an entirely mechanical feel that felt like something between a narcotic

vision and a troubled dream. Dogs howled in the distance and loud, dreary music floated on air. Trevor and Kayce ran on, still hand in hand. Then no longer hand in hand.

At an empty car park between a fence and a rubbish bin, Trevor yanked Kayce aside. He leaned against the fence where the shadows were darkest and pulled her up against him. He leaned down and hissed into her ear, "It's Jerrold."

A rickety car drove by then moaned off into the distance.

The vivacity in Kayce's eyes dimmed and she took a step back. "Jerrold?" she asked. She was tense enough to spring several feet in the air.

Trevor bent his head, speaking through his teeth. "I overheard something I shouldn't have. You know the blood street gang? Well, they've plans to kill him tomorrow as he walks in to give his speech to the justice committee."

Kayce shook her fist, suddenly turning into the tigress. "See if somebody else doesn't die tomorrow. I swear by all—"

"Wait." Trevor dropped his voice so it was sharp as a knife. "It's worse. I was spotted and I'm running for my life right now. You can join me if you want, or you can stay here, but they'll probably track you down too."

Now Kayce struggled to hold back from exploding and moisture shone in her eyes. "What hope is there for this city if Jerrold dies? There isn't an honest leader in this rubbish heap besides him."

Trevor looked furtively about, keeping utterly quiet. It didn't do much to keep them hidden with his sister's muffled sobs, but he kept quiet anyway. No movements caught his eye other than a plastic bag blown steadily by a gust of breeze. He turned back to his sister and laid an awkward hand on her shoulder. "Definitely not much hope. That's what I'm trying to say. And maybe not much hope anywhere else in the world, but I'm willing to gamble on it. I'm not involved in Jerrold's reformatory stuff and there's nothing I can do. It's time to get out of here." He looked almost tenderly at the endless sprawling streets of concrete and decay where once so many fields had stretched.

Kayce shook his hand off. "So you're just going to let him *die*?!"

Trevor scowled and he took an impulsive step toward her. "Look, you don't understand. They'll be watching all the streets. They—" He froze as still as a glacier. A rhythmic clatter like a pickaxe on concrete mingled with the footsteps of a dozen men sounded not two blocks down.

"That's...that's *him*."

Kayce blinked. "Him?"

"Just—he's a crime lord. You're hearing his robotic leg." He spat out a curse and yanked her arm. "Well, don't stand there! Come on!" He started off at a run.

Kayce jumped as if electrocuted and fled after him.

They ran down a labyrinth of hovels, their hearts pounding in their ears and

footsteps pounding behind them. They passed a dead man in the streets with a ghost of a dog licking his face. At one house, a disheveled hag in a tank top half her size screamed at them and threw something. Trevor narrowly dodged the object and kept going.

There were no street lights—little moon.

Kayce took the lead as they came to one of the worst spots in the city. “Are you willing to risk it?” she asked, trying to yell and whisper at the same time. She pointed to a building to their left.

Trevor stumbled and put his hand to his heart. “Tha-that place?”

She nodded. “They won’t check it, will they?”

“No—but *I’m* not going there either.”

Kayce puckered her lips coquettishly, sticking her hands on her hips. “Well, maybe you’re okay with dying...”

The structure was one massive shack nearly the size of a house with peeled white paint that hadn’t had a fresh coat in eons. Trevor recalled many rumors of the mad scientist who supposedly lived there: tales that he performed experiments on human beings, lurked around at night in a white lab coat which glimmered in the moonlight, and that blood-curdling screams sometimes came from his shack.

“Richard says he fears that man more than the devil.”

Kayce snickered. “So what? Like he’s *seen* the devil.”

Trevor stared at her so hard she bit her lip. They both stared deeply into each other’s eyes.

*Clack. Clump. Clack. Clump.*

“Just remember: you’re the one who decided to do this.”

They made it to the shack in a heartbeat and Kayce tried the door. “Hey,” she said, “no need to climb through the window. It’s open.”

Trevor flung himself inside, pulling Kayce along, then carefully closed the door while simultaneously putting his finger to his lips.

“Trevor...”—Kayce stared past him and she had a tone of awe—“what do you think that is?”

“Shush! He’s almost —” Trevor saw it too and froze.

The shack was blanketed in darkness with only the moonlight to cast a pale luminance through the windows and it provided just enough light that Trevor could see the outlines of his surroundings. The shack was generally what he would have expected: scraps of metal, shattered glass, chemistry tubes piled in disorder, ancient yellowed volumes that looked like they were from the late nineteen hundreds, feathers, cans, rubbish of every sort, a skeleton in the corner with a crooked smile....

In the center of the room, however, it was completely different. It was immaculate. Not a speck sullied the polished floor and it looked clean enough to

belong to a palace. In the very center of this odd clearing stood a strange machine.

It was the size of a large army tank with pistons sticking out of it at strange points and electrical components Trevor had never seen before—stuff that looked like it belonged to a space probe. Strange metal bars with a purplish hue gave it an alien appearance and a black box shaped like a snail's shell was the most mystifying component. Around the whole apparatus ran a pipe with a faint green glow; Trevor could almost imagine that the pipe had a soul to it and was laughing to itself in hushed tones. It was like the haunted ghost of something from the future.

"I can't believe—"

"No 'can't's, Trevor," Kayce said, holding his hand. She pulled him along like an exhibitor right up to the machine. She swung open a door that Trevor had failed to see from his angle. "Here, I bet they'll never find us in here." Shouts still came from the street and Trevor's heart beat extra fast. It struck him that the skeleton seemed to be watching him from the corner and he muttered something about Kayce's insanity before following her into the machine. The door closed behind him.

Gagging on the stifling air, Trevor covered his mouth with his sleeve and crouched on the floor. The shouting escalated to a pitch out in the streets. It was muffled, but still audible. There seemed to be air vents or something that let a small amount of noise through. Glass shattered. Someone screamed. A gun fired—it was an automatic.

Trevor didn't want to know what was happening out there.

"Trevor?"

Trevor pursed his lips and held his finger to them.

Kayce shook her head and whispered, touching the door handle. "It's locked."

He gasped in more stifling air and looked for a window they might escape through. "I can probably pick it if I need—"

Someone had entered the room.

They both became as still as if they were furniture. There was a low cackling voice neither of them recognized. In his lowest whisper, Trevor huffed out, "Find somewhere to hide."

There was the sound of wheels outside like a dolly being moved around. Something settled down nearby with a *clunk*.

Kayce bent over into his ear and whispered, "You need glasses." She pointed to the center of their new cell. Trevor caught another green, glowing pipe. It was the same electrical equipment and the same machine, only smaller. He frowned.

There was a loud thump right outside the machine.

He twisted open the door to the inner beast, muttering, "One more lock..." Kayce stole in first and he followed.

It was even darker in the second machine. Trevor closed the door to just a crack and peeked outside. Another object hit the ground and the same eerie voice followed. Someone jiggled at the knob and Trevor shut the door quickly. Total darkness enveloped them.

There was a creak as the door to the outer machine opened.

Two footsteps pounded inside the machine and then complete silence reigned. At last, there was a faint click like the flipping of a switch and more followed in quick succession. The man in the machine breathed low, heavy breaths. More silence, then came an unnatural screech of triumph and sharp breaths. Trevor instinctively clasped Kayce's arm.

The seething stopped and a low voice that was almost animal in its desperation but still unmistakably human—even pathetic, said “I will be king...no —no, I will...” There was a long pause. “...I will rule over everything as one divine.”

The door outside banged open and what sounded like large, heavy, cardboard boxes began to thump against the base of the machine. Trevor counted thirty-four in all, then something was rolled in on wheels followed by large, metal objects that clanged as they hit the floor. Another long silence stretched out followed by two more footsteps into the machine. The same voice came again, but this time in whispers that were choked with grief and spoken like poetry. “Ungrateful world. Land of hatred and pride. One way to find peace. One path to rest. The day is coming when you all must bow.”

The door shut and the man flipped a switch. There was a low humming noise. The man's voice was even lower now and sadder. “The war has begun.”

Trevor flew against the floor as what felt like a million volts shook the black box and a green glow blinded his eyes. His heart pounded like a racing horse. Ear-piercing hisses grew into a screech, then a titanic boom, then the intense green light became unbearable and he wanted to die.

The world spun like it would spin itself to pieces and time ceased to be. Utter darkness mingled with eerie green. Noises disappeared and his senses turned off.

Then it stopped. Life hit him with a crash that left him stunned. Trevor slowly began to feel the floor beneath him and the pulsing of his blood in his head. Darkness was uncorrupted and pure. But there was something about this new life that was wrong. More wrong than anything he had ever experienced.

Birds chirped outside.

Trevor heard the man in the outer chamber of the machine suck in a quick breath and then open the door. There was a pause, and then—“The war begins.”

# Chapter 2

## A New World, A New King

Trevor slowly got up and stared toward his sister in the pitch darkness. His eyes hurt from bulging; his mind ran in circles, and he had to touch the ground several times to assure himself it was real. *Oh, it's sticky*, he thought. *Must have a polish on it*. If it weren't for the scientist right outside the door, he would have laughed a giddy, helpless laugh. Outside, labored grunts told him that the scientist was unpacking his things. Bird sounds still scratched at Trevor's mind like fingernails scraping a chalkboard. He curled up in a ball and waited for the door to fly open and some ghastly face to stare down at him. Minute after minute followed and the words of the scientist buzzed around in his mind on repeat.

The door outside shut abruptly with a gentle *woosh* and a few moments later an engine roared to life, then faded into the distance. Trevor listened to its rumble until there was nothing left to hear.

"Um...Trevor?"

Trevor rubbed his forehead and squeezed his eyes shut. His ears were ringing and he placed a hand on the floor, supporting himself. "What, Kayce?"

Her voice hushed as if she were telling a ghost story. "Do you...believe in the *supernatural*?"

He groaned. His skin hurt with the strength he gripped his forehead and he rolled back with his neck propped against the wall. Methodically, he tried to separate Kayce's words out of his mind and process events rationally.

"'Cause I think *I* believe," said Kayce.

"Nonsense!" Trevor sprang to his feet, wobbled, and caught himself with a hand on the wall. He bent over and something in his chest fluttered like a mini earthquake. "Just shut up, okay? Nothing's happened. We should just get up and go. The blood street gang might still be after us." He was tired. All he wanted was to get out of Hereford and find some place to bunk up for the night.

Kayce stared up at him. He didn't see it, but he felt it.

Somewhere outside the shell of silence, a bird trilled a boisterous tune.

Kayce shifted slightly. "...You mean that guy just drove off through that tiny door at the front of his shack? He was headed in that direction."

Chills crept down Trevor's spine and he stood still, listening, as if he expected the solution to this problem to declare itself out loud. The same bird trilled again, much louder. Groaning, Trevor fell back against the wall. "Well, we escaped at least," he said in a dead tone.

"That's how I look at it," Kayce piped up. Again, the bird trilled and Kayce stilled, listening. After a pause, she added with a sigh, "Well, are you ready to head outside?"

A lump formed in Trevor's throat and he lurched and fumbled for the door handle. He squeezed his eyes shut when the lock wouldn't give way. "I need to break it somehow."

Kayce stood up and skipped over on tiptoe, batting his hand from the door handle and grabbing it herself. She jingled it ineffectually and faced him. "Hey, just shoot it with your gun, Trevor. You have it on you, right?"

"What if he hears?" Trevor smacked his palm against the door and hid his face.

"Big deal." Kayce flung her arms in the air. "Just shoot him too. Come on. Give it some stick."

Somewhere in the distance, there was a faint horn blast. Kayce perked up. There was silence for a moment. "...Ghosts, you think?"

Trevor slumped his shoulders and grabbed his pistol. "All right. I'll do it." He pulled out his gun and put it up to the lock. With a blast, the door sprang backward and revealed the next layer of machinery. Trevor paused to smell fried wires and listen to the crackling sound of some electrical component in its death throes. Shaking his head, he tried the door, then gave a gloomy smile. "Hey. It looks like he didn't close it all the way." He shoved it open and bright light pierced his eyes. It was radiant and yellow and he hid his face in the crook of his arm. "What in the world?" He slowly pulled his arm away from his eyes and tripped over the threshold.

As his face hit the ground, he clawed his hands into moist soil and felt grass-blades brush against his nose. He blinked and stared. After a moment, he felt the tickle of an ant climbing up his arm. The birds sang a mighty chorus that rang in his ears.

"Why...this must be heaven!" Kayce gasped, almost in a squeal. She clapped and laughed. "It's so...*green!*"

Trevor tried to sit up, but the process was achingly slow. His muscles were jittery. Turning round on one knee, Kayce's glowing face came into his line of vision. It was flushed pink and her green eyes sparkled like she had just received the greatest birthday present ever. She faced him, flashing a smile. "It is! It must—"

"Shush, you!" Trevor nearly choked on his own voice. With a burst of energy, he managed to rise to his feet.

"Well, doesn't it seem like it?"

He approached her with one finger pointed at her, then stopped and waved his finger in a wide arc to encompass their surroundings. "You don't even know where this place is. Can't you see we're...stranded?"

Kayce assumed the classic I-am-a-girl-listen-to-me stance and scrunched her eyebrows. "Well, as far as I can see it, we're better off than we were before. This forest is lovely, isn't it?"

Trevor wheeled around and grabbed the door of the machine, squeezing it tight. He bowed his head. "Let's get out of here before something happens. There're two of these machines and the outer one smelled like some of the wiring was fried. I'm guessing they only work one way. We'll take the inner machine and go home."

Kayce looked at the ground and held her nails to her lips as if she were going to nibble them, but failed to do so as if she suddenly lacked the energy even for that. "What home?"

Trevor jerked the door back and forth and looked away. "Just come on!"

"Can't." Kayce folded her arms. "We'll get captured, remember?"

The door crashed against the wall of the machine with a shove from Trevor, then swung back till it almost closed. He wandered back with his hands in his pockets and let out a long breath. "Okay—fine. You get out the tent and the picnic basket. Since you seem to like this place, you can run the planning. Did you bring a knife to cut the tomatoes for our sandwiches? Because a knife might be useful here. Don't know what might attack you." He sat down.

"Blah." Kayce flicked her wrist back. "We can practice worrying later. Since we're in heaven, why not do some exploring?" She suddenly stopped and looked at the sky. "Hey, wait. When did the sun come out? It just set an hour ago."

Trevor shivered and convulsively bent over, hugging his shoulders.

Kayce pursed her lips, then shook her head. "Well, never mind. Come on." She strutted off with a stiff, quirky kick of her legs.

Grunting, Trevor rose and forced his legs to catch up. "Don't you see?" he asked, shaking her by the right shoulder when he was beside her. With a wary look, he scanned the tops of the trees that towered over them and cast all the forest in a deep shade. "Something's off here. This isn't possible. It's almost as if..." He ignored the thought and went on. "How are we going to survive, let me ask you? We have no food. No water. No friends."

Kayce whirled on him suddenly. "Of course you don't have any friends. You just left Jerrold to get killed. Swallow that one if you can." She opened her mouth wide as if her next words had stuck in her throat, then she snapped her mouth closed and looked shyly away. "And it's not that bad here..."

She looked back and their gazes locked, then unlocked and strayed away. They walked on in silence. A horn blast echoed through the air again, but nearer than before. "Hmm," Kayce said, kicking a fallen branch. "Whoever's blowing that has got some lungs."

They kept wandering until they had traveled a long way from the machine.

They were out of the large swath of woods where they had started, far past a small grassland, over a stream, and now in a new section of forest. A horn blast sounded very near, almost like it was calling them, and dogs bayed and howled.

Trevor stopped and glanced up with suspicion at the sky. "Sure seems empty here."

"Well, we can't be too far from home, can we?"

Trevor bit his lower lip and sat down on a rotten log. "...Dogs. I feel like I'm being hunted."

Kayce looked at him, then sat down on his left. "Yeah, I guess it's time to face our situation, whatever it is." She rested her head with a hand on each cheek. Trevor pulled out his semi-auto and placed it on his lap. The dogs grew louder and closer and the horn blast sounded again. The dogs got louder. There were men's voices too. The horn rang in his ears.

"Great Scott!" Trevor shouted, leaping backward and scrambling to his feet as a stag bounded into view.

Dogs burst through the forest a second later with horsemen intermingled. The horsemen were dressed like historical re-enactors of some long past era and yelled wildly. As they pulled to a sudden halt, some pointed at him and Kayce while others called off the dogs. In an instant, Kayce and Trevor were surrounded by frenzied hounds and men with medieval weaponry. That moment, Trevor marked down entering the scientist's machine as one of his worst ideas ever.

"Hold back, curs!" called a rich voice. "Hold! Hold!" When they had quieted somewhat, the man rode toward them, asking, "What is this? Strangers, from whence come ye and where such garments?"

The dogs crouched, snarling, while the horsemen formed a semicircle around Trevor and Kayce.

"Um, hello," said Kayce, grimacing and twiddling her fingers behind her back. She licked her lips, then flashed her best smile.

Seven horsemen faced them, some armed with spears and short swords and others with bows. They wore medieval attire of leggings and long, well-fitted buttoned coats that were belted tightly at the waist. Some wore an additional pointy cap. Many had bi-colored attire and their faces were like the men of ancient story books. In the center of their semicircle sat the one who had called the dogs off. He was young, somewhere in his early twenties, not much older than Trevor or Kayce, but he had a thick well kept beard, thick eyebrows, and deep penetrating eyes that contained limitless expression and were now looking at them with both an aloofness and a friendliness, an austerity, a command, a frankness, and a curiosity. "Pray," he said, in an even tone, "speak ye our English tongue?"

All the muscles in Trevor's face tensed and he spat. "Oh! Don't make some big act out of this." He looked warily between his questioner and the dogs. "Look,

where are we, and which way to Hereford? We're just a little lost and need to know which way to go."

The horseman raised an eyebrow. "Hereford? Not many miles hence. Whence come ye? I trow that never have I heard such speech as thine." He looked down at Trevor's gun and he squinted and stuck out his chin in intense bewilderment.

At that, Trevor backed up a step. He swallowed, then stuttered. "W-what year is it?"

The horseman looked up from his gun. "Thirteen hundred and ninety-three of the year of our Lord. Art thou hermits or foreigners?"

"N-no!" Trevor snapped his jaw shut, then opened it. "We're not any of that. But what are you? Some...carnival act?"

"Sir," chirped in one of the horsemen to the leader, "Methinks these churls be of a land untaught in manners." He smiled.

"Nay, nay, Peter," chided the one in charge. "They are not so uncouth, but foreigners certainly." He turned back to Trevor and Kayce. "Have ye father or mother?"

Kayce blushed. "No," she blurted, rising on her toes, "but we've got each other." She cut herself off abruptly, then looked at Trevor and frowned.

The leader ruffled his hair. Trevor clenched his gun tighter, looking away from Kayce.

"None to vouch for thee?" the leader asked.

"No," Trevor said flatly.

The leader rubbed his hair some more, shaking his head ruefully. "Then I must needs take thee with me. I durst not leave thee alone in the woods if ye be lost, nor can I think aught but cautiously of thee in thy strange disguises."

Trevor flashed his pistol and his eyes blazed. "Look, I don't answer to you in anything. You might be a knight, king, or a clown, but I have as much right to doubt you as you me. I don't even know what you're saying hardly."

"Trevor!" Kayce shouted.

All the horsemen stared.

"Trevor! *They probably don't even know what a gun is.* This is the medieval ages, can't you see?"

He shoved her hard enough he could feel the pressure on his bone. Sweat built on his brow. "Of course I see it," he whispered. "You think I'm happy?"

She regained her balance and came up to him with a coy frown like one would expect from a scolded dog. "Awe, Trevor, we'll have a riot. The medieval ages can't be that bad, really. Come on, Trevor."

The horsemen still hadn't changed their blank stares.

Trevor's hand felt heavy as lead and slowly, inch by inch and against his will, he slid his gun back into its holster. He shrugged and laughed a harsh breathy

laugh.

The leader of the horsemen coughed politely. "'Tis settled, then? I am Sir John Oldcastle. I shall take thee back to my father's house in Almeley."

Kayce came forward and waited attentively. Sighing deeply, Trevor trudged after her. "Mounts?" he asked.

The horseman named Peter volunteered to carry Kayce, but no one seemed inclined to take Trevor. John looked at them all with his steady gaze and then nodded with a slight inclination of his head. Leaning toward Trevor, he offered his hand, saying, "Here, lad, ride with me."

Trevor conceded to mount.

They began at a slow pace, and as they journeyed on, the knight John Oldcastle kept his eye on Peter and Kayce. He shook his head once or twice as if in an inner debate with himself, took a deep breath, and then quietly requested a loaf of bread from a fellow horseman. He took it and rode with much more boldness up beside Peter and Kayce. Acknowledging Kayce with cold gentlemanliness, he handed it to her. "Here," he said in an apologetic voice, "please, break thy fast on some cake."

She took it, but as if she doubted it was really intended for her. She stared at it in utter bewilderment. "This—this isn't cake, it's..." Her voice trailed off and then she colored bright pink. "Well, of course! I love bread! Life wouldn't be the same without it." In an explosion of energy, she tore off a huge chunk and shoved it in her mouth, making ridiculous faces.

There was an awkward silence.

Suddenly then the woods erupted with the merry laughter of the party. It took a full minute before it subsided, at which time, Trevor was the only one who hadn't laughed.

Richard II stared at the crowd gathered in his stately hall, dressed in their elaborate houppelandes of rich embroidery, high collars, and flowing sleeves trailing so far down they almost seemed like wings. Their faces were like that of Bacchus, the Roman god of wine, and their laughter rolled in waves.

They gobbled his feast up with the bellies of giants while a set of jesters performed for them an act of Roman heroism with the faces of lunatics. The night was riotous.

The king withheld himself from the revelry. On the table at which he sat apart from the crowd—the table alike in its aloofness with his disposition—he tapped a beat with his fingers. Occasionally, he took sips of wine, but it seemed he did so only from a sense of duty. He did not even grant a smirk when a jester in bright red, yellow, and blue expounded his love for a Roman maiden with such contortions of the face that he might have been a wax figure carved by a mob of

artists each with their own designs for him.

Smiling for the first time (though not at the jesters) the king leaned over toward his uncle, John of Gaunt, and said with an irritated twitch of his mouth, "Betwixt thou and me, my uncle, I would rather esteem the English heroics. Are not the glories of Rome exaggerated by idle minds? Our own works are noble enough."

His uncle was silent with his hands folded on his lap. The king grimaced and tapped him on the shoulder. John of Gaunt sat upright. "Ah! Pardon, Your Highness,"—he made an act of pretending to be interested in his food—"I was listening to the strange thunder afar off. What is it thou asked?"

Richard leaned back and touched the tips of his fingers together lightly. "Is not our own time as great as that of the ancients? Is not the future brighter than the past?" He rested his hands casually on the arms of his chair and cocked his head back with a satisfied smile.

The king's uncle was looking elsewhere and did not show any sign of hearing, but after a moment he muttered, "Ah, forsooth. I would wager anything." He relapsed back into the company of himself and appeared to be listening to some faint distant sound.

The king scowled and took another draught from his goblet—a large draught. He twitched his nose when he heard a knight running into the hall. The knight seemed to think the castle his personal play ground. Richard sighed when his uncle rose from his seat, an oath of the Virgin's name on his lips, and he wiped his brow when the commotion began to spread to the general audience of the hall. He decided to turn and see the knight for himself.

The knight ran up to him and threw himself on the floor ten paces away. "Your Highness"—the expressions of his face changed rapidly from one shade of horror to another—"there is a messenger come to speak with you, if he is not some devil with other intent."

The king quirked an eyebrow at him, then chose a piece of bread from the table and tossed it at him as he would to a hound. He leaned back in his seat, blinking twice with a wry face, and snorted. "What tidings doth he carry?"

The knight crossed himself. "Only his person, Your Highness—and ill tidings that. He is a sorcerer, I swear."

Despite the hilarity of the jesters, the general attention of the hall was almost completely occupied by this messenger.

The king raised his hand to signal peace. "Keep him outside the castle then."

The knight rose to his feet, though none too steadily, and bowed impulsively before he was quite able to speak. "That we have tried, Your Highness, but he slays the guards from a way off and with naught but thunder." He crossed himself twice. "'Tis the truth as I swear it on my soul."

There was grumbling from some of the courtiers like a faint earthquake, but Richard laughed, then laughed again much louder. "Ha! My uncle, here is a chance to prove to thee what I propounded. A test of our people's courage!" He waved to a captain of his guard who stood rigidly a few paces beyond the end of the table. "Sirrah, muster the guard. Let us see how my soldiers fare 'gainst a magician."

The captain rose and departed and Richard sent the messenger away. John of Gaunt sat soberly with his head bowed and his lips tightly pursed. "Forsooth," he muttered. "I hear that sorcerer's din."

Interest in the jesters' performance had vanished from the hall almost entirely after the knight's tale, though the jesters struggled manfully to maintain their act. "Fie!" the king shouted at them, loud enough so all could hear. "Enough of Rome. Sing a merry song of our own warriors."

The one in red, yellow, and blue bowed with the elasticity of a spring and produced a lute from seemingly nowhere while another snatched up a lyre and a group of others plied their voices. Yet their voices were of those singing a dirge. Laughter resurged through the hall, louder than before and as quick as the joke began—almost before it began. A cloud seemed to settle on the hall and Richard forced himself to resign to the fact that he had been defeated by fools.

He retreated to the world of his own imagination, where at least he still reigned supreme. In five minutes, he had raised one hundred thousand men and leveled France to a pile of ruins. For a while, he basked in the praise of his soldiers, but then realized that his uncle had risen with an oath. "What?" he asked, sitting up and folding his legs. "Is aught afoot?"

John of Gaunt muttered to himself and put a hand on the dagger at his side. A thunder like a barrage of cannon was inside the palace and audible screams. Silence bustled its way through the hall like the very candle of life being snuffed out.

"A curse on that magician!" muttered the king.

Many at the table rose. Their faces were wan and they stood completely still. A troop of guards rose gradually from their positions and crept toward the entrance of the hall, nocking arrows to their bows and waiting.

"God save us..."

"'Tis a monster."

"'Tis Lucifer."

The thunder crashed again and again, each time closer and closer. The screams rose to a pitch and then died into a desolate silence.

"Infernal fire," breathed the king and he looked about him for a weapon or shield.

Footsteps sounded near and the bowmen began to pull back their strings.

Somewhere deep within Richard, a part of him completely changed its nature and he rose slowly to his feet, clutching the tablecloth. He stared at the entrance of the hall like it were the gate of hell. Of a sudden, the man appeared.

His face was ghastly white and twisted and far more terrible than that of any magician. Then, in a moment, it softened immensely and the man smiled a thin, tentative smile. His white robe flowed behind him like an angel's and his face was chiseled in a dark, calculating expression. His face bore murder and awe, as if he had come to enact a long planned vengeance and it were almost too wonderful for him. In his hand he held a tool all black and something like a crossbow, only made of metal. Richard had never seen such a thing before, but it seemed to him like a scepter in the hand of a god.

"Loose thine arrows!" the king screeched, leaping behind the cover of his chair. "Attack, ye fools!"

Bows twanged and the sorcerer laughed a dead mirthless laugh as the darts shattered on his chest—as if his bones were made of iron. Thunder erupted in a storm and the guardsmen fell with screams that sent an icy chill to Richard's heart. No one in the hall moved, but the jester in red, yellow, and blue began to sob. Not even the sorcerer took a step.

Everyone waited and waited. Back and forth the sorcerer turned his gaze and surveyed the dead bodies before him, shaking with a nauseous excitement. He stumbled forward and then panted as he surveyed the scene once more. His eyes settled on Richard.

The king took a step back. "S-s-succor! Who will come to my aid?"

Amid a world of statues, the weeping jester alone came forward without a weapon and his head still bowed in tears. He planted himself in front of the scientist and waited. Everyone watched. The scientist frowned. He began to shake and lower the strange instrument in his hand. He almost dropped it, but then he gritted his teeth. Grunting, he stepped forward and knocked the jester to the floor with a backhand and stepped over him.

Richard spat out the words in a near explosion. "Who else? Who will come!?"

No one moved toward him. No one except the scientist. "A curse on all of you!" Richard shouted. Gagged on his rage, he drew his dagger.

The sorcerer came forward with slow strides, taking each step as if he were treading on a narrow road with cliffs on either side. He dropped the strange device in his hand and halted. He looked at everyone in the hall with wide amazed eyes, but when they all made no movement, the stern ruthlessness came back into his gaze and he prowled forward.

Richard held out his dagger at full length. "I def-f-fy...thee. I de—"

The sorcerer sprang, knocking the dagger out of his hand. He hit the king to the floor and stood over him, his eyes becoming glossy and brilliant as he gazed

around the hall again, his breath tremulous.

The hall, even yet, was silent.

The sorcerer raised his foot and stared into Richard's eyes. "Fool," he whispered almost tenderly, placing his foot upon the king's neck. He raised his eyes to the ceiling with the face of a martyr and said in a voice that could barely be heard, "At last I am free."

A wail pierced the air and one jester in red, yellow, and blue crawled out of the hall in a flood of tears.

## Chapter 3

### The madman's dominion

It was with a reverential sweep that William Courtenay bowed before the scientist on his throne and accepted his assignment. Rising and taking the parchments he had been given, Courtenay straightened his garments and departed.

As he left the hall, Courtenay relaxed his stiff gait and smiled smugly. He fingered the parchments in his hand with an air of distraction and cast his quiet critical gaze about him, casually critiquing the decoration of the palace. His mind drifted to his own cares, for he was, in fact, the Archbishop of Canterbury—a man of vast power.

"Greetings, holy one."

Courtenay jumped and snatched his papers to his chest. After a moment, his eyes settled on the speaker and his lips formed a snarl. "What? Thou? What dost thou know of holiness, murderer? Why art thou here?"

The figure before him slouched from the shadows with the air of a fox and presented a smugly twisted face that belonged in appearance to the class of vagrants, fortune tellers, and lepers. "I know little of holiness?" He laughed low and deliberately, holding Courtenay's gaze with an iron fixity. "Thou and I are very similar on that score, archbishop."

Courtenay rubbed the parchments delicately and held the man's gaze. After a time, he scrunched his nose, turned his eyes away, and walked straight by the man.

The criminal followed lightly on his toes. "Not afraid of me, archbishop? Belike thou'rt so nigh with lawlessness that ye scarce take notice of a compatriot? Haha!" He slapped Courtenay so hard that the archbishop had to catch his

balance.

Courtenay whirled around as quick as a snake. An inch from the criminal's cheek, his hand stopped, rigid and straining. Purple flashed on his face. Slowly, it receded and he backed up one deliberate step at a time, each step backward seeming like it would turn into a pounce forward. "Fool!" he laughed, in a low voice. "What dost thou know of me? When I was a child, I was enraptured when my prayers were answered." A light—a strange, pure light began to shine in his eyes. "I pray still. Little thou knowest of me."

The criminal made a near perfect imitation of Courtenay, only with a screechier voice. "Nay, 'tis not I who am the fool, but thee. And pray—haha! What dost thou to pray for? That the sorcerer may not stab thee in thy sleep? Aye, pray that he may not. He is thy hope to obtain power, is he not? Aye, thou dost lust for power, well I know. Yet he may take thy power from thee at his whim." The criminal smiled a toothy smile.

For the first time, Courtenay looked at the man with respect. He furrowed his brows and fidgeted absently at his robes. "Forsooth, I *should* wonder why thou art here. Shall I order thee sent out?"

"Nay," the criminal laughed, "that should go ill with thee, for I am high in favor with the sorcerer. Of all people, he hath chosen me as Richard's guardian and companion. See? I am more favored than thee. What saith the Holy Writ? 'Thou hast seen a man skilled in his work; he shall stand before kings.' A benediction on the soul of Wycliffe! He hath gifted wisdom to the people. Who is there in all England more skilled in villainy, and today I serve a king!"

Courtenay smiled pleasantly as he backed away. He raised his hands as if for a benediction, then suddenly gritted his teeth and snapped, "Then go to thy master." He wheeled around and scampered away, his gold-embroidered garments billowing behind him.

Fleeing down one corridor and then another, Courtenay gradually slowed to a steady pace. He made a few faces and then shook his head as if to clear his mind. He let his thoughts drift back to their previous train. There had been a near successful attack by the citizens on the Tower of London that week, and the alchemist had only repelled them because of his few guard who carried the strange guns that fired over and over—Courtenay had marveled over them; he had seen guns before, but they were as toys to the ones the alchemist had. The alchemist was now sending out orders to all the nobility, ordering them to pledge loyalty to him. Courtenay bit his lip and clicked his next step emphatically on the floor. There were tame lions among the nobility, but also fierce ones.

The archbishop had a sensation like a giant spider creeping up close behind him. The hair rose on his skin and he heaved a breath. Slowly, he turned.

When he saw who it was, he wheezed out a breath and clapped a hand to his

heart. "Fay! Thou'rt churlish to sneak up on one so!"

The watcher—for so his order was called—stared back at him unmoving. After a second, he twitched the fingers of his right hand. His face had a statue-like blandness but his eyes stared straight into Courtenay's. The watchers were the guard of the sorcerer, but more than that. They were his hands and feet.

The archbishop clenched and unclenched his fingers around his heart and wavered between the watcher and his course down the hallway. When he looked at the watcher, it sent tingles all the way down to his toes. "Art sworn to silence?"

The watcher shook his head calmly and his gaze penetrated deeper into the archbishop's, making Courtenay take a step back.

"Ah,"—Courtenay intertwined his hands in front of him—"well...tell me then, why liest in wait for innocent passers-by?"

The watcher paused for a moment. He did not say anything but his gaze drifted elsewhere. All Courtenay's muscles relaxed and he shrank by an inch.

Courtenay looked the watcher over long and well. The man was a youth—all of them were—fanatics who had taken vows stricter than a monk's and who obeyed the slightest wish of the sorcerer both swiftly and brutally. The youth had light wavy hair and blue shining eyes and was uniformed in a shirt of the darkest woodsman green covered by a thick leather jerkin with a studded steel collar. From his left shoulder slung a baldric decked with round metal objects Courtenay had been informed could explode. At the watcher's side was a small gun and a larger one slung behind his back. A black cape dropped behind him like a doorway that he was always coming out of. Its hood partially shrouded his face. His trousers were also of black and he wore boots of a martial appearance that reached halfway to his knees.

The watcher wet his lips and the archbishop noticed that he was looking into his eyes again.

The watcher raised his hand a few inches, which seemed the highest form of amusement he was capable of. "I am watching," he said. There was an air of mysticism in his tone. Courtenay's gaze drifted and he noticed a statue half hidden ten or more feet behind the watcher that had a beard like the frothing sea and eyes like the sharpest arrows. Courtenay looked away.

"Well—that is not unfair I trow." He swallowed.

The watcher stared at him without expression.

Courtenay hesitated and then turned quickly back to his course. "...Right this way...if thou art come to watch me. T'would be a fair thing if thou didst admire art, for thou'lt see some."

A little walking soon brought them to the threshold of the chapel of St. John where Courtenay stopped. Brilliant lights spilled through the stained glass windows, illuminating the walls and beautiful stone columns with sparkling hues

no painter could match. The light shimmered like little droplets or tiny creatures that had a life of their own. Courtenay sensed the watcher behind him and he stepped quickly across the threshold.

At the end of the room, he stopped, pulling out his set of parchments. Over them were drawn in rude sketches portraits of the alchemist by the usurper's own hand. The success of this artwork could be judged by the fact that Courtenay had had to ask who they portrayed. There were many markings around the eyes however, as if the artist had tried with much patience to suffuse a poetry into their gaze. The archbishop held one before his face and impulsively snickered at it, but at that moment he felt a cold chill tingle down his spine and a presence looming behind him. He tensed and lowered the papers. "It is a...lovely chapel, is it not?"

The watcher didn't answer.

The archbishop shivered and pulled out the tape he had been given, but found it difficult to use. At last he succeeded in figuring it out and he taped one of the faces over that of the Virgin Mary. The face happened to look straight down with a sneer at the Messiah in the Virgin's arms. Courtenay felt his heart thud and quickly picked up the next one. He covered up the face of the Christ with the profile of the alchemist which had a tortured expression fitting to the sneer the mother gave it.

The watcher had not moved this whole time.

The archbishop next covered up the faces of St. John, Edward the Confessor, and, at last, God himself.

"Doth not the new reign bode well for our citizenry?" he asked, using a voice far smoother than the jerky tension in his hands. "It shall be plainer for them to have Christ, the apostles, saints, and Virgin all magnified and joined together into one." He tried to laugh, and he started to. It felt good, but it didn't last. He ended by catching his breath and did not release it until he became aware that the watcher was breathing easily and even peaceably.

"There now," he said, rubbing his hands quickly and stepping back to admire his work. "Well that is done. I vow, I wonder why I never conceived the idea myself. It is an improvement to religion. Gods should have power—real power. Is it not so?" The archbishop turned around and gasped when he saw the figure in the darkness. The man crouched behind a column some fifteen feet away. "By the saints!" Courtenay exclaimed.

Two fiery eyes stared into his that reminded him of a branding iron. The face was that of a god of wrath hidden behind the disguise of a priest's cowl. The man's stance was that of an assassin.

Cloth fluttered as the watcher spun around and caught sight of the priest. Between the two, a duel of gazes commenced in which many sharp jabs were given. At the end, the priest's face turned ashen and he put his hand on the floor to

keep himself steady.

The priest cowered and stepped out from behind his cover, falling on his knees and bowing his head three times. "Pardon, sirs, I meant no fright." He looked up and the duel of gazes between the watcher and the priest continued and the priest flinched. He trembled, then at last covered his face with his hands.

The watcher's tone was like a languid but freezing breeze. "What wert thou doing?"

"Only watching," the priest hurried to assert, withdrawing his hands from his face to cross himself.

The watcher crouched to be at eye level with his victim. With a tone of amusement, but vicious amusement, he hissed, "That is *not* for thee to do." He drew his pistol, but kept it at his side. "Thou seemed angered—as if thou wouldst have interfered."

"No! No! Faith, I swear it."

The watcher pointed his gun at the priest and left it there until the priest subdued himself with the tensivity of a frightened hare. He drew closer so that his lips nearly touched the priest's ear. "Know this, little one. We are watching. Always watching."

There was a short pause and then a sharp stuttering voice clipped over the watcher's radio. "This is your king. You are wanted in the throne room."

The watcher pushed the talk button. "I obey," he said. He glared for a moment at the priest, then retired. Courtenay clung close behind him, staring dumbly at the priest then passing on.

The room was still. The priest buried his face in his hands once again. Light flooded through the stained glass windows on him.

When the priest arose, he took away his hands. He had not made a sound, but his face was flooded with tears. He took one look at the chapel and fled.

Leaving Courtenay to himself, the watcher returned to the throne room only to find his way blocked by full twenty of his order and a group of prisoners. He paused and folded his hands, watching as one particular prisoner was forced to his knees.

Sounds from within the room caught his attention and he stood on his toes to see past his fellows. There, sitting on his throne, was the alchemist king. Wyot noticed that his lab coat was as spotless as snow and it made his heart swell. The alchemist's reputation as a magician was fully satisfied by his thin, bony frame and sharp chin touched on the end with stubble. The mop of his thin grey hair reminded Wyot of the ancient willows back on the farm where he had been raised. There was a gleam in the alchemist's eye and he shifted constantly about in a feverish way.

In the alchemist's right hand was the royal scepter and he rubbed it gently with his left hand. Sitting forward, he spoke words that sounded vaguely like shattered glass and which jerked Wyot's attention back to the prisoner on his knees. "John Purvey, is it not?" asked the alchemist.

Wyot rested his chin on his right fist and waited. The captive bowed his head, sighed, and Wyot found himself studying the man. He seemed to be a scholar. He was intelligent at least. Doubtless, reason would lead him to side with right — with the alchemist.

The alchemist adjusted himself in his seat again. "You are a leader of the Lollards?"

"Gracious Highness—"

A crash drew Wyot's attention back to the alchemist and he saw that the ruler's scepter was flat against the arm of his throne. The alchemist scowled. Complete silence reigned. The alchemist wiped his brow and then rose from his throne and began to pace back and forth. "I know it well. The archbishop tells me you are a dangerous group and I know it is true because your men were some of the leaders in the rebellion last week. Don't speak to me unless it is to tell me who else is in your little society. That's why you are here, is that not clear?"

Wyot smiled and rubbed his brow with his hand.

"Your Highness," said the prisoner, "I...cannot."

Some of the watchers grunted, but otherwise all was silent. Wyot could tell that the alchemist was still, but he knew he wouldn't stay that way for long. He knew what was coming.

"Well then," said the alchemist, and a second later an awful crack split the air. Wyot looked over to see the man named Purvey fall over dead just as a flash of blue lightning disappeared back into the hidden machine above the entrance way. The alchemist used it to slay prisoners and claimed it worked through a mystical power called electricity.

The alchemist coughed and Purvey was removed and replaced with a nobleman.

He too was executed and then followed three prisoners who bought their lives with requested information or oath.

Wyot stroked his chin as he stared at the dead corpse of Purvey. He found it baffling how he had thrown away his life simply because he would not abandon a broken system. Some men were simply fools. For his part, Wyot knew the current ruler was capable of bringing the world into a new age they had never even dreamed of before. An age of miracles. That was something that all men should celebrate.

At last, all the other watchers left, taking the corpses with them. Wyot was left alone with his king.

“Wyot,” said the alchemist, “come forward.”

Wyot straightened as was fitting for a soldier, approached the alchemist, and took a knee.

“You may rise,” the alchemist said.

Wyot stood to his feet.

The alchemist paced for some time, but then he finally came over and leaned in toward Wyot as if he were about to whisper secrets of dark magic. “My good servant,” he said, “I hear rumors. There are—some tell me strange things about two youths...” He pointed to the watcher’s rifle and his eyes glistened. “Are you ready for a mission?”

# Chapter 4

## Torn Between Two Worlds

Two long hours had passed since their departure for Oldcastle’s estate and Trevor had still not spoken a word. He hadn’t needed to. As he slouched on the back of the horse, he gazed at the hoofs that carried him away like a stream from the mountains into a wide oceans where ships tossed and turned. Tiring of staring at the ground, he looked up, but not straight ahead—instead, back in the direction of the time machine. The path behind him was thin and trees stretched in from either side to blot it out in an endless forest. A vulture swooped in on a small caracas on the wayside, nibbled at it, then stared at him without expression.

Trevor turned his gaze ahead to the scene seriously for the first time. The landscape was clean and mostly empty. No ill-clad laborers tottered beneath crude barbaric tools threatening to fall apart if the workers didn’t break first—a thing he half expected to see. His hand stole down to his belt, the one piece of technology he still had from the future. Built in was a holographic computer. For a second, he thrilled at the idea that turning it on might convince his captor that he was really from the future, but on second thought he concluded that it might make him seem like a conjurer instead.

“You’re impossible!” Kayce laughed, her voice carrying all the way from the front of the line. Her companion, Peter, had finished a piece of indecipherable dialogue and she looked about ready to fall off the horse.

“Impossible?” asked Peter, cocking his head at an angle and scratching his

head. "How so?" It was some time before they could figure each other out.

Their laughter sounded to Trevor like a child banging a glass with a spoon in the midst of a funeral.

The woodland finally left them behind and opened to an expansive view. A dirt path with bordering farmlands stretched before them. Trevor studied a cluster of cottages off to his right, but started when he heard a light cough. He turned to see John facing him a faint sparkle in the depths of his eyes and the hairs of his whiskers twitching and bristling as he wet his lips. John gathered himself together, and Trevor tensed. "Take it not to heart," John said softly. His tone was almost fatherly and he gave a shrug of his shoulders. "I trust thy journey may not be stayed over long, and I shall help thee on thy way as best I may. I admire thy lusty spirit."

Trevor noticed that the ground was ugly after being churned up by the horses. He made a sort of half scowl, half indifferent expression and nodded without really intending to. He turned away and a peasant dwelling by the wayside struck him as more respectable than he had expected. The air was fresh and blew through his hair with a rapture, but he wanted to splutter with the reek of the huntsmen. It made him feel slightly dizzy. He noticed Kayce was acting as if she were in a garden of fresh smelling herbs and he mentally labeled her a genetic freak with a dysfunctional nose.

The conversation around him began to stir as a country manor of stone and solid timber appeared over the crest of a hill. Voices rose to high pitches of exclamation while others lowered to soft exchanges of gratification. One of the younger hunters raced ahead and then everyone else whooped and followed his lead. John held back at first, but he finally grunted and let out a light chuckle. Trevor cried out "woah!" and had to hold on tight as John raced to the head of the pack.

When they arrived, John stopped a short distance from the manor where Trevor slid off the horse. He took a deep breath, then looked about him. It was a bit dizzying at first. Visiting someone's home was a trite business, but he was doing

it in the fourteenth century. The manor's building materials were crude compared to what he was used to in the future, but the place nevertheless reminded him in a way of the handful of wealthy estates he had known back in Hereford. He looked beyond the house to the farmlands away off. The soils were half weed-choked due to the fact that they were not yet plowed, and the few stones scattered on the sides of the fields looked to him like grave markers almost as decayed as their patrons. There was much green though, and overall it was serene, but it was too serene—like the blank slate his life had suddenly become. He fingered his gun again and stared off back down the road they had come.

John dismounted beside him with a gruff exhale. He stretched, then stroked the mane of his horse, massaging it with his large, strong hands. "There, now," he said.

Trevor looked at the horse, but then realized that John had spoken to him. John stroked his whiskers for a moment and his eyes roved up and down over Trevor. In the same tone he had used just before, he said, "It would be an improper thing, me introducing thee to my father, and still not knowing thy name."

"T-Trevor." Trevor gulped. He pointed to Kayce, who was dismounting. He wasn't sure what he was going to say, but then heat rushed to his head and he stammered, "She's Kayce. She's the reason I'm stuck here."

He hadn't thought she could hear, but she hollered back, "I am not!"

He shot a quick look at her queenly posture and the heat in his face traveled down to his chest where it stung and he looked for the millionth time back at the ground. When he looked up, he expected to see Oldcastle, and he did, but not the one he had expected.

It was John's father, standing in the doorway. His hair seemed to have stolen its color from the streaks of clouds above and he had the same bottomless gaze as his son, which was both cold and hearty at the same time. He was handsome, though Trevor might not have admitted it if asked.

His son stood a little to the right with rigid calm--it was at once like a soldier bringing a prisoner before his judge and a champion waiting to defend

him.

The father took but two steps out of his house, then stood eyeing Trevor. He drew himself erect like a hero standing in the front of his army, and Trevor felt his gaze digging into him and discerning him. Trevor took his hand off his gun and put it in his back pocket, but that didn't feel comfortable either so he searched for another place to put them. There didn't seem many good options.

John spoke quietly. "Father, we found two strangers in the woods. You may judge by their dress that they are foreigners."

The father raised his hand sharply and then came forward to within five paces of Trevor. He rocked sideways on his feet, viewing Trevor from both sides before asking in a gruff but not unkind voice, "Strangers from afar east, belike. Well? What say ye?"

Trevor wanted to laugh, but it didn't come out. He tried to roll his eyes, but it never really happened.

The father arched his right eyebrow.

"Look." Trevor shot his arms in the air. "You want to know where I'm from? Hereford. Just a couple miles away. And I'm from the future. Yeah, I don't care what you think. I'm from the future, and I'd go right back there if you hadn't captured me like a thief."

The father said nothing. Trevor held his breath and stuck his hands awkwardly in his front pockets.

Trevor heard whispers from the horsemen behind him. Never in his life had his legs itched so much to move. He noticed he had a pebble in his shoe, though how it had gotten there he had no idea.

Father turned to son and the two Oldcastles exchanged glances.

Trevor watched their every twitch of expression, but then he was distracted by someone's shoulder bumping into his. He turned and saw Kayce. She gave him a quirky, lopsided smile, rose imperiously on her toes, winked, and then jabbed him sharply in the ribs. He pulled his own arm back and barely held himself from returning the blow. All the huntsmen laughed and he felt the heat rising to his face.

Once again, he put his hands in his back pockets then in his front.

The Oldcastles exchanged hurried whispers, their heads turned down and their gesticulations sharp but fluent like the thrusts and hacks of sword play. Finally, they raised their heads and John waved for silence. The laughing stopped with a final trailing snicker from Peter. Kayce was the first to look at John and Trevor the last.

John folded his arms as his chest heaved and his jaw tightened. He held his breath just a little too long and his lips twitched in an odd way.

“Well...”—John bowed his head as a servant might have—“I have heard of a stag turning into a human in tales, but never have I heard tell of a stag becoming both man and maid.”

Trevor found himself loosening the grip on his gun, though he could not remember when he had grabbed it. His whole body was relaxing.

At the same moment, John knitted his brows together and gave a slight frown. He clasped his hands together. “No less strange is it that the stag should turn into such...” He trailed off, then resumed. “Thy dress is utterly foreign to us, yet ye say ye are from Hereford. ‘Tis only honest to feel suspicion in this matter. Let thine own honesty prove us wrong then. Whence come ye?”

While Trevor worked through all the things he could say, Kayce gradually twisted her lips into a smile and she spluttered out, “We’re from the United States of America, don’t you know?” She ended with a cheesy smile and then colored looked quickly at the ground.

John blinked, then blinked three times more in rapid succession. His hands were still frozen in their clasped position. “I beg pardon. It may be mine ignorance, but—”

“Oh, never mind!” Kayce rose on her toes with a gasping breath, then looked shamefully at the ground, tracing the bracelet on her left wrist with her fingers. “Don’t mind me. We’re from England and America doesn’t even exist yet. I don’t exist either.”

John stared at her for a few seconds then tried several times to produce a

confused smile in which the smile never quite succeeded in ending up on top.

Father and son exchanged glances once more and the father took over, coughing and grunting. “Trevor. Kayce. It is sorely against my wishes, but I have no other option than to keep thee here till ye repent of your silence. But ye must not be idle. I shall pay thee. I am a fair man. Have ye aught to say?”

Trevor shrugged and kicked up a thick clod of grass. “What work are you going to make me do?”

John turned and caught his eye. “Ever plowed?”

Trevor looked at him, and, for the first time, John seemed to have a controlling aspect to him—like a taskmaster. Trevor froze. “...Er, plow?”

With two weeks as a plowman, Trevor’s entire worldview had changed. Before, he had viewed life as an eat or be eaten system in which it was best to play things safe. Now he viewed life as an eat or don’t eat system in which plowing got you food but it was uncertain whether being able to eat was worth the effort. He had contrived forty-two alternatives to plow-based farming, none of which the Oldcastles had the scientific zeal to experiment with. As he plowed, he imagined himself as a professor of an agricultural institute instructing students in the eighty-nine evils of the plow and throwing clods of dirt at any student who dozed off during his lectures. One night, he even dreamed that he beat his plowshare into a sword and went on a national tractor vandalism streak back in the future. Then the scene changed in his dream and he found himself battling the mysterious scientist who had whisked him into this era of knights and serfs. He imagined clearly his face even though he had never seen it. The scientist had pulled out a gun and Trevor ran and ran and ran. Even in his dream, he felt his throat tightening and a sense that something was right behind him. He ran until he came to the farm fields, then he buried himself in freshly plowed soil and grasped his sword like a vise, gnashing his teeth, and hissing.

This morning, Trevor had finished the plowing and was free for the moment. He stretched his numb hands to ease away the ache and found himself a gnarly tree he could collapse under. He hit the ground with an “oomph”, spread his arms

and legs out, and extended his tongue like a piece of dry jerky. He rubbed his eyes, shook his head, and groaned at the squirrel which chattered overhead and finally mustered the effort to throw a pebble at the vermin. "Yapper somewhere else, would you?" The squirrel scampered off faster than Trevor could draw a breath. He rolled over and planted his face in the ground where he could have some darkness along with his quiet. The darkness reminded him of the alleyways back at home he was so familiar with. He buried his nose deeper into the cool moist turf. It smelled alive. Alive and happy. There were zillions of little organisms down there.

"Master Allen. Lad! Where art thou?"

Trevor rolled over with a "humph". He had an express dislike for being called by his last name. "Over here."

Trevor squinted as John approached from the direction of the manor. He saw something in John's hands and scrunched his nose. They were wooden swords and shields, simple in design but solid looking.

John arrived and tossed one set on the ground. His own shield he let hang comfortably at his side and his sword against his shoulder. "Now that the fields are in order, thou mayest turn to other things."

Trevor stared at the battle implements and made an impressive lack of movement. A very impressive lack of movement. He raised one eyebrow and looked at John. One might have thought by his expression that John had just placed a set of rag dolls at his feet with round faces and frilly dresses. "You think I came here to be a knight or something?"

John stuck the point of his sword into the dirt and rested his hands on the hilt. "Nay, but every man must be trained if the need for combat arises."

Trevor snuffed, rolled over, and looked back up at the tree. There was no squirrel there anymore, but he threw a pebble at the tree anyway. "Swords are outdated."

John said nothing.

Trevor shifted into several different positions then turned and stared with a

cynically arched brow back at the arms before him. He tucked his chin in his hand and frowned. His legs began to itch and all the inconveniences of ancient existence rose before his mind like a throng of ugly brutes jeering at him. He turned his left fist into the dirt and ground it, then snatched for his sword and, grasping it firmly, swung it at John's head, thinking of him only by the one word "captor". He cried out as the sword flew from his hand and his arm stung and felt like sloshing jelly. John had caught the blow squarely on his shield.

John lowered his shield and his eyes took on a cold, distant glaze. There was a moment of silence while a gentle breeze blew by. John blinked and nodded slowly toward Trevor's sword. "Fetch it."

Trevor glared back, then turned his head and retrieved the sword with deliberately sluggish steps. Then he fetched his shield. He stood before John and planted his feet two feet apart. John pointed at him with the tip of his sword like an accusing finger. His face, though, was calm and apparently recovered except for the firm set of his jaw. "A swordsman," John said with awful dryness, "always learns his drills before he moves on to fight." John proceeded to ruthlessly drill Trevor in the most basic moves of footwork for the next half hour. Trevor moved through the routines with as much impertinence as reasonable, hoping to show John that he was not interested in instruction. After he executed an advance move without even looking where he was going and practically fell over, John shook his head with something between a growl and an exasperated laugh. "Certes, I have never seen one so incapable."

In an instant Trevor drew his gun and fired. As he had aimed it, it hit John's training sword and shattered it into a million splinters. "Say that again!" he snapped.

John dropped the stub of a stick left in his hands. He slowly dragged his hand across his cheek where a splinter from the sword had caused a thin gash, then, with his other hand, he wiped the cold sweat from his brow.

Trevor shook and then forcefully shoved the gun into its holster.

John's face was white. His lips moved up and down.

Trevor's brain swarmed with conflicting thoughts and his heart sped up. "Well..." He couldn't form the next word.

John sank on one knee and stretched out his hands. "I...I—I have wronged thee." John paused, his eye turning blank as in a daze. "Thou'rt honest.... Though I know not how, thou dost truly come from the future even as I heard thee say."

Trevor's chest tightened and he fought against vertigo, stumbling forward. In a whisper, he replied, "Yeah," and then rushed past John. The world blurred before him as he ran, but he was certainly not crying. He didn't know what he was feeling, actually. It was like all his emotions since coming to the fourteenth century were hitting him at once. He stumbled, his breath came hard, and he had the sensation of being chased. At the manor he shoved past the house's maid who nearly dropped her armload of linens. He careened into the main hall. The room was dark and seemed like a subterranean dungeon after his day outside. He groped for the doorway to the kitchen, but he was unable to find it until his eyes adjusted to the light. Stumbling through the doorway and closing the door behind him, he entered the kitchen in a rush. Kayce happened to be there, whirling a broom in a burst of ninja-esque theatrics. She didn't notice him.

"Kayce!"

Kayce squealed and pulled the broom close to her in a defensive guard. She eyed him up and down with her mouth in a small little "o", then laid the broom against the wall and folded her arms. "What's up? You cut your foot off with the plow or something?"

Trevor leaned against the wall. He didn't seem to have his previous energy anymore. He stared down at his hands as if he had never seen them before. "Kayce, you ever...you—"

"Trevor, you're not all right. You look like you've just lost a bet or something." She came forward and gave him a soft pat on the shoulder.

He jumped away as if shocked by electricity and put up his hands. "Look. It's not me. It's"—he gestured to his surroundings—"this place. *I can't live like this any longer.*" He held his breath. The world seemed very still. He paused, then

blurted out, "I've given it a try, but I'm leaving tonight. I'll-I'll find the time machine."

Kayce turned her head so that she was looking at him out of the corner of her eyes through a stray lock of light brown hair. She blew, and the hair danced in front of her face. "Weeeelll..." she said, clicking her tongue. "I would call that a hasty decision."

He exhaled, shrugged, and leaned against the wall. "I've just been thinking about where I belong." He got up and turned toward the door. "I guess you'll be coming." He looked back. Kayce was standing with her feet firm, her arms crossed, and her eyes flashing warnings. He gripped the door handle tightly and pent up a breath in his throat.

"Trevor," she said in an formal voice and she held her arms rigidly straight, "Don't you think we might be here for some reason?"

He shoved the door open and snorted. "Uh...no."

Her eyes flamed like hundreds of sparks dancing a polka. "You call these circumstances normal?"

He shook his head.

They stood there. At last, Kayce said in a quieter tone, "Well, anyway, you're no woodsman. You'd probably get lost and starve out there. ...Not to mention that I would starve, which is totally unacceptable."

Trevor's heart sank and at the same time his stomach growled. He walked over to a three legged stool and sat on it, resting his chin in his hand. "Okay. Okay. Let's talk this over." His voice grew softer after he sat in contemplation. "It's not this *place* I'm against, it's this...life. Maybe I could learn to like the country?"

Kayce choked on a laugh and then covered her mouth.

"That is, without dirt and plows." He glared at her, then turned away as if he would retreat into a shell. Kayce waited and at last he continued, his words coming out sluggish. "I want to return home, but what I really want is some place where I could be free. Maybe a shop or something to work in, but no deadlines and no bosses. No farm, but maybe a large pond. And a locked retreat"—he

frowned—“where I could be alone when I wanted.”

“Well...”

Trevor glanced up. Kayce was looking in his eyes, and it struck him he had never seen her so quiet.

“Well,” she repeated, “I would come...”—she paused for dramatic effect—“to swim in the pond.” She flashed one of those smiles that asks for appreciation, and despite himself, Trevor managed a tiny smirk.

The door creaked open and Richard and Isabel Oldcastle entered—the parents of John. Each leaned on the other in the manner of couples when they go on walks. Richard pointed his finger at Trevor and Kayce and smiled an “aha!” expression as if saying to his wife, “look there.”

“It warms me,” said the mother, her eyes brightening, “To see ye enjoying one another.” The father nodded and, for a moment, Trevor felt a sort of warmth in himself, though the warmth also made it uncomfortable to sit on a stool.

Kayce saved the situation. Turning her eyes toward the ceiling with her hands clasped before her chin and a hint of coquetry, she said, “Well, maybe we’re just learning from a certain two somebodies whose names I won’t mention. At least,” she shook a finger with unconvincing sternness, “*Trevor* is. I haven’t needed any lessons, but I’ve been making sure he pays good attention.”

The two parents both gave warm smiles like the lazy, colorful flames of a small fire. The wife—practically minded—recovered first. She pulled her arm from around her husband and stepped forward with a swing in her step, rubbing her hands together. “Now then, Trevor. John told me he would be out with thee. Is he yet in the fields?”

Trevor grasped both hands on the stool to hide the quiver that ran down his chest. “Of course. He ought to be coming back soon.” He began unconsciously picking at the wood.

Within seconds, the door was thrown open, sending Richard Oldcastle with a sudden quick leap over beside his wife. John entered in a rush with heavy footsteps. He stopped right inside the room and stood rigid, giving no explanation

of his manner of entry or even a glance at his parents. He looked straight at Trevor and Kayce with eyes that were darker and more intense than the gassy clouds of space. Trevor slid from his stool.

“How did ye come here?” John fumbled somewhat with his right hand and his eyes didn’t seem to totally focus.

Isabel Oldcastle furrowed her brows and took a step toward her son, but her husband laid a hand on her shoulder and pulled her back.

“How?” John repeated. This time he bit his lip and wiped fresh blood from the scratch on his cheek.

Trevor and Kayce exchanged glances. Trevor shrugged. “We came by a machine. I don’t know how it worked, but some scientist brought us here. It was an accident.”

John pursed his lips, brief sparks appearing in the depths of his eyes. Turning away, he walked to the other end of the room and grabbed two wooden chairs, then brought them over to his sire and dame. “Father, mother,” he said woodenly, “seat thyselves.”

Trevor searched his mind for what was causing this behavior in John. The gunshot was prominent in his mind. John glanced over the room impassively before settling on Trevor with a hard, wooden, and impersonal gaze. Without knowing it, Trevor fingered his gun.

John took a few steps backward to where he could view all the others without turning his head. Everyone looked at him and no one spoke. He folded his arms. “A Lollard just rode by from Hereford.”

His father grunted but Kayce asked, “Lollard?” Isabel rose to light another lamp for the room.

John stared at Kayce sullenly and then seemed to remember his manners and said, “A follower of Wycliffe. He was a good man and a holy teacher, but some in power think him a heretic.”

Kayce’s eyes grew big. “You mean like a rebel? Are you one?”

John’s face showed no amusement. He looked at Trevor and then Richard.

“But the authority of yesterday is not the authority of today.”

Richard gripped his chair and leaned forward. In the depths of his eyes there was a faint fire. He spoke in a hush. “For our favor?”

“No.” John stroked his beard as he let the word sink in. “’Tis a tyrant now. King Richard has been overthrown. His usurper now reigns.”

“God be merciful!” cried the father, sinking back in his chair.

John grunted. “The messenger told me of the usurpation. He spoke of things I never would have believed, save now that I have met our guests. He told that this one man slew single-handedly all of the king’s guard.”

“It cannot be!”

Trevor paled as John turned toward him. “Do you know this man?”

The voice of the scientist passed through his head. The desperate, mad voice that had spoken of a war with the world. The voice he heard in his dreams. “It—it must be him.” He felt the gazes of the Oldecastles fixed on him and turned to Kayce as if to shift the pressure over to her. He felt empty in his stomach. “Kayce, you—you remember what he said back then.”

Kayce squinted and smoothed her hair with her fingers. She stopped with her fingers halfway down. “He said that he would rule. That he would rule...” she stopped and let her hand fall to her side. “Did he say *all*?”

Trevor swallowed.

“But that’s crazy,” laughed Kayce, throwing her head back. “He’s only one man.”

Trevor gazed down at the stool beside him and tapped it with his fingers. “Ever heard of a 3D printer? They can make tools, guns, really anything. They can make them fast, too. I bet you anything he has one. A really good one.”

Kayce stopped laughing.

“...With a generator, the right tools, the right supplies, a super genius...” He felt all eyes on him, and this time he knew he could not endure them. He slipped past John and opened the door.

“Wait! Where are you going?” Kayce hollered.

“I need to think.” He slammed the door.

# Chapter 5

## An Unexpected Visit

Trevor tossed a canvas bag down on his cot in a brown, plain room with brown, plain furniture. After rummaging in a corner, he pulled out his modern set of clothes, then shoved them into the bag without folding them. Task done, he took a moment to bite his lip as he stared at the clothes he had on. Shaking his head, he gave his modern clothes some company by adding in a loaf of bread from the kitchen and a flask of water. Next went in a pair of medieval pliers and a makeshift screwdriver in case any repairs were needed. He pulled out his gun and held it in front of his face, then began to put it in the bag too. “Wait...what am I thinking?” he asked, pulling the gun back out and putting it in his holster.

He was not like Kayce. She could fit in anywhere. In fact, maybe it really was her destiny to be in this time period. If that was the case though, whatever purpose was involved with her had made a mistake in messing with his life about as big as spilling milk over the whole continent of Europe. Every day he felt a constant itch inside and like an Olympic runner confined to crutches. In the swirling thoughts of his mind each night, he tried to grapple with the new life he had been given. The thoughts of his half-sentient state, though, were stark and honest. Every time he tried to trick his mind into accepting his situation, it would probe him harder and sharper. He was no more at home than a kidnapped slave—even if that slave was well treated.

Staring down at himself, Trevor realized he still had the sack in his hand and that he was heading for the door. Forming a puzzled furrow with his brow, he went back to his cot and shoved the sack underneath. “Not until midnight,” he muttered.

He would bring Kayce with him. He had thought for a moment about leaving her behind and he had come up with many good arguments for why she would prefer to stay, but against reason his mind settled on taking her. It wouldn’t budge on the idea so much as an inch.

Trevor lumbered out the door, shutting it behind him. He stared at the back for a moment, wondering if he should leave a note when he left, but then he shook his head. It was just possible someone would check his room at night and find it.

At the end of the corridor, Trevor entered the great hall—a room somewhat between a crude Norse longhouse and lodge. No one was there. Taking a deep

contented sigh, Trevor walked over and flopped down into the largest chair, twiddled his thumbs, and stared like an idiot at the fire. He yawned and the fire glowed on his cheeks.

Distant sounds of horses approached. It was much more distinct, he thought, than a doorbell—probably because there were no mailmen in this age, no police, and fewer neighbors to be a botheration about useless matters. Trevor sat up and listened as the horses approached. There were two or three by the sound of them. Grumbling, he debated whether to rise and answer the door but only strained his ears to hear if anyone else was coming to greet the newcomers. It seemed to him a sacrilege to exert any effort in the last few hours of his stay. A moment later, his attention focused on John's voice rising clear from the outside and answered by others.

Trevor sank back into his chair and folded his hands. It lasted about five seconds before he sprang up to his feet. "Bah! I'm a fool. I should be listening." He walked up to a window and put his ear against it so that he could hear clearly what everyone was saying. It was a habit of his to know everything since that prepared him for anything.

The voice was that of a male, but incredibly soft—something like what one would expect from a smiling tiger. "...Kington, but our work there is done. Our journey hath been laborious, but thy hospitality will lighten the burden."

John's voice was gruff. "The poor preachers are always welcome here."

Trevor raised an eyebrow. He had heard of preachers, but never poor ones. Once, one had come through Hereford saying some nonsense about having a great life, but he seemed mainly focused on his own good life. There was something even stranger about what John said though. It was his tone actually. Both John and the spokesman for the riders seemed vaguely cold toward each other.

"I trust ye have many tales of your work," John continued, saying it as if it were a misfortune.

Another rider, his voice young like the first's and equally smooth, but much richer, answered, "Aye. Truly the work doth warm our hearts and we ne're tire in the telling of it."

There was an awkward silence between the two parties that made Trevor look around the room for anything more interesting to steal his attention. There wasn't anything, but John muttered something that drew Trevor's attention back into the discussion even though he couldn't make out the words. There was an equally low reply from the three horsemen and then Trevor heard hoofs stomping away toward the stables.

"Well, if thou'rt not some old dying hound!"

Trevor jumped. The maid Martha was standing in the room, a thin woman

with a sharp motherly voice and more energy than two men. “Thou’rt all still and gloomy and idle. I’ve a namesake from in Holy Writ, hear now, and she was always working. Now, I work likewise, and what else am I here for? Thou’lt work too, and that as long as my master keeps thee. Throw a log on yonder fire. The sun sets and there’s a draft. What, art thou deaf and have not heard our visitors outside?”

Trevor stared, then obediently fetched the wood while Martha put her hands on her hips and puffed out accentuated breaths and shook her head. He threw two logs on the fire that sent a whole cohort of sparks charging up at him like cavalry. Martha caught sight of some little detail in another room that needed straightening and huffed away to set the thing aright.

Task done, Trevor brushed off his hands and breathed a sigh of relief. He walked back to his chair and sat down, gazing into the fire. He had noticed that one could lose their sense of time while staring at a fire and he wondered if midnight might come sooner if he never moved his eyes. That would make him a time traveler without even having to use a machine. Next thing, the door opened and Trevor instantly shot up and faced it.

First John entered, his face lowered, then the riders. They wore suits of unusually plain brown cloth, tailored after the fashion of commoners, which, to their credit, had more variety of style than modern fashions. Their faces were all youthful and shaven, though their eyes were keen in that sense that gave the impression they were very observant, only from a distance.

“Have ye broken your fast yet?” asked John.

One who had the most alert face of the three answered, “Nay. Not since morning.”

The party grew silent, for footsteps announced that the rest of the household was arriving. In that brief pause Trevor noticed that all three visitors had their eyes on him. He looked down at his medieval clothes, noted to himself that he did indeed look like a clown in them, and then pretended to become interested in the ceiling.

Richard and Isabel came in first and gave a greeting, then Martha with a hurried curtsy, and last of all Kayce who had her lips tightly sealed as if she had an impertinent remark on the tip of her tongue, but was wrestling to keep it back. The riders exchanged pleasantries and kept their eyes almost entirely on Kayce. Trevor looked at her and figured she did seem quite unusual with her helplessly over-energetic and modern demeanor—even more unusual than him.

It being the custom of any unacquainted parties meeting for the first time at a house where there is a fire to start the conversation standing, then as the individuals become more relaxed for them to move toward that fire, the company at present followed this unwritten code. Richard and Isabel took the only two seats

after their guests had refused. Trevor stayed to the side, a little distanced from the others. He quickly lost track of their conversation on issues of politics, religion, and other things that bored him, but because it was neither advisable to run away at that moment nor to die of boredom, he began studying the visitors' faces. Not in any psychological way, but merely in their distinctions.

There was enough variety in them for him to be barely interested. They ranged from dark haired to sandy to white-blond. Their noses also were significantly different. The one thing, however, that they all shared (and here Trevor realized with unease that he had become psychological) was an air of caution, as if they could never feel comfortable in their current position.

He was startled into attention when the rider closest to him asked him, "And what thinkest thou, young sir?"

"Oh, um,"—Trevor stopped picking at Richard Oldcastle's chair and stood alert—"well...as to that topic—"

John started suddenly, his eyes flashing Trevor a warning even as he stretched a hand out to interrupt the conversation. "Excuse him, sirs, he hath dwelt little time among us and is of another land, so he knows not of what we speak."

The eyes of the rider closest to Trevor sparkled, though all else in his face was utterly expressionless. "Forsooth? I have some interest in geography. I would hear more of whence thou comest. Is it a country like unto ours, or vastly otherwise?"

Trevor noticed that John had tensed his muscles but was restraining himself. "Vastly different," Trevor replied flippantly. "You would think they were different worlds."

The eyes of his questioner sparkled again, though it seemed odd with the calm way he folded his hands. "Aye?"

Trevor nodded and folded his arms, looking elsewhere.

The visitor wouldn't let him finish though. "And are there cars there?"

"Of course."

The question seemed so natural that Trevor answered it without thinking—without fearing. And then those sparkling intelligent eyes burst with a red fire and Trevor knew only that he had to get it. Must get his gun. And, oh, where was it?! Where was it? The rider—he was something more than a rider—he was reaching. *He had grabbed his.*

But he could not remember where the gun was he had fingered so often. His hand found it for him and he was aware of one thunderous heartbeat and every muscle trembling, the feeling that he would fall, and then the explosion. Smoke. Screams. Chaos. It was strange how time suddenly went from eternity to rapid-fire.

He shook and nearly dropped his gun as the rider before him stumbled backward, face turning blood red and his chest blooming with it. A scream from Isabel, Kayce yelling, and intertwining roars from John and Richard as they sprang

on the other two riders. Trevor froze and his eyes blurred. Two pistols were fired and neither were his. Then there was no noise but screams and roars and Trevor swayed, but he could see and move again and he lurched forward to join the attack. Richard slumped to the ground beside his opponent and the rider raised his gun for Kayce. One leap and Trevor sent his fist crashing into the rider's skull, hurling the man off his feet and sending the gun flying from his hand. Heat welled in Trevor's chest and he shot at the man even as he rose to flee. One bullet entered the man's ribs and the next his arm and then he was out the door.

A head collided with Trevor's and he crashed to the floor. He cursed then gasped as two bodies rolled over of him. He was free for a moment and sprang up to see the last rider beneath John, stabbing a knife toward his chest. But there was a crack and then the rider lay dead and then all was completely still.

Trevor closed his eyes and stared at the darkness behind his eyelids. All his muscles shook and he felt light as a feather and there was a bitter taste in his mouth. The thought came to him that he must flee for the time machine at once.

"I shot someone," Kayce choked out and then she covered her face and wailed. "I shot someone! Trevor! Trevor, how could you let this happen?" She sobbed.

He didn't tell her to shut up. He just stood there and took it all in. He took in John's ghastly face and burning eyes. Martha was wailing pitifully on the floor. Martha was wailing. She was wailing. It was the only thing he could hear. Trevor faced her and felt a pit in his stomach.

All he could do was walk forward and stand over them. He could feel very little and think even less. All he felt was a gnawing ache in John's chest.

"Trevor! Trevor, how could you?" Kayce continued to cry.

It was Richard and Isabel. Both lifeless. And Martha was wailing.

Trevor stared.

Behind him, Trevor heard John slowly rise to his feet, muttering reverentially. Trevor muttered the only eulogy he could think of in the moment. "I guess—I guess it just couldn't be helped."

He was tackled in an instant and John's face loomed inches above him, his dark eyes like black holes that would soon explode. John gritted his teeth. "How dare—" he stopped himself with a groan and tore away.

Trevor's head spun and he felt glued to the floor. What was more, he felt a wet warmth on his stomach. He knew what it meant and looked up to confirm it. John was turned away from him, head buried in his arm, but Trevor could still see the wound in his side—a knife wound.

Martha was whispering something into her dead mistress's ear with more tenderness than Trevor had heard perhaps from anyone ever.

"Did you get that last rider, Trevor?" Kayce sniffled.

He rose slowly and shook his head. He deliberately avoided looking into Kayce's eyes. Finally realizing that he still had a gun in his hand, Trevor placed it in his holster then glanced toward the window. Twilight was setting in and there was a fresh drizzle. He walked over to the window and looked out. A cold draft soaked his face. "He may still be out there. Hiding..." Trevor didn't care to check. The darkness was rising and, truth be told, he would not have chased after the man even in daylight. He shivered as he felt a sensation like two fingers poking him just beneath the shoulders. Turning, he made as if to leave the window, only some irresistible call dragged his gaze back. He peered off into the darkness once again, looking past the grasslands, past the road and the forest, far away to where the time machine rested in wait for him.

A hand rested on his shoulder and Trevor was surprised to find it was Martha. "I have finished," she said softly. "Thou'llt not hear me cry again." He looked into her eyes, one brow raised. She had her gaze fixed on the window, though Trevor knew she saw nothing past it. Trevor felt for a moment that John would die, that Martha would forever gaze out that window, and that he and Kayce would be trapped in the manor with the prowling rider forever waiting for them outside. He imagined wolves howling and worse things. He shook his head and placed his hand on his pistol. "Oh, the time machine," he whispered, sinking to the floor.

It was incredibly quiet and there was only a faint drizzle, but then in the quiet there was a new noise and it was of many men. It was distant, but there was shouting and horses neighing and there could be no doubt where they were headed. Trevor looked at the others. Kayce met his eyes. John didn't. He was kneeling before his parents, eyes closed.

Trevor drew out his pistol even as his heart thudded a chaotic beat. "Can we hold out?"

John slowly rose, settled his hand to his lips, and then faced Trevor. His face was expressionless as if it was no longer connected with his emotions. "We've scarcely a moment," he said with perfect calm. His eyes glittered like still pools in the faint light as he clutched the wound at his side. "Follow me." He made for the back doorway. Trevor ran forward and snatched one of the riders' guns off the floor as he did so. He and Kayce made a break for the door, but it was just as Trevor had feared. Martha stayed immovable at her window, staring out as still as a piece of furniture.

"Curse it," Trevor snapped, then ran back and yanked her forcibly, exciting a shriek. John muttered at him as they ran through the doorway.

It was a wild dash for the stables, John in the lead with his hand on his wound. He shoved the door open and rushed in, signaling for the others to wait. Kayce whimpered and her shoulders heaved as shouts came from right on the other side of the house. John made a clatter and Trevor nearly yelled at him to cut

the noise.

“They’re behind the house!” came a shout from the soldiers and just then John emerged, driving three horses before him and riding one. “Bareback!” he cried. “Martha, ride anywhere. ’Tis the others they want.” He swung her off the ground with one arm and nearly threw her onto a horse, giving the beast a kick. Martha grunted, not clearly understanding, but letting herself be carried away into the night.

Trevor stared at the horses for a moment. Animals were things he could never learn to trust.

Kayce moaned. “I always wanted to ride a horse, but not to save my life!”

“Halt!” Armor clanged mere feet away. Trevor shot the soldier and leaped onto his horse, swallowing. He waited for the beast to buck him off, but it didn’t. John kicked the beast and it sprang into a gallop so fast Trevor nearly did fall off.

It was dark now—truly night—and Trevor realized with a sudden emptiness that he was leaving behind his only chance of escape from the medieval ages. A tree line stretched before him where even the moon scarcely shone through. His horse crossed a stretch of forty bounds and then they entered it.

## Chapter 6

### The March

Hours passed like ships floating by on a river after their first mad dash for escape and it now seemed long ago. John had only stopped to mend his wound, a shallow one, and they were now riding at a gentle pace—almost too gentle. Quiet things came to life in the peaceful night air. Life merged into a dream and dreams became real.

The forest was a marvelous entity. Trevor had never truly understood what a forest was. Once or twice he had been in one, but he had never actually *understood* them.

The night shone a half moon overhead like an eyelid partially open, half-watching but unconcerned. Trees loomed about Trevor like marble pillars reaching into the heavens and it truly seemed that the world had become one piece of architecture, old as the age of the first ships when men set forth to pierce the hidden secrets of the primeval world that was their own. The trees were quiet, looming, and shadowy, but they were also straight, noble, and tall. Riding beneath

them gave one both a feeling of insignificance and hope. Trevor drifted in a profound inner reflection, drifting from one idea to another, but never coming to any conclusion. It was that sort of quietness that pervaded the night.

At the head of their party rode John. When their ride had begun, his head had been straight and tall, but now it hung over like a tower about to crumble. He never moved, though he was awake. Only twice in the night had he lisped a faint groan. Trevor rarely looked at him. If he did though, he wound up looking at the ground and brooding in a vague wandering manner that gave him a sinking feeling. Kayce rode beside Trevor every step of the way. She looked at John often and her eyes glimmered with a thin veneer of water even in the faint moonlight.

When the skies began to tinge with orange and the trees changed their demeanor and gave a faint cheer, Trevor felt his eyelids turn heavy as bags of sand. It seemed even as he closed his eyes though, that he could still see the woods vividly. They walked about in his dreams.

In his dream, he rode through the forests for what seemed to him a great while and in all his wanderings he was alone without friend or guide. Only the trees stayed by him and comforted him, singing soft, unintelligible notes as of hidden mysteries of the past and cloudy visions of the future. The moon shone full and enchantingly silver. Trevor thought to himself, *Why isn't the moon always silver?* A dark, misty feeling clutched his heart.

On and on he rode until he reached a clearing with a pool in its center that was dark and smooth. Its shape was round and its appearance was enchanting. As he drew closer, he noticed that before the pool was a statue of himself, carved out of marble, and this did not surprise him. He dismounted and felt the soft earth beneath his feet. Walking over to the marble statue, he knelt in front of it, peering at its inscription as keenly as if he were gazing at his very body after death. The words were carved in an ancient style: "Here lies Trevor Allen. In life, he fought to stay alive and in death he cannot return." Bowing down, Trevor kissed the stone with the passion of red coals three full times and tears stung his eyes as they ran down his cheeks. He crossed himself reverentially.

There was a deep watery grey and then Trevor found himself no longer kneeling before the statue but somehow in the air like a spirit floating above the earth. He saw clearly the pool before him and sensed with a deep trembling that something was moving in its depths—large and unknown.

The sky darkened and Trevor felt a chill, but he noticed that somehow there was still a faint light around him. Wondering why the sky was darkening, he thought, *Yes, of course this is bound to happen. It always happens at this time. It is the creature that blots out the moon.*

Then he noticed that a voice was speaking to him out of the pool. It was feminine, hushed, and mystic. "Though all be lost, yet thou shalt hope."

A *film*, thought Trevor, feeling somehow that he was waking. *I would like to watch a film.*

"Look to thy belt," a louder voice seemed to say, not the same as spoke from the pool.

Trevor felt the need to hide himself as if from an all-seeing eye. *Of course*, he chided himself, *my holographic belt. There are films on it.*

The belt somehow began to emit a blue light, though he had never started it. It flashed with a lusty gleam before his eyes, yet seemed also to glow *within* him. It was a vague light at first, but then Trevor saw the form of John materialize out of it and at that moment he felt as if the only things in the world were the hologram and him.

"Trevor!" John's eyes were like fine needles stabbing into his mind. "Trevor!" John repeated, "Thy heart is darkened."

*No!* Trevor replied, struggling desperately as if he were being suffocated. He tried to cover his eyes and turn away. *It's not me! It's the creature blocking out the moon! When he goes away it will be light again.*

"Trevor," John said, "there is a battle ahead."

Trevor's lungs burned as he held his breath.

"Trevor, draw thy sword."

He was falling. *No, no!* he cried. The hologram turned menacing. It grew brighter and brighter and brighter.

Then Trevor awoke.

Someone was tugging at his arm. With a groan, Trevor straightened his back. His muscles felt like a tourniquet twisted too many times with needles sticking into it and his legs didn't want to peel from the horse's hide.

"Come on, pillow head," Kayce grumbled, "sun's out."

Trevor slid down from his horse onto the wet grass with a thunk. He didn't want to move. Gathering together his little energy, he rubbed his eyes and winced at the sunlight. "... 'Ur not 'wake either," he yawned.

"Look..." Grass rustled and then moments later Kayce's face appeared in front of Trevor. She squinted at him and frowned. "Now that you're all grown up, Trevor, it's time you learned to treat a girl respectfully and cook her her breakfast."

Trevor closed one eye and raised the opposite eyebrow. A bird trilled in the extending silence. "And...*how* do I find the food?"

Kayce snorted, sitting up on her knees. "Go shoot a bear, silly. What other option do you have? Boxed cereal?"

Trevor said nothing and sat up. He looked about him and saw only two horses. "Where's John?" He looked up at Kayce.

She eyed him almost sympathetically for a moment, stroking her hair, and then sighed. A slight smile curled on her lips and she folded her legs cross-legged then laid her hands on her lap. "Okay, I was being a bit queenish." She faced him for an empty second. "You're not a hunter after all and who knows if bear even tastes good. Besides,"—she rolled her tongue around the inside of her cheeks and made a bland expression— "I'm a vegan."

Trevor snorted, almost choking. "You are *not*."

She shrugged, cocking back her neck. "Details, details." She waved a hand dismissively. "Here, John at least left us some water." She handed him a flask.

Trevor eyed it, then took a sip. It was still cold from the night air. At the first gulp, he felt a tingling of life all through his body and the chill of the liquid snapped his mind into focus. All the tension in his bones disappeared like they had grounded into the soil. He handed the flask back with a "thanks".

Looking around, he noticed that his surroundings seemed very different from the night before. Warm light caressed the branching trees and they seemed no longer like cold, marble pillars but like gentle giants finding enjoyment in watching their little companions below. Instead of the silver moon, there was the golden sun—social advancement for the earth. In addition to its new wealth, the earth seemed spryer—jumpier. As if to prove it, a rabbit leaped by.

Then Trevor remembered what was missing in the scenery and jerked his head around. "Wait, Kayce, I asked what happened to John?"

"Oh, that," said Kayce flatly. "He left you all alone to die."

Trevor leapt to his feet.

"Ha!" Kayce slapped her hand in front of her mouth, bending over with laughter. "You really believed it!"

Trevor almost sat back down, but straightened stiffly and folded his arms. "N-no—not completely. What's really happened?"

"Oh..."—she tilted her head back at an angle, wiping tears of laughter from her eyes—"he told me he has friends of his nearby that are part of his special group—the Lollards, I think. He'll be back soon. Don't worry. And the break's good because I needed to talk with you."

Her face suddenly became serious and Trevor wiped his hands at his sides. "Yeeeah?" he drawled.

Kayce first crossed her legs, then began to play aimlessly with a loose strand of her hair. She smiled faintly at the strand for some reason, though her eyes didn't have their normal twinkle in them. "It's about Jerrold."

Trevor caught his breath and tightened his jaw muscles.

Kayce's eye was on him. She tossed the strand of hair away like a piece of junk. "Look, you just about let him die. There was only one way he could know he was in danger, and that was if you told him. Well, you just plumb fled like a

coward." Trevor was about to interject something, but she interrupted him, her eyes flashing. "Yeah, I know you had your own life to think about, but this here's the age of knights and chivalry, and that's what I'm getting to. You just fought with the rest of us when those whoever-they-ares attacked us, but you had yourself to defend. What if you could just run away?"

Trevor felt that he would shout something, but it just wouldn't come out. He groaned and turned away. "No, that's not how it is Kayce. You just don't understand. It's just..." He walked away.

Trevor and Kayce were sitting like mute Indians when John returned with a train of men behind him. John had a strained look in his eyes and he seemed unable to turn his gaze to either side. When he pulled up beside them, he reached down mechanically, took the water flask from Kayce, and drank in silence.

Trevor got up and stared at those John had brought with him while he tried to figure out where to put his hands. There weren't any good options, so he hid them behind his back. A good forty men followed in John's train, all with some amount of armor and all well armed. They carried bows, crossbows, spears, axes, and a few had swords. A few were also mounted. Their faces were stern enough to be philosophers, and as they came up, they saluted Trevor like a prince, saying things like, "Well met!" or "We greet thee, sir, no matter thy epoch." After that, they moved on to Kayce and made her a deep bow.

Kayce stared like she had just seen the royal family pass by on the street.

As the last man came up—a boy really—he stared up at Trevor. His jaw hung loose, and muttered something Trevor didn't understand, but which was apparently an oath because his elder slapped him, saying, "Guard thy tongue, lad. We seek to do that which no band may if they do not begin with discipline."

There was some little laughter and John spoke for the first time since their arrival. His appearance had become rough and wild like a woodsman fresh out of a month's journey on his own, though there was something weak and vulnerable in his eyes. He spoke bluntly. "Mayhap our fine youth would like to prove his discipline? Here, Gerard—"

The lad looked in his direction.

"Thou hast fleet feet, dost not? Run ahead to Gloucester. Tell all thou canst to be gathered together when we come."

The lad nodded vigorously, but John gave a look to still him and scratched his beard. "Stay, others had well go with him. There will be many to gather. Who will go?"

The shouts of those willing were loud enough that no particular voice could be heard. Trevor looked around from one to the other, feeling immensely out of place.

John's brows came together. "Let those mounted go then." The lad protested and John added as he blinked sleepily, "And those who cannot command their tongues."

Assent broke from the party and those who were to carry the message saluted and set off, the others organizing themselves behind John. Trevor and Kayce mounted, Trevor shaking his head and constantly looking at the company with wide eyes. Trevor wouldn't ask anything with all the others crowded around him, but as soon as he had a little distance he planned to. He had a brief opportunity as John started off ahead of the others to ride up beside him. He slapped his horse's neck and whispered as loud as he could, "What do you think you're doing with all this?"

The silence made him humph and he placed a hand on his side. John still kept his gaze ahead and there was something quieting about that. The gaze was utterly fixed. His lips were pressed in a hard line, and in the deepest depths of his eyes there was a faint blaze as of a great bonfire on the peak of a distant mountain.

Trevor tried to remain inconspicuous as he listened to every word John spoke. His mind drifted however when he glanced out over the vast crowd. It was almost as unbelievable as seeing a mob of armored dwarves straight out of a fairytale. John spoke roughly but in a resounding voice that stirred the gathered assembly. Trevor thought there must be three thousand of them, mostly men.

Some of the chief men of the district stood nearest John with their arms folded or tapping their sides. One of these stood forward and began to debate John. He spoke eloquently and John replied in short, sharp sentences. Trevor gathered that John was calling on the people to take up arms and that his opponent was challenging his authority. Trevor leaned over to Kayce. "Kayce. What. Is. Going. On?"

Her eyes widened and she asked in a hushed tone as if she were trying to soothe him, "You mean John hasn't told you?"

At that moment, John's voice rose to twice its power. "You need no Duke's authority in this! While we wait, our chances diminish. I ask, is thy fealty to England or no? Enough of talk. I take none who would fain stay. All who are with me, return here when the sun sits highest in the sky, then I shall know who is true. The usurper hath reigned long enough. We march at once on London!"

## Chapter 7

### The Madman and the Jester

The gutter stank, but the man in red, yellow, and blue rolled into it and held his breath as the watcher bounded around the corner. The pounding of his heart throbbed in his ears like war drums as he heard the steps slow down and draw nearer. An oppressive silence followed. The jester covered his eyes and tried to shrink and become invisible. The reek of the gutters burned his nose and salty tears stung his eyes.

There was a sharp hiss above and the watcher took a step closer. The jester trembled and tried in vain to distract his mind with thoughts of happy songs. There was a pause where it seemed the earth itself might betray him and toss him out of the gutter to be imprisoned and butchered. He blessed the earth at the thought, thinking that then at least it would be over.

The watcher moved again. The jester waited and then a sensation like he would float away overcame him as he noticed that the watcher was moving on. The watcher headed down the street and took a turn.

Fast as a stone from a catapult, the jester sprang to his feet and sprinted in the opposite direction, stumbling as his chest heaved with pent-up sobs for all that life had become. The sky was dark and cloudy. The houses around him were cramped and poorly built, like shacks tossed heedlessly on top of each other. A very few dim, wavering lamps served to accent the darkness, but they were of poor help in guiding him as he careened down tight passages with as little idea where he was headed as a blind rat in a fiery underworld.

He caught a shadow out of the corner of his eye but ignored it. Next instant, he tripped and landed with his face on the pavement, stars exploding across his vision and his nose pounding with blood. He cried out and flailed to scramble to his feet, but an arm as strong as Hercules grabbed his shoulder and held him in place. The jester turned his head, seeing nothing in the darkness until his eyes adjusted. Two small, bright orbs stared back at him from the face of a wasted, scraggly man in tattered clothes. The face was marked with heavy lines, the hair disorderly, and the body a starved form of what had doubtless once been a powerful frame.

The man's voice was like an icy ghost of wind mixed with rustling leaves, and it was eerily soothing. "Needing a hole, my lordship? Hiding, are ye?" His boot scraped loudly on the cobblestone street as he shifted his weight.

The jester wrung his hands. "Yes—ah, I beg! The watchers—ah!"

Instantly, the man released his shoulder. His face tightened as if the words were a poison in his blood and he crouched ready to pounce. "Watchers?" he hissed. The man rose to his feet and spat three times, each time more vehemently. "Watchers?" he repeated, then laughed in a mad cackle that rumbled through the

long street and echoed back. The jester shrank away, crawling backward, but the man leaned down and peered at him. "Are ye of the criminal type, eh, my lordship? ...Ah...mute as a dead crow. Fay! A pity. But, nay, thou'rt a jester now, ay?" He laughed his same cackle. "A jest! A jest! Our Lady, a jester that weeps!"

In an instant the jester fell at his feet and clasped his ankles. He touched the very stones of the road with his forehead and his voice came out choking. "For what is lost, sir. For the good that is lost!" He broke down, his lips moving without words.

The madman slowly picked up his staff which lay leaning against the house beside him and looked at it with a mixture of aggression, doubt, and pity. "Shall we let the broken one into our hole?" His brows furrowed and he pounded the stick against the ground. "We knows London—aye, well." He pulled his stick an inch away from his eyes and glared at it. "Mayhap this be the jester that watchers look for. Mayhap they shall not find him if we bring him into our hole. Not find him. Hahaha! The watchers not find him."

With a sudden spring, he leapt on the jester and dragged him to his feet. The jester, broken in spirit, hung limp like a wilted flower. With seemingly no effort, the madman dragged him down to the end of the street where a door at street level led into a cellar of sorts. Opening this, he began descending the steps into a realm of complete darkness, still carrying the jester.

He closed the door with a light thud—the only noise to be heard in that desolate underworld. Leaving the jester on the steps, he proceeded cautiously ahead. For a minute there was only darkness. Once there was a scratching noise here and then a sliding noise there. Suddenly, a light appeared and the madman lit three oil lamps in quick succession. The faint luminance grew and spread throughout the room with a struggle as if the flames needed to stretch their limbs after an ageless sleep that might have begun before the Roman times. A single room was revealed of a small size, very grimy, and with no other furniture than a thin pile of straw dropped with cloth, one table, one stool, and a wooden chest.

The madman paced with the softest tread back to the jester like a mother checking on her sleeping child. He studied him. "Dost know where ye are, lordship?" he whispered. The jester only stared back with blank, weary eyes laced with pain. "Then," continued the madman with an air of mysticism and taking a crouch, "ye are in the underworld. A priest told me that, 'pon my soul. He had the plague as did I, and I carried him down here that we might die in peace and he said to me, 'Thomas, son, now my soul is laid in the underworld' haha!" Intense silence settled on the room.

"Thomas..." the jester repeated in a faint whisper, blinking twice and a streak of intelligence entering his eyes.

"Aye! Aye!" The madman nodded with a grin. "Thomas of underworld manor,

an' please thy lordship." He wet his lips and watched the jester patiently with a hesitant smile. He suddenly got up as if he had remembered something, but then crouched back down and held his chin glumly in his hand. His voice became somewhat musical, if a bit rough, "So, ye're being hunted by watchers, eh?"

The jester gave a silent nod, then yawned and rolled over. It seemed as if he might fall asleep, but instead his attention became fixed on one of the oil lamps burning nearest him. His gaze became intense, almost scrutinizing, and slowly a thin smile formed on his lips. "They hunt me everywhere. I was in the rebellion and my red, yellow, and blue caught the watchers' eyes. I cannot get past the gates, for all the guards are informed against me. I have no friend to lend me a disguise and never would I steal one." After a pause, he added, "Thou mayst be mad, Thomas, but I think it is only because of thy head, not like those who are mad because of their heart. Thou art no friend of the watchers, I think?"

The madman cackled and cracked his knuckles. "Yes! Yes!" For a moment he hesitated, then stood and leaned forward. His eyes positively glistened. "I know London." He acted as if he were making a confession and were desperate to be absolved, even folding his hands as if pleading. "There is an army outside these London walls, dost know it? They would free us from the watchers. All of us! Overthrow the sorcerer even." These last words were said with an almost breathlessness. The jester sprang to his feet.

"Can it be true?" He grasped the madman by the shoulders. Perhaps he thought him his only friend on earth. "Can..." He had to steady himself.

"Aye, ye may wager thy soul on it," said the madman, helping hold the jester up. "They shall attack on the morrow, methinks."

As if the heavenly choruses were singing around him, the jester raised his hands in the air with a cry, then covered his face and sank down, prostrating himself and weeping.

"Ack! Ack!" cried the madman, nearly crying. "Enough of this." He stood up and began to pace rapidly. "But perhaps we shall stay here in our hole. No more blessed sun for the ground-dwellers! Aye, no more sun. Perhaps we shall burrow into the underworld and never come out, no matter who reigns. Ack! Why do ye weep so? Stop it! Ack!"

"They will be slaughtered!" moaned the jester. "Who can stand before the sorcerer?"

There was nothing to cause it, but the madman suddenly snatched up his staff and stood on guard, eyes scanning the room. He seemed to have forgotten the jester for the moment. A wild look came into his eyes.

The two remained in this way for several minutes, the jester weeping and the madman clutching his staff. Then the jester gasped out, "...a gate!"

"Gate?" the madman asked, a light dawning in his eyes. He pulled his staff

closer to his chest and muttered meekly, "Ye are mad as I. Ye speak the things in your mind." He laughed a thin trail of laughter.

After a minute, the jester could speak through his tears and continued, "We must open a gate for the army."

"A jest! A jest!" cried the madman. "'Who can stand before the sorcerer' and then 'we must open a gate,' forsooth!"

"Aye, but so be it," said the jester, rising to his feet with his fists clenched at his sides. "I will be no devil's chattel."

The madman quieted and leaned on his staff, gazing piercingly at the jester. What was in his eyes was either the first sign of sanity or something far more mad than before. "Open a gate then? Shall we open a gate?"

The jester sucked in a quick breath as he caught a glimpse of the watcher at the gate. There were twelve men at arms besides. In a microsecond, the jester pulled back behind the cover of the building and squeezed his eyes shut, taking deep breaths. After a moment, he pursed his lips and sprinted across the open area toward the street on the other end

"Halt!" called the watcher.

The jester reached cover and slid just half his face around the corner to look. He kept quiet.

Footsteps came nearer. "I see thy uniform, jester."

The jester sprang up with a stifled cry and darted away. He had just reached the end of the street when he turned around and saw the watcher sprinting after him. Wheeling round on his heels, he sprinted down an alley, took a left, and craned his neck to see the watcher right behind him. The jester took one more left and found himself at a complete dead end. He looked around wildly for the madman, expecting to see him, but finding nobody.

A force jerked him from behind and the jester felt cold metal against his temple. The watcher was utterly silent for a moment and then asked in a whisper that was utterly freezing, "Dost think thou canst escape from us?" He pressed the muzzle of his gun harder into the jester's temple till the jester felt a dull ache there.

"Ho! There's a man with a damned soul!" shouted a voice that split the silence like a crack of thunder.

The watcher spun around, the jester still held up against his chest and his gun still to the jester's head.

Coming toward them was a priest in a cowl, limping with a staff. The priest had his face pointed at the ground and was sniffing like a hound. He sniffed right and left but only ever walked straight forward toward the watcher. The priest stopped only when he was seven feet away, then raised his head with a start. "Aha! What do I sniff? Adultery? Parricide? Wait!" He shook his staff at the watcher like a

finger. His voice was low and menacing. "Thou wouldst show irreverence to thine elders, thou infernal fool! Cursed be thou!"

The watcher gave a slow cynical smile. He spat at the priest's feet.

The priest raised his staff as if to call down lightning. "I am a prophet! Even I said, so thou hast done. Be forewarned then, thou shalt surely come to ruin."

"Wouldst like to see a murder, priest?" The watcher's tone was almost sweet, though mixed with wormwood.

The jester looked pleadingly at the priest, squirming and grimacing pitifully. The priest bowed his head with gravity. "My son," he said, shaking his head and squinting at the watcher, "I would do all I can for thy soul."

A hint of doubt flickered in the watcher's eyes and the priest concluded, "And this is all I can do." His staff whacked the watcher square across the side of the head, sending him reeling to the ground, his gun flying across the street.

The jester sucked in a heavy breath and wiped his forehead, inhaling and exhaling a dramatic quantity of air. "Why the deception, friend? A priest?"

The madman shrugged, throwing back his hood. "I must still gather the knights of London." He pointed to the watcher with his staff. "Ye must put on his garments for thy part in the act."

The jester turned to the body beside him and looked down at it with moist eyes and shoulders drooping like willow branches. "He's dead, Thomas. I hate this."

"What?" asked the madman. "His crown so thin?" He began muttering to himself in a great variety of undertones in which were a few high crescendos. Meanwhile, the jester leaned down and stripped the watcher of his uniform with hushed, broken sobs.

"I did sniff him though," interjected the madman in a defensive tone, à propos of nothing. He sounded offended, as if someone had stated that he *hadn't* sniffed the watcher. "Sniffed his sins from three streets down. That's what the plague does to one."

When the jester had put on his disguise, he stood before the madman for approval.

"Hmm..." grumbled the madman, narrowing his eyes and frowning. "Ye look less companionable than before."

"Will I pass though?"

The madman roared. "Who can say? It's a jest after all!" He thumped his staff so hard the jester thought he would break it.

The jester bowed his head and folded his hands over his face, sighing. "Perhaps I am not able to bear this weight."

"By all the saints! How hard can it be? Men will make way for anyone who orders them with authority. Tell them the jester has been spotted, order them away

to search, and guard the gate thyself."

The jester sank his head further and made no response. At first, the madman looked down at him with his upper lip pushed up, scratching his head, then he waved his staff overhead threateningly, yelling, "Go! Go! Go!" and the jester fled away with a cry.

The madman nodded smugly to himself as he watched the jester bolting to his task. He remained staring a few moments longer, then shook his head with a smile and set down the street on his own course. He walked with the gait of a bear and shook his staff every few seconds.

After a minute he stopped by the door of a brightly lit tavern, one of the few places that still received business at the hour. He put his nose in the air and sniffed, then grunted, his eyes sparkling with a strange fire. Pulling his hood back over his face, he swung the door open and stepped inside.

The tavern was a cheery place, the more so because of its commonness. Good clean earth lay pleasantly upon the floor and the wood structure of the room matched grandly. A song sung by men in their blaring, drunken, companionable voices completed the atmosphere and the many lamps in the room kept it well lit. One man stood up from all the rest and faced the madman, rocking a bit on his feet. He was young, sharply dressed in green, and his leather shoes tapered to a fashionable point.

"Priest," he said with a merry laugh, "I trow an angel sent thee. Hear this man's argument and judge betwixt us. Shall a man pay taxes to the sorcerer? I say nay, for what sin is it to steal from devils and it would profit me. But he will say that God appoints even brutes to the throne."

"Heathen!" the madman screamed, crashing his staff on the table between the quarrelers. Everyone's attention was instantly riveted. He glared at them all with eyes of livid flame. "How little thou knowest of the Holy Writ! Not of sinful mammon lies this question, but of souls and devils and arms of battle! Arms of battle! Know ye not of that antichrist that shall come with all types of signs, deceiving many? But I see ye are deceived already, for this sorcerer is no human king, but a phantom of no form or shape, inhabiting the body of Brutus, Caesar's murderer, raised from the dead, so that he is rather an enemy to kings than a ruler. 'Tis as the holy pope Innocent III himself prophesied, and can ye stand like barbarian men and speak of *taxes*?!"—this last part he screamed at the top of his lungs.

The men in the tavern looked at each other, utterly speechless.

"Thou, sir!" thundered the madman, slamming his staff in front of one man. "Hast thou a family?"

"Y-y-yes."

The madman staggered and hid his face, then looked again and gnashed his

teeth with tears in his eyes. "Then thou hast damned them. Thou hast placed them under the rule of a devil and so made them unclean by thine own hand."

The man with the family paled.

"And all of you, damned!" the madman yelled, waving his staff with a gigantic flourish.

"Holy father," begged the man with the fashionable shoes. "I have done good —"

"Speak not in thine ignorance!" the madman hissed. "I know what ye would say, that ye have done good by the church and are penitent, but can ye save yourself howsoever ye wish? Nay! But there is only one way to cleanse thyself, and that the hard and bloody way. But take heart, my brethren, for I have seen a mercy for thee. God has caused thine enemies to stumble so that there is but a single man guarding Newgate. With these two eyes I have seen it. This then is thy salvation, for only in taking that gate and opening it for the army outside shall thy souls be saved, for it will be the righting of what ye have set wrong. Come like men with stick and knife if thou hast no weapons. Take the gate and save thy souls. Save thy souls!" The madman rushed them all and waved his staff overhead so threateningly that all were eager to save their bodies if not their souls as well.

Trevor waited in the back of the room twiddling his thumbs as he watched the first knight exit through the door while a second knight came forward and lean over with his hands on the table. He was a shorter man than John, but John was sitting and the knight used it to his advantage and towered over him.

"Some of the men are grumbling, sir. They say it is not right for a common man to be leading us."

John looked up at him and was silent for a moment, folding his hands. Trevor could not see his eyes, but he imagined they were soft and unmoving as if to make the knight feel ashamed. "A common man, sir? I am a knight as well as thou art."

The knight flung one hand in the air and leaned in further. "That is not to the point."

John nodded, moving aside some papers. He coughed preparatory to speaking and Trevor involuntarily leaned forward. "I have a respect for the nobility," John said, "but the law is higher, first moral then civil. I will obey them. As for the dissenters, tell them they may have a nobleman over them if they can but find one to lead us."

The knight stood up. He stared, biting his lip for a moment, then turned round sharply and left with his head bowed.

The room was silent. Trevor scratched his chin and tossed a hunk of cheese into his mouth that he happened to have. He swallowed it before it was fully chewed and sat up. "Hey, John."

John turned around in his chair and faced him. His eyes were sterner now that he was not facing threats—an odd facet of his personality.

Trevor came forward and hesitantly pulled the gun out of his pocket and laid it on the table. “I wanted to give this to you.” He shrugged. “I got it off one of the horsemen who attacked us. I’ve already got one. I figured it might increase your chances of survival.”

John kept his steady gaze on him instead of the gun. “Was it thy sister asked thee to do this?”

“Look!” Trevor picked the gun up and pounded it back on the table. “I can have my own good intentions.” He took a deep breath and calmed down. “Here, I’ll teach you how to fire it.”

A gust of wind hit him and Trevor looked up to see three men barging through the open door. Two of them were men-at-arms and the one in-between was a man dressed in dark soldierly garments. The men-at-arms held the prisoner’s arms firmly behind his back and the jester stumbled under their urges to carry him forward.

John shot to his feet. “What is this?”

One of the men-at-arms took full possession of their hostage who immediately fell to the floor on his knees. The other soldier saluted. “Sir Oldcastle, this man turned himself over to us as a hostage. He claims to have a message for you, sir, but we were wary that he might be a spy.”

“Sir,” interposed the man, looking up into John’s eyes and speaking with a frail voice. “I am a jester by trade and a rebel against the sorcerer. Some of us in the city have captured the gate called Newgate and will open it for you, but we cannot hold it once we are found out.”

John stared at him and whistled. “Thou’rt saying we must attack at once?”

The prisoner nodded.

John frowned and looked up at the ceiling. He folded his hands behind his back and carefully circumvented the table bringing himself straight in front of the prisoner. Bending down, he placed his face inches away from the prisoner’s and looked into his eyes. After a long moment, he grunted and backed away with a faint smile. “Very well. I will not pass up the chance to avoid a siege. We attack at once.”

## Chapter 8

### Dire Straits in the Streets

A few wide-eyed citizens of London hovered about the gates like scarecrows as the mounted knights passed through. The knights shouted and cheered while jostling each other and moving blindly forward with the reckless confidence of bulls. Just past the gates, they ran into a maze of promising side streets where they halted and the shouting increased as those behind urged those in front to move on. John rushed to reassemble them and lead them from the front. More horsemen poured through the gate and the foot soldiers followed. The whole mass was more like a flock of birds than an army, their ranks mixed, some with only half their armor on, even more without armor, and all following blindly those who led the way.

From the front of the line, John spat at the ground and wheeled his horse around. He weaved his way through the shifting obstacles streaming by him till he was about a third of the way through the ranks of knights, then turned back and pulled up beside the jester in his bright colors. Trevor was there also, both of them mounted.

“What is thy name, Jester?”

The jester hung his head and said quietly, “Tristan.”

John’s voice had a note of ice to it. “Tristan, tell me where the alchemist is. In the Tower?”

“Alchemist?” asked the jester, raising his startled eyes and looking about as if fearing the unnatural creature might be nearby.

Trevor smacked a hand over his face. “Sorcerer,” he said.

“Ah...” The jester looked down at his saddle and grew a shade pale as if he were afraid of even his saddle. “Yes, in the Tower.”

John looked down the road before them, a broad, mostly straight path that went on for how long he could not see due to the crowds of men in front of him. His voice was soft but authoritative, his eyes never on the jester but on the road ahead. “How are we to approach it?”

“’Tis opposite in the layout of the city. We need but continue thus for a ways, then take a road leading right and from there a left.”

“’Tis well.”

Trevor simply drifted along for the moment, trying to hide his jitteriness. He strained his eyes to catch a glimpse of the Tower of London against the dark sky and he thought he could just barely see it—a white peak like some glimmering magician’s abode. He shivered, then laughed nervously and rubbed his hands together to keep warm.

John interrupted his thoughts. “The Tower will not be unguarded like the gate. We cannot take it like a mob. We must organize and form a plan of siege.”

Trevor went through the motions several times of drawing his pistol to make sure he had it down. He looked over at the jester who was melancholy, but calm.

“You gonna be safe in that thin jester’s suit, ole boy?” Trevor asked, his voice shaking and none too confident.

The only reply was a despondent choke attempting to be a laugh.

Trevor decided not to offer any further conversation. He focused on the task at hand, watching out to make sure he wasn’t jostled by the knights packed close around him. It was midnight and hard to see more than ten feet ahead. He reached for his pistol and made sure the safety was off, then urged his horse a little faster to keep up with the others. He grimaced as he looked up at the skies. They were dark and cloudy, veiling the moon as if it were too modest to show itself before so many observers, or perhaps as if it were ashamed *of them*. Trevor didn’t care which it was. It was fitting for the moon to be squeamish. This was a night for heroes to perform deeds of valor and Trevor aimed to be one of them.

Gunfire erupted and Trevor lurched in shock. His horse reared and his head collided with a knight’s, then his neck jerked as he came back down. More gunfire. Screams. Once his heart descended from his throat and it stopped pounding at the speed of a bullet, Trevor felt all the queasiness in his gut harden rock solid and his muscles tense like iron.

Trevor charged forward, but other knights got in his way. John somehow ended up in front, waving his sword and yelling things Trevor couldn’t hear. All was chaos for a moment and then the gunfire ceased like a candle suddenly blown out. Just then, the moon left the cover of the clouds.

Trevor glanced over the horsemen in his way and saw it. Knights lay piled in a heap as if for mass burial. There was no one past this pile—no enemy. A single knight dismounted from his horse and crawled forward like a thief to the junction of the streets. He peeked his head around the corner and then fell dead with a bullet through his head.

“Hey, watch it!” Trevor cried as a horseman nearly knocked him off his saddle in trying to turn around and retreat. He could hardly tell what was going on with so many soldiers pressing forward and so many fleeing back and all milling about like a seething stew. Someone tugged his arm and he turned about to see dark, almost indiscernible eyes staring down into his. He half tried to break out of John’s grasp, but the grip was too firm so he stopped. “What knowest of these weapons? Can we charge them?” John’s face had no particular expression, but it was taut as a bowstring.

“No way,” Trevor said, gritting his teeth and clenching his gun. “You’d get killed in a heartbeat.”

John rose full height in his stirrups and flung his arm out in the air as if slapping somebody. “Listen, all!” he shouted above the clamor, though it was a moment before he received silence. “Listen, all! Ye knights must take a route through these side streets to come around these warriors from the rear.”

Cheers arose and many of the knights thundered off at once, swords waving like plumes in a dandy's cap. John's face tightened like a coil of rope and he looked behind him at the gathering hordes who were pressing to hurry onwards like prisoners to a dinner call.

Trevor rode up beside him and pointed his finger toward the street corner. "You know," he said, "Those gunmen probably just heard all your plans."

"Well, let them!" John looked about him almost madly and his eyes rested on the building at the street corner. He grimaced. "Archers. I need archers up there. Where are they?" He spurred his horse off into the darkness.

Trevor sunk his head and knitted his brows. He fumbled absently with his pistol and listened to the sounds around him. He picked up on little sounds: a Londoner slamming his window shut, someone groaning, a soft breeze. He heard thunder too. A storm was rolling in from the distance. The tremor in Trevor's stomach returned and, fight it though he tried, it wouldn't go away. He tried to distract himself by making sure his gun was cocked then double-checking the gunmen hadn't rounded the corner. He scowled, wondering why in the world the gunmen *didn't* round the corner. Just then, he caught dim figures approaching down the street in front of them. He only had time to catch his breath before the firing started. Bullets whizzed by in a hurricane.

His horse screamed and the next instant he hit the ground and stars danced before his eyes as hoofs trampled inches from his head. He scrambled back to his feet, then whirled around on his stomach to face the attackers, bringing his gun in front of him.

A fallen horse covered him from the eyes of the gunmen and he breathed a grateful gasp as he crashed against it and returned fire. His shots sounded like cannon fire and he felt naked and exposed. He rolled over and fired from two feet right of his former position.

For a moment, the gunmen stopped. Trevor took advantage of the situation and unloaded all his clip save the last round then buried himself against the horse as return fire zipped around him. From the direction of his feet, Trevor heard a shrill female voice yell, "Jerks! Take this!" A gun was fired. He heard another sound from the opposite direction of a masculine tone. Trevor looked over and saw the jester throwing stones. He looked back past his feet and saw Kayce. "Kayce!"

She flattened herself against the ground and made a long toothy grimace. "I'm out of ammo!"

"Kayce! What are you thinking?!"

"I'm thinking we need to leave."

His chest hurt with the strength his heart pounded against it. "I'm with you."

They ran for their lives. It was a good effort. They were obvious targets,

though.

As Trevor collapsed into a side street, he looked down to see blood on his coat and leggings.

# Chapter 9

## Trevor Takes a Stroll

The room was still and quiet when Trevor woke up as if time had stopped working. Mixed images floated about in his mind—some sharp and jabbing, some hazy, feverish, and hard to identify, others dark and others hopeful. He sighed a deep breath and tossed around a bit, then rubbed his eyes.

Without even looking, he could tell that John had left the room and the surgeon also. He couldn't remember how long he had been in bed. Two weeks? Trevor winced and rubbed a spot on his shoulder. He had a few things in mind to say if he ever happened into that surgeon again.

He propped his head up with his arms and engaged himself with the thatched ceiling above him. After a minute he grumbled and rolled over. "Rubbish. Who cares about thatched roofs?"

He landed on the ground in a crouch and then, as his legs began to wobble beneath him, he wondered if he would be able to stand up. He managed to, and after tottering about like a ship in a storm for half a minute, he was able to walk a full circle without any problem.

He headed toward the open door where warm light flooded in, but stopped at a table in the center of the room, leaned over, and tapped his fingers on it. He shuffled around various papers and scanned short sections of them. *...I ask thine aid in...Grain is almost depleted...What news yet?* He yawned and walked out of the cottage where a gentle but steady and vivacious breeze was blowing. All around him were tents pitched to the number of a few hundred. Quite a few looked like they were about ready to fall apart and most looked more like emergency shelters than tents. He saw one group packing up and heading off. They weren't the first to leave from lack of supplies or other strains, at least so he was given to understand.

Trevor stretched his arms and scrunched up his cheeks in a sort of smile as he looked up. The sky was all blue and there wasn't much activity in the camp. London sat in the distance all innocent and quiet and unmoving as if it were trying to seem impertinent. He flipped his hair back, which had grown longer than he

liked it recently, scratched his head, then broke into a hobble in a random direction.

He soon came upon John, pacing leisurely beneath a sprawling shade tree and rubbing a blade of grass between his fingers.

"Hullo, John."

John looked up and placed his hands behind his back, dropping the piece of grass. "Thou art well," he said with a pleasant nod.

Trevor stopped abruptly and arched his back. "Not terrible you could say. Just remind me never to get wounded again. Your surgeons are deplorable. Never dealt with bullet wounds before, I guess. Humph."

"Likely not," John replied. He rubbed his fingers together behind his back and rolled his tongue along the inside of his cheeks, then frowned. There was a pleasant pause, or at least Trevor was too weak to find it annoying. After watching a sparrow prance across a branch for no reason, he asked. "How's the campaign?"

John folded his arms and turned slightly away. The tree above him swayed, shifting patterns of shadow across his face first this way and then that. "There is no campaign," he said flatly and then sighed. "I hoped that anon the alchemist would arise from his stronghold and fight us, but he is wary."

Trevor looked around for something interesting to divert his eyes on but found nothing. "Ah." He ended up pushing a stone forward with his foot. "Is the army disbanding then?"

Trevor wasn't looking at John, but he could imagine his body language by the way he held his breath for a few moments before speaking. "No...we are allying ourselves with the Earl of Warwick. He hath sent an epistle saying that he hath raised an army for our cause and asks us to join him. If we but join forces, then peradventure we may lay a proper siege to London and end the tyrant's reign." Trevor raised his gaze and John looked him up and down. "Hast seen thy sister yet?"

Trevor swallowed and his head became light. He suddenly felt that his hands were very much in the way even though there was nothing for them to be in the way of. "No. Is she..."

"She will live. In fact, she fares very well I am told."

"Ah. Good." Trevor looked at the ground.

"There. Look to the cottage. None are sent to her but the surgeon who tends her, but thou mayst enter."

Trevor nodded.

"The jester is in that tent there," John continued. He made a rare dreamy face and pinched his brows together. "I offered him a room in one of the nearby cottages in light of his services, but he refused special treatment."

"Thanks," Trevor said, heading off toward the cottage. "Have fun running the

army." The next moment he wondered why he used such sarcasm. He thought about looking round for a peek back at John, but didn't. Twenty paces out, he stopped abruptly and changed his direction, deciding to see the jester before he visited Kayce. He walked in a nervous, fidgety sort of way and twisted his fingers together. He hung his head. Before the jester's tent, he stopped and stood somewhat like a man about to ask another man for his daughter's hand in marriage, only not nearly so dramatic. He asked himself what had caused him to come visit the jester and his mind replied, "I don't know. I just want to see him. Can't that be enough?"

He walked in and found the jester sitting alone with his legs crossed, laboring at a small bowl of stew which he gazed at in a consolatory way as if he wished to apologize to the stew for eating it. He had changed from his jester's outfit into a simple attire of green and light brown with a hood that hung limp around his shoulders. He had a small sword at his side. He was not a bad looking chap, Trevor thought. His hair was wavy brown and short. At the moment, there was stubble on his chin and cheeks, though normally he was clean-shaven. His eyes were bright blue and his nose a fine, thin roman. His face was slightly angular, but since he was only of a medium height, it gave him no ungainliness. He was lithe, athletic, but strangely he never smiled, or at least that was the impression Trevor had gained from his short time with him.

Trevor sat down on the ground and folded his hands in his lap. Wordlessly, the jester held out his bowl, offering it to him. Trevor, at that moment remembering he was a germaphobe, declined and tried not to be too offensive.

"The holes from your bullet wounds knitting back together yet?"

The jester stared back at him with his gentle blue eyes, no change in his expression. After a while, he nodded.

"Right. That's all I came to see." But Trevor didn't leave. In fact, he did not even move. The jester's gaze was steady and unflinching. Nevertheless, it did not feel awkward. "Hmm. It's a nice day, isn't it?" Trevor yawned. He furrowed his brows in thought, then said suddenly and like a thinker who has just concocted a cherished theorem, "You know what? I wish we could just avoid this whole war thing. I'm pretty sure this life's all I've got and I'd hate to lose it on something stupid."

"I would we could avoid it also," replied the jester in a quiet unassuming tone. "But I think there shall be a life after this."

Trevor perked up, then shrugged. "Well, we won't discuss it. But, say, we two were the only ones beside my sister who held the line during that retreat and we're probably the two who most want to keep out of danger. Aren't I right?" He realized after saying it that he had no idea why he had said it and that it was an awkward question.

The jester nodded.

"Then why didn't you retreat?"

The jester sighed. It was gentle—almost like a breeze. "The fight needed to be fought. I was greatly afeared, but.... Well, besides that..."

"Besides what?"

A slight color came into the jester's cheeks. "I could not have borne it if thou hadst been killed."

Trevor gave a small smile. "Ha. You really are a fool then." He dug his fingers absently into the sod. "I don't actually know why I fought really. I think I felt like being a warrior might give my life meaning."

"Warriors get killed," said the jester. He had a tender smile on his face. Any woman might certainly have fallen in love with him if he had had even an ounce of optimism.

"You really are a pessimist," Trevor laughed, shooing with his hand.

The jester cast his gaze to the floor. "We shall all be slain sooner or later by the sorcerer's army. I call that not despondent. It is only what must be."

"Ah, well," said Trevor rising to his feet. "Maybe you're right. I don't want you to be though, so I'll go talk with my ultra-optimist sister."

There seemed to be a beautiful pain in the jester's eyes. "Well, thank thee, lad."

Trevor left the tent sticking his hands in his pockets, only to find that his medieval garb had no pockets. This did not over bother him however and he went away smiling. He continued in his state of elation until he came near the cottage where Kayce lay in bed. Then he became meditative. In this state of mind, he entered.

As he walked inside, he had to blink several times to adjust his eyes to the dimness. The lighting was soft which was fitting for one in recovery. Kayce gave him a faint "hi" and he noticed that she was lying on the far side of the room. He took a breath of air. It was clean and sweet. He saw clearly now so he walked forward and stood beside her bed. He reached out his hand almost as if to grasp hers, except he wasn't so personal as that. "I wanted to check up on you," he said.

She rustled under her blankets and adjusted herself so that she could look straight at him. She made her official, straight businesswoman face but her voice had a little more emotion. "That's nice of you."

He snuffed. "You're chipper for a sick person."

She wiped her forehead and was silent, almost grave. "I've been thinking a lot. That's all."

"Yeah?" Trevor looked around the room almost as if he expected to see a pill case with the label: "warning: side effects may include gravity."

Kayce drawled out her answer evasively. "Yeah..." She picked her fingernails,

looking at them with soft affection. She glanced up suddenly and hid everything but her head beneath the covers like a scared child. "I don't have scars on my face, do I?"

"No. Why? Did you get shot there?"

"No..."—she stared at a random corner of the wall—"I just don't want to have any scars, especially not on my face. They'd make me look bad."

Trevor remembered then that he was coming to Kayce to hear her optimism. He coughed and flicked his wrist casually to get her attention. "Soldiers are leaving because we're out of supplies. You think the army's gonna scatter?"

She sat up with so much enthusiasm that she scarcely seemed ill at all. "No! They just need to know what they're fighting for. They need to be encouraged. You need to make a speech, Trevor."

He jumped back and managed to snap out a "no" as he wrestled with his words. He thought about snapping something else, but didn't. His muscles had stiffened and he had to relax.

"You *should*," she said coquettishly, emphasizing the femininity of her voice and blinking her eyes.

Trevor rolled his eyes and tapped his foot on the floor rhythmically, waiting for her to forget the whole thing.

Kayce sighed dramatically and resumed cleaning her nails. She seemed to shrink into a shell now and yet she had a mischievous smile. Almost a dangerous smile. "John's told me not to fight in battles again. He's got his chivalry code stuff to follow, you know."

Trevor felt that it was getting hotter in the room and they needed more ventilation. He shifted on his feet. "You told him no, I bet."

Kayce looked at him with her jaw loose in a strange smile as if she thought him very dimwitted and found it so amusing she didn't quite know what to do. "No,"—she spoke in a normal volume but with vast intensity—"I'll obey him and I'll disobey." There was something fanatical in her eyes. "I'll find some loophole. I can't just go bashing *chivalry* though."

"You have a plan?"

"No," Kayce snapped. "But I just have to think *harder*." She looked very desperate and aggressive and it was a while before she exhaled. When she did, she adjusted herself in her bed demurely and furrowed her brows. After a while she said, "You should go now."

"Yes, I should," Trevor said quickly and turned to leave.

"Wait!" Kayce shouted.

Trevor turned around.

Kayce had propped herself up and her eyes were flashing like all the shimmering reflections of a small pool condensed into one spot. "I wanted to tell

you, Trevor Allen, that you are not a coward and I am sorry for saying so."

Trevor felt his throat swell and tried to say something. He took a step backward and stumbled out the door. "Th-thanks." He turned and ran.

# Chapter 10

## Treachery

"There should be a sentry up ahead."

"Very well. Bring us through as thou promised," said John. He squinted at the pale moon then bent his head and plodded on.

The night was moderately chilly and the three travelers walked with silence fit for a graveyard. Their feet fell lightly on the grass as if they were immortals passing on out of this world and their chain mail scarcely gave a clink. They rounded the crest of a hill, and as they began to descend a voice croaked from the shadows like a vulture, "The gears of the world."

"Turn faster," the guide replied solemnly. John and Trevor looked each other in the eye, nodded, and let their hands fall from their swords.

There was a pause and, though they saw no one, footsteps plodded toward them. There were ten in succession, and then whoever it was stopped. There was only a thin sliver of moon in the sky, and the towering boughs of a nearby tree blocked out most of its light.

Out of the haze, the silhouette of a man materialized, his form vague and large. His breath came sharp. "Whence come ye?"

The guide approached like a cat up to the sentry, swinging his shield in a gentle lullaby. "We have information for the Earl of Warwick. How go things, comrade?"

"W-well," stammered the sentry, lowering his guard.

"Good then. It is well such a guard is kept. 'Twould be ill if our enemies snuck up on us."

"Aye," replied the sentry, now without the croak. He yawned, then tottered on one leg and walked away.

The guide motioned to his two companions and they moved forward, each moment bringing them a little closer to the camp. Tents dotted the plain below them like sheep grazing calmly in a pasture. The three travelers descended in among them. "Be wary," said the guide, "for there is much about on the ground and ye may wake those sleeping if ye stumble."

There were some soldiers who slept under the stars, and Trevor, who brought up the rear of the party, carefully studied all their faces. When he thought he saw the flicker of an eyelid, he would look back or when he imagined a hand moving, he would pause to make sure it was only the soldier's chest heaving. Only a faint rustle kept the camp from being completely silent. It was a combination of many tiny sounds, more like a wind than anything. It made Trevor feel like he was walking past a slumbering giant. He took care with his every step.

"The earl's tent is in the center of the camp," the guide breathed.

A cloud passed over the moon and then drifted away.

They drew nearer and nearer, yet the closer they got the slower they became and the heavier their footsteps. A few times John stroked his beard and muttered to himself. Once, he shook his head and let out a low growl. Twice, he gazed at the stars. He sighed. "All my plans focus around having the Earl and his army. All of them."

They neared, at last, a tent much larger than the others, outside of which were two guards posted. One swayed his halberd slightly back and forth, and the other leaned heavily on his. Neither noticed them.

Trevor and John drew to a halt, but their guide continued and motioned them forward. "Thou must do the talking, Oldcastle," he said as he drew a hood over his face. "My voice would be recognized." John was silent.

The guards shot erect when they finally noticed the three approaching. They held their halberds tightly in both hands and planted their feet in a cautious stance. The two parties met. Both sides stood silent and limp, waiting for nothing in particular. At last, John strode forward. He shook his head like a lion shaking its mane, then said in his rich tone, "We have a message for the earl. It concerns enemy movements."

The two guards exchanged glances, then the shorter, brawnier of the two raised one brow and asked, "Carry ye a report I might give to my lordship?"

"Nay," answered John, and his face and everything about him grew stern until he looked like a Greek hero. He drew himself an inch higher. "We bring the message ourselves."

"Heh," muttered the guard, rubbing his fingers on his halberd's shaft. "What is the message?"

Time seemed to stop for just a moment, then John knitted his brows and his voice took on a grinding tone. "Tell him his enemy, the knight Sir Oldcastle, is only four miles south, marching through the night as if to attack him unawares."

The guard widened his eyes. For a moment he stood there frozen, then ducked quick as a rabbit into the tent.

John folded his arms and scowled. A minute later the guard returned with the Earl of Warwick who stumbled out then snapped straight and tall as if he were

leaping to salute a monarch. He blinked several times and stared at his three visitors with a blank expression before suddenly exclaiming, "Fay! 'Tis dark out."

"Sir," began John.

"Yes, yes." The earl rubbed his hands together as if to keep warm. "My enemy is coming to attack me. But how did the infernal rogue find out? I told him explicitly that my army was for his aid."

If one had been right next to him and watching attentively, he might have seen a brief and slight smile on John's face. "Who can know?" John answered in a whisper and his gaze became sharp and keen.

"Ah! Thou art hiding something from me. What more dost thou know?"

"He has only some five hundred men."

"Ha! Well, we shall be ready for him then." The earl flicked his hand back and hit the tent flap. "Oldcastle is more a fool than I thought, first meeting slaughter at London and now coming for slaughter here. He should flee and hide. But how did he know I have allied myself with the wizard? That is what troubles me."

John took a step forward and motioned to his guide behind him. "This man knows, sir."

The earl's eyes dilated and flashed between John and the guide. "I—"

Three blades flashed in the moonlight, then pressed against the throats of the earl and his guards. The guide threw back his hood and gasped a small dramatic breath. "I am loyal to my country, my lord." His youthful face flashed like a beacon from a lighthouse amid a stormy sea, his cheeks flushed red, and his eyes gleamed with the luminance of a sick child's.

The earl made no sudden burst of outrage, no movements of defense, did not grow pale, did not glower. He seemed uncommonly quiet and sighed an "oh" as if he were still only half awake and had been told that his name was Millard and believed it. He blinked once and an indent formed between his brows.

"And who am I?" asked John.

The earl stared blankly.

"I am Sir John Oldcastle."

The earl paled.

A wind blew across the scene. Trevor shuffled impatiently and John nodded to the two guards. "Drop thy halberds. No—!" One of the guards swung his halberd for Trevor's head and the next instant he fell dead with Trevor's sword buried in his flesh. Trevor pulled it out and wiped it clean.

John lost control of his actions for a moment and found himself gripping the earl as if to crush him and squeezing him against his chest. His head was hot with passion. "Fool! Fool!" he cried, facing the remaining guard and shaking the earl like a rag doll. "See now? What canst thou do for thy leader? Do not forfeit thy life like thy companion." He tensed like a stone with a final surge of energy, then let it

out with a pant, flourishing his sword for a final exclamation point.

The remaining guard dropped his halberd.

John shook the earl one last time and then took a long deep breath. He nodded his head toward his guide and spoke with exhaustion, "Tie the guard up." The youth sprang to do so, darting into the tent and leaving Trevor in charge of his prisoner. He emerged with a torn piece of sheet. John looked up at the sliver of moon and wiped his brow. In a minute the guard was fully taken care of.

John tossed the earl to the ground, who, up to that point, had not made a sound. As the earl rose from the turf to his knees, he looked at John with a bitterly amused smile and said, "I am not thy enemy." It was said almost tauntingly, like an insult.

John tensed. He took one step toward the earl with a clenched fist, then he suddenly shivered. He sheathed his sword and stared down sullenly. "How so?" His guide and Trevor gathered round him on either side. Something about the lighting at the moment seemed darker to John as though a film had come over his eyes.

The Earl of Warwick gazed at John's boots with a look between an idiot about to crack a joke, a mother remembering a lost child, and a convict about to curse his judge. For a moment, he did not reply and only drew steady, even breaths which had a sense of lordliness to them. When he looked up, it was with an upturned nose but a quiet gaze. "I am a traitor, perhaps, but all must needs betray some cause if they have conviction. I have only betrayed thee, Oldcastle, not England." He laughed a slow, heaving laugh which ended quickly and his chest deflated. "No, I betrayed thee *for* England. I was to be a martyr,"—he smiled—"earning a traitor's name in order to save my country. Is that not foolishness?" His smile turned bitter. "Thou'lt only kill countless good men, Oldcastle. Wouldst thou have that on thy hands?"

John turned his face away. He felt someone brush past his shoulder and the faint hiss of a blade moved through the air.

"Rubbish," Trevor snorted, dangling the point of his sword in front of the earl's face. "My sister tells better lies than that." He spat to his side.

John turned round and grabbed Trevor's arm so hard it felt like a solid bar of iron beneath his grip. "Wait," he whispered. He released Trevor's arm and faced the earl. He heard Trevor retreating behind him.

Between John and the earl there was a mutual silence as they stared at each other, yet not quite with total attention—almost as if they were communicating with each other telepathically. John's face was nearly impassive except that his eyes were searching like two sentinels feeling each crevice for some spy hiding in their midst.

Still maintaining his gaze with that quiet fixedness, John stepped toward the

earl. He drew his sword with the next step, his lips twisting down as it rubbed with a smooth purr against its sheath. The earl hung his head, smiling a thin, almost straight smile with his lips compressed. With a sudden violence, John banged his sword back into its sheath and the earl started. "Leave. Now," John whispered.

The earl stroked his chin in the way intellectuals do. "Thou'lt lead thy countrymen into slaughter?"

The veins on John's neck pulsed, he took a deep breath, and then he spoke with emphasized gentleness. "There is nothing more I can offer them."

The earl nodded his head in a bobbing, careless sort of way, almost like he was trying to hide laughter. He rose to his feet without looking John in the eye and said, "Then die." He flipped his hand over his shoulder and walked away, snorting quietly to himself.

John watched his enemy retreat, though he did so with mingled passions. Someone placed a hand on his shoulder and it reminded him of his mother's touch for some reason.

"I am glad for thy act of mercy," said the youthful guide.

John thought he would say something but then no words came out. The hand remained on his shoulder so that he considered asking his guide to remove it, but he didn't. "Wilt stay with us?" he asked at last.

"No," answered the youth. "I too have sacrificed myself as a traitor, but I should never hope for the name. I shall leave now before the camp awakes to find me."

"Mmm." John slipped from under his guide's hand and slowly turned around. "The earl will not reveal thy part in this?"

The guide bobbed his head to hide a troubled smile. "No," he said abruptly.

"Well..." John was silent for a moment. Sometimes no expression is an expression. "God be with thee then." John laid his own powerful hand on the youth's shoulder and shook it. He took it off and he was aware of how the youth's bittersweet smile grew sweeter, then all of a sudden the youth turned and fled into the night with the leap of a deer.

John remained in contemplation for a time, stroking his beard and oblivious to all around him. It might have been three minutes before he finally turned around. The first thing that struck him was that there was no one there. "Trevor?" he asked, still in his meditative mood and not raising his voice. Then he noticed a dim figure coming toward him, walking with a stagger like a wounded man. As it drew nearer and nearer, John noticed the form shaking. He knitted his brows and as the form drew even closer he recognized Trevor. The scarce, pale light gave his face a strange illumination. He had his eyes to the ground and seemed to be continually swallowing.

"Trevor?" John asked in a tone between soothing and sharp.

Trevor shook his head wildly and stared up, stopping in his tracks a mere three feet away.

“Art well?”

Trevor swallowed again.

John looked him calmly in the face, then let his gaze drop. He jumped back. “Trevor, thy sword is stained with blood.”

Trevor blinked twice, looked down at his sword, and then laughed a short utterly mad laugh.

All of a sudden John understood. “Get out of my sight!” he yelled, raising his arm as if to strike. “Get out of my sight. Now!”

# Chapter 11

## Council of One

Her eyes were like big moons in outer space with beautiful craters scaring its surface. They glimmered like moons too—bittersweet and hard to measure in depth or distance. Kayce wiped the last tears from her eyes. “Trevor...” She moved her lips but said no more.

Trevor nibbled at his lip while he wiped one sweaty hand on his trousers. He looked down and it occurred to him that he had looked at the same spot of ground almost constantly during his talk with Kayce, which had easily lasted an eternity or two. The patch of ground was very bland. There was no grass. Just dirt. Trevor hated dirt.

There wasn’t the least gust of wind on the plain. The tent flap hung still and nothing in the tent changed. It was just him and Kayce. The sun was temperate, but the tent could have used an air conditioner. Trevor scratched himself, then blurted, “It was in defense!” He still wasn’t looking up. The knowledge made him hang his head lower, bobbing it in a half-crazed sort of manner.

“When John had pardoned him?” Kayce croaked. If there could be any parallel to her voice, it would have been Lady Justice in all her beauty and terribleness with a single startlingly large tear running down her cheek. “Was he really such a threat?”

Trevor never knew how he kept his feet as he mumbled, “He was a liar...” Something tickled his subconscious—a presence—and his knees wobbled. Trying to turn around, he was stopped. Arms that folded around him and he felt a warm face against his shoulder.

"K-K-Kayce..." he spluttered, gasping, and trying to shove himself away.

She let go, though for a moment her gaze was locked into his. He read something in there so overwhelming it could only be a spiritual crisis. He shook his head and spun around with a strained breath. He remained still for one moment, looking grimly and vaguely into the distance like one calculating a battle strategy, then bent his head and walked away with his hands folded behind his back.

Kayce followed after him. She came in a quick impulsive burst, then slowed and proceeded like his shadow. She had an expression on her face as of rapture, though she was a little pale and bit her lip occasionally. She looked, in fact, like a girl frightened but half pleased by her passions who is caught up in meditation.

After they had walked for a minute, Trevor stopped and turned around. His expression was perfectly normal, but he spoke quickly and much too formally. "Let's not talk about it again."

"Yes," Kayce said with half a breath, and she bowed her head.

As they wandered, soldiers milled about them in preparation for departure. When Warwick's army had arisen at the cries of the sentries early that the morning, they had found John's army surrounding them. John himself had ridden among them as they rushed to arm themselves, calling on all who were for England to join him. Looking at the faces of those around told the story of that event—a story of fidelity to one's country. However, looking at the eighteen men and three horses leaving the camp passed by one small cart driving in supplies told quite a different story—a story of fidelity to one's belly.

Trevor viewed things in his peripheral vision as he walked along, examining them carefully and staying mostly near the inanimate objects and away from people. As he came to the center of the camp, he saw the command tent and turned to head away from it, but the jester called out and he stopped. Turning deliberately back, Trevor trudged up in the way people do through thick winter snow. "What's up, Tristan?"

The jester looked down at him and their eyes met. Tristan wiped his cheek, which was particularly wan, and his fingers twitched. His gaze shifted endlessly and he cast an almost desperate glance at Kayce before turning quickly back to Trevor's shoes. "There is a council inside. Ye are asked to attend." He shuffled his feet and swayed back and forth. "They would save the army, but..." he hung his head, "I cannot abide to remain through it." He looked at them with his mouth just slightly parted and his eyebrows slanted away from each other like the sagging roof of a house.

"Oh, that." Trevor bunched up his left cheek then scowled.

Kayce raised her eyebrows and clasped her hands together. "You mean John wants me in the council?"

The jester fidgeted with his cuff. "Yes,"—he said it as if he wished he could have spared her the bad news.

Kayce folded her arms. "All out offensive, that's what I say!" She gave the jester a commanding look, then ducked energetically into the tent.

"And thou?" The jester bit his lip.

Just then John pushed aside the tent flap, came out, and rose stiffly from his stoop. He cocked his head slightly to one side and stared blankly at Trevor, his lips tightly closed.

Trevor huffed out a breath of air. He turned and walked away, then called out behind him, "I've already done my job to save the army." He kept huffing for a whole minute as if exerting himself and his pace was strong and deliberate. He observed things as before through his peripheral vision, but eventually stopped paying attention at all and walked forward on autopilot. He came under the impression that he had no impressions at the moment—he noticed that particularly. He did not notice the temperature or the colors or the noises or the people around him. After a vague amount of time, he was struck by a memory of the earl's face when he had said that he was not an enemy. Trevor gave a bitter smile. It was then that he began to think again—or rather that his thoughts began to focus on a particular object. He quickened his pace to make it to the outer fringes of the camp.

He found, at last, a tent a little secluded with a lone man outside sitting on a wooden box. The man looked just the type as should have had a wooden leg and been smoking a pipe, only his legs were whole and tobacco was as yet undiscovered. Trevor approached him. "Hey. Soldier,"—he yawned suddenly, finding his legs heavy and the sun particularly hot—"I need a tent."

The man who should have had a wooden leg peered up at him. He scrunched his brows, bringing out the many grooves of his skin, and puckered his lips tightly. "Bless me. Art thou the man from the future we hear tell of?"

"Yes," Trevor assented, practically in a moan. He had a sudden feeling that the tent was already his and that he was talking to a stranger who had happened to be picketing rudely beside *his* tent. He took a step toward it.

The man who really owned the tent rose and bowed. "T'would be an honor, sir. I warrant thou'lt find it tidy." He hobbled away with a peculiar grin on his face as if all things in the world were pleasant to him. Trevor, thinking something quite different about all the things in the world, shoved aside a flap of the tent and entered.

It was tidy as the man had said except for one loose tunic crumpled in a corner. The canvas blocked out most of the sun's light but let just enough through to see. Trevor threw the tunic out the front of the tent, then began to pace. He stopped abruptly and went over to fasten the front of the tent so the sunlight

wouldn't come in there.

Sighing, he curled up in the grass with a vague feeling that the darkness in the tent was his close friend and that he was nestling up beside it, sharing an amicable silence. Suddenly, he bit his lip and moved his hand down to his belt. His lips twitched in mild distaste, but he held down the button on the buckle, closing his eyes as a feeling like pitch black waves washed over him in slow motion, enveloping his mind. Blue shades began to swim with the dark breakers, growing more and more prominent. Trevor opened his eyes and saw the hologram.

A small woman in blue light stood before him, suspended in midair. She was thin, tall, with accentuated curves, and looked like she belonged to a TV ad. For a moment, she stared down at him with her chin pointed slightly up, then said, "It's been a long time, Trevor."

Trevor twitched his right cheek, raising his lips in a smile shape that seemed more like a frown. He began tapping his thigh restlessly.

"What can I do for you?" the lady asked, turning at an angle and putting one hand on her hip.

He glared at her for half a minute, then said, "Aurora, eliminate my enemies for me."

The lady rolled her eyes. "Look, I'm not your slave, big guy."

"Aurora, you're pretty stupid for artificial intelligence."

She smiled and flicked her hair self-consciously. "It's my strong suit over real intelligence. How else am I going to be special?"

Trevor stared at her, then snorted and slashed his hand at her. Instantly, she disappeared. "Aurora," he said, "open my albums." Album covers appeared in midair and he swiped through them with his hand until he picked one.

As he reclined back on the grass, sounds like frustrated mountains crying at one another, screams of doomed combatants, and interstellar space battles blasted in his ears. His heart quickened. He imagined himself as a massive robotic warrior, tearing nations to shreds with his bare hands. Every moment though, he had this sense always had a sense that there was some other warrior lurking nearby—one so much larger than him that it was hiding in plain sight. It was nightmarish, only in the daytime. He was perfectly calm, but agitated at the same time. He was almost in a trance. Almost in a spiritual awakening. Almost in a metaphysical torture. He imagined the Earl's treacherous face. Then the Earl's dead body. Then John was standing over him, stern and menacing, but Trevor smiled and John fled—vanished almost as if he had never been there.

Trevor awoke several hours later with a start. "Aurora!" he gasped, jerking his head and putting his hand to his heart. "Aurora, turn off that music and look up gunpowder in my encyclopedias." He glanced at the remaining battery life on his

hologram and bit his lip. An idea had just come to him.

“Okay,” came Aurora’s voice, “Here are the articles I found on gunpowder.”

Trevor scanned them and selected the first one on the list. He shook his head, letting out a low whistle. “This just might work. Here goes.”

# Chapter 12

## Richard and Courtenay

William Courtenay stroked his finely shaven chin with the smile of one about to enjoy a carnival as he entered the council chamber with two watchers trailing behind him. The chamber was well lit by an overzealous sun that blazed a perfectly golden hue, and the councilors assembled around the table looked like heralds lining the carpeted way to a royal crowning. Courtenay, of course, had never aimed for a crown, that being far too ambitious for a conservative like himself, but the thought nonetheless placed a sweet flavor in his mouth. He tapped his hands lightly together with the rhythm of one tapping to a song.

The councilors rose at his entrance, mute as slaves and equally inexpressive. He walked up to their table and leaned over, tapping a map and pressing his tongue on the inside of his bottom lip. “Mmm. Geography, is it?” He didn’t wait for a response, but lifted his chin and rose promptly on his toes before settling back down, much in the way a conductor would, or a woman who wanted to seem as tall as a man. “My good councilors,” he began, clearing his throat, “I bring thee the judgment of his Allpowerfulness in regards to this present war.”

The councilors—noblemen, knights, prominent men of the city, and one who was the leader of the order of watchers—all took their seats in an orderly and dull, ritualistic fashion. As Courtenay surveyed their faces, he saw types of expressions: that of guarded gamblers well experienced in duplicity and of world-weary goblins just hoping for a quiet corner to chew on a bit of fresh meat in peace.

Courtenay raised his voice and proceeded, spreading his palms out and thrusting them forward. “We have now been appraised of our adversary’s position and are ready to form our plans against him. Though I regret to say that the Earl of Warwick hath proved unserviceable and utterly petty, being annexed by Sir Oldcastle, we are assured that Oldcastle hath kept no more than thirteen hundred afield, and that number diminishes with every day. ’Tis said he comes gradually toward us, foraging off the land and that the populace supports him, but ’tis not a campaign he may maintain long.”

A knight near the front of the table pushed his hand forward, pressing his fingers forcefully against the wood. "Might not we pillage the countryside before him to starve his forces as they come?"

Courtenay pursed his lips at this interruption and gazed emptily at the ceiling, but then relaxed into a bemused and fatherly smile. "Nay, nay. 'Tis well thought of, but our forces are as yet too few for such a task. They must remain in London at present. But we have no need of such measures. Oldcastle hath little chance of reaching us with his army if he be not enforced and heavily supplied."

"Aye, but that he will be," barked a nobleman with a long nose, grinding his fist into the table and snuffing. "I hear that men are being gathered in every part of the kingdom."

"Nay, nay!" Courtenay involuntarily formed his right hand into a fist, but he calmed down and relaxed it. His eyes sparkled. "His Allpowerfulness..."—he said it like a purring cat—"hath already made arrangements for such incidents." Seeing that many of the councilors were leaning forward in their seats, he tapped his fingers together with a smile and paused dramatically. "The work to continue a needless war and pervert the good of our society is perpetuated by worthless noblemen. If a spring is poisoned, all who drink from it shall perish. Is it not best to remove the noblemen and let their revolutions wither?"

There was a hushed silence over all the room and an equal lack of movement. The hearts of everyone present did a little jump as a dry cackle broke the spell. The leader of the watchers tapped his fingers on the table and looked into Courtenay's eyes with the mirth of one who has just drunken wine. Courtenay found himself fidgeting with a piece of his robe under that gaze. The head watcher was a skeleton of a man, yet there was something about his demeanor that allowed him to intimidate men much stronger than himself. His eyes were a dark, purplish black and his face was sharp and keen with a mysterious intensity that one would expect from an Arabian warlord.

Slowly, the watcher moved his other hand out onto the table and said with an intense protractedness, "Aye, we shall remove the nobility, but what of thy priests, Courtenay? They too arouse the people."

Courtenay felt a light heat in his cheeks and he hurried to make it pass as quickly as possible. "Patience, Guiscard. The work groweth, but it will not be full ripe within an hour." Courtenay took a deep breath and exhaled. "When it is all done, Oldcastle shall have no support. His army will dwindle and die. In but a short time, his Allpowerfulness will have completed his great invention, and then we will attack him and remove our only threat." Courtenay became keenly aware of the shadowy presence of the watchers behind him and a sly smile lit his face. "Such is the stratagem of our worshipful Allpowerfulness, and he asks ye to provide plans for the details of its execution." He bowed low and quickly. When

he rose, he looked at everyone present and marked how dumb their faces were—like badgers that would frown forever and sit motionless even longer.

He was about to turn and make his exit when a councilman asked hesitantly, “This Oldcastle—shall he be assassinated too?”

Courtenay nodded to the man with a thin smile, momentarily closing his eyes. “But of course.”

“And the future ones? The young man and woman?”

Courtenay coughed. He could almost hear the air itself moving in the room. “N-no. His Allpowerfullness has...other plans for them.” He scanned the councilmen and, seeing none ready to raise a question, he departed. His watchers followed him.

The halls he passed through were in shadow and every icon, every statue, every tapestry seemed to be looking down at him. He felt it on his back, just below the shoulder blades, like a thin band pressing into him. One tapestry had a particular expression that seemed to ask him, “What dost thou? Answer, mortal!” He crinkled his nose and stroked his chin, every once in a while lifting his head and smiling as if he knew some terrible secret about the halls by which he could tame them and claim his mastery over them.

As he came to one hall however, he raised his head and looked about him as if hearing his name. His eyes rested on a long corridor heading off at an opposite direction and he muttered, “Ah, yes,” then proceeded down it.

There was a door at the end of the hallway, a prominent lock displayed on its front and a watcher beside it—a surer lock than any mechanical one ever invented. Courtenay raised his hand and the watcher nodded, pulling out a key. It came into Courtenay’s mind just as he drew near that he should proceed with the utmost care into the room so as not to be noticed by those inside. The watcher unlocked the door and swung it noiselessly open. Peeking in like a thief breaking into a house, Courtenay smiled to see that he had not been observed.

The room had that element of spacious emptiness which fitted royalty and was well lit with stone walls only covered in a few spaces by rich tapestries. Most of the furniture was congregated near the front of the room and in its center was a rug of oriental patterns and deep reds. A couch marked the borders of this little metropolis, after which the room was empty, though there were three doors at the back leading into smaller apartments. Compared to the deep darks of the room, the light grey stones of the wall provided a pleasant contrast.

Sprawled on the room’s couch was Richard II. He was dressed in a scarlet houppelande with an elaborate headpiece and three gold chains about his neck, while his face was wasted and worn. Facing him was a man with long scraggly grey hair and a lean face. He was on the short side with wiry arms, thin long ears, and a bony face so sharp and accented that his slightest expressions seemed

caricatures. In sickly tones he was recounting some tale of a nameless woman of infamy who had been tortured for her crimes, a process which he described in flowery terms, twitching his hands now and then. Richard stared at this companion with laconic gloom.

Courtenay felt a twist in his guts when he realized Richard's companion was the impertinent criminal who had met him in the hall some time previous—a man who had been in prison for half a year and should have remained there. Courtenay almost considered slinking away, but instead he chose boldness and sprang into the room with a low exclamation. Snapping to a rigid position like a wooden soldier, he pulled off his right glove and flapped it lightly in his left. "I bid a good morning to the fallen monarch," he said, bowing with self-conscious courtesy. He conspicuously ignored the criminal to his left.

Richard looked up without the least change of expression or energy. He rose to a sitting position and gave a sigh. The king's companion only glowered and fled into the corner of the room, watching the bishop with unmoving eyes. He showed a row of rotten teeth and his eyes sparkled.

Courtenay kept flapping the loose glove in his hand, quite at a loss as to what to say. It came as a surprise to him that he only repeated quietly and darkly, "... Fallen monarch..."

Richard rose slowly. His face was quiet and composed, but the way he never stopped gazing into Courtenay's eyes made the archbishop cease flicking his glove and hide it behind his back. Richard's voice was utterly flat. His eyes were particularly round and lifeless. "I was not always thus."

"Short foresight on thy part," said Courtenay, turning up his nose. "It is wise to have a strong guard."

Richard swallowed and continued as if Courtenay had never spoken. "England was great once."

Courtenay's chest heaved explosively and he waved his loose glove before Richard, then crushed it with all his might. "Great?" He struggled to produce words as his jaw worked up and down. He took one step toward Richard. "Fool! We shall have wagons that fly and fleets made of iron in this new reign. We shall know all that is done on the earth and no criminal shall escape us. What hast *thou* ever done for thy country?!"

Richard paled. His right hand stole to where his sword would have been if he had one. His eyes fell to the floor. "Ye think ye are gods," he spat out with a curious smile, both bitter and wolfish.

Courtenay eyed him uncertainly, then went off into a long thin laugh, sighing at the end of it as one does when they close a storybook. "I pity thee, forsooth." He folded his hands in front of him and nodded. "Power is all that is worth having, and thou hast no more than doth a clump of clay." He looked around the room

much as a modern man would if he were searching for a clock, then whirled around as if overcome with emotion. "Farewell," he said and left, closing the door behind him.

Richard stared, then collapsed back on his couch as though dead. He dragged a hand down his face, then buried his face in both his hands.

From a corner of the room his companion emerged, his eyes blazing like red-hot knives. "Sickly bishop," he said. He hissed and shook his head vigorously, then sat down on a table before the couch. "He is naught but a puppet in the hand of the sorcerer. *I shall be no puppet. I am no common man to serve another.*" He cut himself short and looked hesitantly at Richard.

Richard said nothing.

"Of course," said the wretch, "I make an *appearance* of serving him for a time, but there will come a day when *he* will serve *me*. All must come to serve me at last." He made a gurgling sound. "Now, I had been speaking of torture. Hast ever heard how the rack—"

"Cease, devil!" Richard cried, flinging out his hands. "Art thou sent to torture me?"

"Haha! Devil. Yes," cried his companion, dropping to a squat on the floor and yanking out the tangles of his hair. "The devil fell through pride, 'twas it not so? Nay, mayhap it is a but a tale. Ask the archbishop, haha!" He leapt to his feet like some triumphant savage warrior. "Know'st how I came hither?"

Richard raised his head an inch and looked up with one brow bent. "The sorcerer's appointment."

The other flung his head back in a silent fit of laughter and began pawing at his chest. "Aye, but why? I will tell thee. Because *I too* am a king." He wet his lips and looked down with a broad animal smile. "One night, when I was drunk, I said to myself, 'I am as good as King Richard. I too shall be a monarch. I shall do all I please and be greater than the law.' Thus, I formed an army of looters and I was their king and we plundered, killed, and destroyed as we wished. And, behold! I am thine equal, for we share the same room!"

Richard sneered. "Thou art a devil," he said, emphasizing every syllable.

"Yes, yes!" squealed the other, pounding his chest. "An evil devil."

Richard leaned forward with clenched teeth as if he were about to charge. "Thou ought to do penance for a *year*."

"Yes..." The devilish king looked off into empty space with a now quiet expression. He rubbed a scar on his chin. "I did penance once, but I did it for myself because I thought I would be a great penitent—the king of penitents—the god of penitents! But I am a good devil!" he shouted, rushing over to a stand by the wall on which were two goblets. "See," he said, lifting one in each hand, "Here is thy chalice and here is mine." With that, he dumped the king's wine on

the floor and drank his own.

# Chapter 13

## Everything Goes to Pot

Trevor slammed his fist on the table, rustling the papers spread over it. The councilors turned hesitant gazes toward him. Leaning with both his hands on the table, Trevor raised his voice a pitch. “This is our only chance at getting an advantage! The reason we didn’t take London was because the scientist had gunpowder. We gain that, and we enter his playing field.”

Many murmured, but the jester hung his head and wailed out, “What hope had we to begin with?” A glance from John quieted him and he buried his head in the crook of his elbow.

Many of the councilors pursed their lips, looking toward John at the opposite end of the tent. John dragged his hands through his tangled beard which had fallen in disorder over the past few days. After about a quarter of a minute, he shifted his body weight and nodded with stoical inexpressiveness. He walked forward, mail clinking loudly, and settled his fingers on the edge of the table. “The issue”—he paused, tightening his jaw and avoiding Trevor’s eyes—“is not the product, but the risk. We are few enough and with more tasks upon ourselves than we can bear, and yet you say it might cost us many men spent constantly laboring at the contraption to extract the-the...”

“Nitrate,” Trevor filled in. He scowled, leaning deeper in toward John. “Well, do you know any *easier* way to pull nitrate from thin air? I tell you, my friend back in the future was an expert at this thing. He developed his own method, I just...it’s going to take some time to replicate it. I can’t remember all the details. Don’t think I’m some magician and can just snap my fingers and make you gunpowder.”

The tent was silent. The first noise was a grumbling cough. It was the cough of an aged man. The cough died, but the grumble continued to an anticlimactic peak, then descended into oblivion. A few more seconds of silence continued as if the group believed that silence were the universal delete button and that by holding it long enough they could delete the whole previous conversation from history and return to less embarrassing subjects, no doubt with the addition of their afternoon tea and light refreshments.

Trevor snapped his jaw open and closed and rose slowly back to a straight position. “It’s all I have to offer,” he said. “Take it or leave it. If you want to die

because you made a stupid choice, go ahead."

John humphed and pulled at his hair with his whole face taut. He shook his head. "It simply will not do. Mayhap we could find some already made, but that is unlikely as I hear the usurper searches everywhere for it. It is not our best option at the moment. How can I spare any troops?"

"What troops?" asked Tristan, barely raising his head an inch. He blinked his eyes but was otherwise as still as a stone. "I see no troops."

John turned and was about to say something, but Kayce stepped out into the middle of the tent. "Okay, lookee here, everyone." She held her hands like scissors and then snapped them out in wide arcs, drawing out the next words, "I know we're not exactly *bursting* with options here, but...nobody's sending us reinforcements, so maybe gunpowder is our only chance at taking back the capitol. Just be imaginative for a moment. We could be going on the offense in as soon as a week."

"Months," John sighed, pressing on his right temple and walking away from Trevor. "And that, perhaps, too optimistic. Harken better to what is said."

Kayce gave a grimacing smile. "Oh...yeah. Listening. That. I should do that." She grimaced with a great showing of teeth and pulled her shoulders in with a little shrug, then hung her head like an offended puppy.

John gave a reluctant smile that was barely that and turned back to Trevor. "I have sent dispatches to lords all over England. This fledgling band may soon become a well-supplied army in less time than it would take for thee and thy alchemy."

Trevor was still for a moment, and though he was standing perfectly straight, there was something in his body language that made him seem like he was shrinking up and backing away. He bowed his head with icy, almost too graceful formality and circumvented the small table in what appeared to be perfect composure. "Then you will simply be losing more men." Reaching the door of the tent, he flung open one of the flaps and left.

There was a momentary silence, then Kayce raised her head and looked left, then right. She tested the mood of her listeners. "Well...now that he's gone, I have a proposition to make."

John pulled himself a chair and sank into it with a sigh, gazing at the door of the tent and grasping at his forehead. "Proceed," he said without looking up.

"Er, yes, well I think we—you, I should say—should give Trevor some sort of command position. You know—I think he feels kinda sidelined and all. It would help smooth things over and make peace."

John snorted. At that moment, a shadow appeared against the door of the tent, but nobody noticed it. John especially was occupied solely with how poor the trampled grass looked beneath him. "I greatly mistrust thy brother. He has not won

my honor.”

Kayce puckered her lips and folded her arms. There was a slight edge to her voice that might have been a crack. “Why not?”

There was a general clanking of armor as the council members shifted on their feet. John rose from his chair. He had a thin smile painted on his lips. The lines at the edges of his eyes were wrinkled though, which greatly softened the expression. He gave Kayce a slight bow—a gesture he rarely used—and stated flatly, “Because he did take the life of the earl without fair provocation.” There were soft murmurings from the council members and Kayce seemed to become a very insignificant figure among the throng, not as if she shrank or backed into a corner, but it was as if somebody had taken half of her soul and walked away with it.

The shadow by the doorway wavered, and then, after a short delay, pushed aside the flap of the tent. Trevor entered with formality. What was strange was how expressionless his face was and how perfectly even and regular his breathing. The only thing that wasn’t perfectly controlled about him was his set jaw. He stood still for a moment and nodded coldly at John. “I left my gun here,” he said. It sounded the most normal thing in the world.

He walked forward with smooth, perfect pacing, and grabbed his gun off the table. He stuck it quietly in his holster, smiled, turned, and walked back.

Pausing just at the doorway, he turned around. His smile was still there and it was ludicrous—probably because his face was pale. He licked his lips and said with a tender passion, “Goodbye!” He left.

He did not know what he did next. He did not think about Kayce or about the army. He did not think about the future. He merely walked farther and farther from the command tent. He walked. It was only when he reached the outer fringes of the camp that the thought occurred to him. *I am leaving.*

*Well, his mind concluded, why shouldn't you?*

It did not enter his mind whether he would return again. It did not even enter his mind where he was going.

He left the camp and kept walking.

There was someone at his side now. When it registered in his mind, he knew that the man had been there for a while. There was something unobtrusive about this man though. It was no wonder Trevor hadn’t noticed him in his state of mind. Actually, it was the man’s horse had given him away. Trevor turned and faced the man, then took a step back, eyes narrowing. “Well? What do you want with me?”

The man had grey eyes and light dusty hair. He wore black mail and a tunic of the darkest green. The most defining part of his demeanor was his momentary silence. When he did speak, it was in a low soothing voice almost like a lullaby. “Thou mayest think me thine enemy, but fear not.”

In an instant, the man had grabbed Trevor and stabbed him with a needle.

“What, you idiot! What are you—” He had trouble breathing all of a sudden. He tried to shout and strained to break free. Then he felt something slowly seep over his mind. It was wet and heavy. It was sticky. He stumbled. “Ack! What is...” His eyes began to close.

He heard gunshots and forced his drooping eyes open for a second and glanced toward where the sounds had come from. His gaze settled on the center of the camp. The command tent.

“Steady. Steady,” Trevor’s captor whispered, his tone hinting at far away places, and snow-capped mountains and sunsets that had never been seen. “It is all an ugly dream, and we are ending it. Do not worry about Oldcastle. The world is larger than one man. Much larger...”

The darkness in Trevor’s mind grew until it almost shut him out. He felt one little spark of sensation and then it was gone.

When Trevor woke up, he saw a face looking at him. He didn’t know who it was at first. It was a girl’s face. His head hurt. He seemed to be in a cart and he grabbed instinctively for the side panel to heave himself up. The wood put a splinter in his hand, kicking his senses into play. He squeezed his eyes as tight as he could, then opened them. “K-Kayce? Is that you?”

She didn’t even make a sarcastic remark. She just said, “Yeah.” Her voice was quiet like that of a refugee in hiding asking if she can come out into the open. “Guess I shouldn’t have wandered off by myself,” she added.

“Oh,” Trevor said. He sat up and looked about him. Trailing along behind them was his captor, silently watching him and holding a pistol at his side. Beyond him was the sunset and the whole sky. It seemed to be lit on fire. The whole world looked like it was burning. The only noise was the wheels of the cart. They sounded faintly like millstones grinding grain into powder.

“I guess everything’s going to pot, huh Trevor?” asked Kayce, Trevor’s voice seemed raspy in his own ears. “Yeah...”—he swallowed—“It is.”

# Chapter 14

## The Call of Freedom

The room was as empty and quiet. Though Trevor paced it for the hundredth time, he found nothing in it to distract his mind. As he stared about the room, something nudged his subconscious and his gaze intensified like that of a shipwrecked sailor's looking for a sail on the horizon. In the corner. By the door. He looked everywhere for the elusive thing that told him there was something more to the room to be observed. It was all a trick of his mind. There was nothing in his cell but him. Kayce had long since stopped pacing in the other room. He concluded she had probably fallen asleep by now. It occurred to him that he had already had that exact thought upwards of twenty times. He took a very slow breath, released it, then sank to the floor, rubbing his eyes.

He stared at the door to his little room which was fastened from the outside—a fine door with a dark prominent grain. “John, my dear fellow,” he drawled, pointing at the door handle, “you’re dead. Dead...dead...dead.” He licked his lips, yawned a big tired yawn, and finished, “And there’s nothing I can do about it.”

For a while, he kept his finger pointed at the door handle, then he blinked and drew it back. “Dead,” he repeated breathlessly and his eyes widened. His face formed a timid hungry expression like that of a young beggar. He sprang to his feet and began to pace, gesturing wildly with his hands or pressing them against his forehead.

There was no window to let sunlight in. His only light was an oil lamp in the corner that provided barely sufficient illumination and seemed reserved—somehow introverted, if such a thing could be said of a lamp. Almost, he could have imagined that it could talk to him if it wished, but it never did—like a statue that stares with stoicism at everything that passes by. After five minutes of wandering, Trevor walked over to this lamp and blew it out. He rested his back against the wall and closed his eyes.

He had a very simple dream during that short lapse of sleep, but one as clear as if it were realer than reality. He dreamt that, while he slept, a flame began to ooze from the oil lamp in the corner, secretly, as if it knew he was asleep and could do nothing to stop it. It grew slowly, and, at last, a single spark of flame drooped over its edge like a teardrop of molten stone. It fell in slow motion like a teardrop too, and when it hit the floor, the world seemed to still and wait for what would happen.

Flames ebbed like tendrils slowly and tenderly spreading themselves across the floor. They were strange flames. Dancing flames that performed a slow, tragic, oriental dance that one might have imagined done in honor of some emperor or a soldier who had slain himself in despair. They swirled slowly higher and higher toward the ceiling. At first, Trevor felt no emotion in this whatsoever, but gradually he became aware of an overwhelming dread as the dance of the flames increased its rhythm. He wished with all he had to scramble away from the room—to flee to

the door and use every last ounce of energy to force it open. At times, he felt that he was actually doing so, but a moment later he felt that he had never done so and that he was permanently rooted to the floor.

Then a coolness washed all down his back and over his cheeks. His mind focused till it hurt and his ears paid listened. There was a grating sound at the door and Trevor was sure it must be himself making the noise. A triumph! He had made it, for how else could he be forcing the door open unless he had escaped the flames?

He suddenly realized that it was not he who had made the noise, but another, and he awoke with a start. Someone was about to enter his room.

Straightening his ruffled hair, Trevor rose wide-eyed and leaned back against the wall, his breath loud in his ears. A few moments later, metal stopped jingling and the door swung open. A man with a smooth, clipping step walked in who was an inch taller than Trevor. He turned back and closed the door gently, just so as to let in enough light to see. Settling on the exact amount of space he wanted, he turned around.

His eyes had that calm greyness which was almost blue and could only be compared to that thin line of horizon that floats over a seashore. The blacks of his eyes were startlingly keen and rich in contrast with the grey while his hands were nimble and looked ready for action. There was a silence lasting half a minute and then the man gave a distant smile. "Hello Trevor," he said. "Sit down." He took the initiative in this, crossing his legs on the floor and waiting with eyes unmoving and soft.

Trevor paused, then sunk down in a heap as he fingered his empty holster. "You have a lot to explain," he muttered.

The man nodded "I am Wyot," he said, seeming to think that Trevor's greatest concern. Trevor was silent and looked away toward the door. Wyot smiled coyly and stretched out a hand. "I am a watcher. I was one of the ones who fired at thee in London and before that in Almeley."

The conversation was carried out slowly, as if the two spoke different languages and had to take care to be understood. "You look like one," Trevor replied, though there was no reason to say this. He suddenly shifted positions, clenching and unclenching his right hand as he glared at the watcher. "What do you want with me? Get it over with."

Trevor could never have expected the man's reaction. He leaned forward with the blacks of his eyes glinting and whispered as if it were a great secret, "I want thy liberty."

Trevor stared blankly, then laughed in Wyot's face. "By kidnapping me?"

Wyot nodded. He breathed a sigh and looked with narrowed eyebrows at the corner of the room. There was something casual in his posture as if he

belonged where he was sitting and had sat there every day. "I hear thou comest from the age of freedom. I..."—he paused, sighing—"do not. Dost understand me now?"

Trevor rose to his feet and held out his arms to balance himself. For some reason, he looked toward the same empty corner where Wyot was gazing. "N-no," he huffed as if spitting out something distasteful.

Wyot himself rose to his feet, backing off a step with a slight bow to give Trevor more distance. "Art not aware that I dwell in an era of creeds?"

Trevor shut his eyes tightly and clenched his fists.

"There is only one form of right," Wyot continued, slyly smiling. "Whosoever does aught but that right is punished for his waywardness. Thus are all men made thralls." He stepped further away from Trevor, his smile growing. "But the paths of men lead to many places. Should they all then take the same road? If a stream floweth south, ought one to paddle north? The wise man knoweth when to turn with the turning of the ages."

Trevor thought at this moment that the watcher's nose looked faintly beakish, and with the man's compounding energy, he seemed like a bird that could take off at any moment and soar above the world.

"Dost understand?" asked Wyot.

The look on Trevor's face turned haggard like one who desperately needs sleep. He winced and ruled his forehead. "...It is just possible..." His Adam's apple rose dramatically, then sunk back.

The watcher bent with an icy gravity, and when he rose again his eyes flashed like newborn stars. "We shall leave for London on the morrow."

As he turned to leave, Trevor called out, "Wait!"

Wyot stopped and turned around neat and respectfully.

Trevor hid his face and muttered, "Never mind."

Wyot smiled, left, and locked the door again.

When all was still, Trevor retrieved the lamp he had blown out, sat down with it placed in front of him, and meditated.

It was hard to believe that Trevor had consented to follow through with their kidnapper's plans, but that's what their kidnappers had told her. Muttering curses, Kayce gave three taps on the wall, then tilted her head back an accentuated pant and wobbled back until she bumped into the wall behind her. Still no reply from Trevor, so she began pacing the room. Trevor was asleep, she concluded. He was always sleeping more than he should. She spent a few minutes philosophizing on the greatness of alarm clocks.

What she really wanted more than an alarm clock though was some good music. Tipping her chin back, she exploded into:

"I was born to be free! Don't preside over me..."

She stopped suddenly with a faint blush and gave such an expression of such self-reproach as can only be seen in females. In order to complete her self-punishment, she flicked her hair back and forth so that it slapped her in the face. She scowled and wondered what her captors were thinking of her outside the door. She hoped they thought she was crazy, because that was exactly what she was thinking. She sat down moodily and stared at the light slipping through the crack beneath her door.

When she had been much younger, she had formed a hobby of watching ants for long periods of time, and her current occupation brought back memories of that time. After enough time for her eyes to go out of focus, she heard a voice, and, with a rush of adrenaline that snapped her to attention, she scooted closer to the door with suppressed breathing and listened through the crack.

A door closed—the entrance door for the three-room cottage—and footsteps followed. Kayce shook her head. Had one of their captors just entered? That meant there had only been one guard the whole time and one guard was easier to overpower than two guards.

She could imagine the watcher who had been there the whole time looking up with an impassive glance and stroking a dagger. "A belated return," that same man muttered. He was the one who had captured Trevor.

The footsteps stopped. "But we are ready to depart now." Kayce marked that as her own captor. Fingering an imaginary dagger, she made a sneering grin and clenched her teeth together.

Trevor's captor grunted.

Her own captor spoke again. "I will but spend a short time alone in the woods to recite my vows as a watcher, then we may leave."

"Mmm..." was the reply.

Heavy footsteps reverberated through the house and the door slammed shut.

After half a minute to make sure the man didn't return, Kayce scooted away from the doorway and looked up at the ceiling, her face filled with wonder as if she were looking up at the stars. "I. Am. Stupid," she said, her jaw hanging. She smiled mischievously at saying it.

Her first task after rising to her feet was to appraise her paths of escape. The door featured prominently in her options to the exclusion of any other. She bent her head and placed her middle and forefinger against her forehead, pressing hard. She thought for a while, nodded slowly, then shook her head quickly. "No—wait, yes...wait..." She nodded her head energetically in conclusion and began looking for some sort of weapon.

It was pure poetry that the only one she found as unconventional as herself. A medium sized earthen jar was the only furniture in the room. The purpose of this

artifact was to act in place of facilities while she was locked in the room. Perhaps her grin was a little idiotic as she settled her eyes on it. She ran over to it, picked it up, and embraced it like a long lost friend. "You're just what I'm looking for!" she squealed, though not too loud.

Crying it over to the door, she hesitated, raising her free hand in the air. She took a deep breath, closed her eyes briefly, then knocked. There was a faint shuffling outside.

Mustering all the obnoxiousness she could, Kayce shouted in a voice between a whistling tea kettle and an awfully tuned viola, "Hey, room service guy! I want this pot emptied!"

Her heart pounded like a drum in a heavy metal concert. She heard the watcher rise, but he didn't approach. Maybe he planned to leave her alone. "Room! Ser! Vice!" she screamed, hurling herself against the door three times. She almost burst as she heard clapping footsteps approaching rapidly and then the clang of a key in the lock. Struggling with a brief lightheadedness and trying not to lose her footing, Kayce raised the heavy pot over her head.

The door opened and Kayce sprang forward, smashing the pottery over the kidnapper's head with a satisfying *thunk*.

He fell like a bowling pin and she sprang dizzily over him. "That was beautiful!" she screamed like a fanatic and she shook her hands in the air in the ways girls do who are afraid to catch a ball. She immediately went over to Trevor's door and started banging on it. "Trevor! Trevor!" She flung her head back and then hit it against the door. "Dimwit. Ugh. Wake up!"

Over to her side, she heard the watcher gasping for breath. He was already waking up. She glanced over just to make sure. Giving one last pound against the door, she hoped Trevor would reply this time.

Hearing no reply, she buried her face in her hands and mumbled a few things. "This is not a good day," she said. Gritting her teeth, she squeezed her fists and rushed out the door with a speed fit to make any admirer proud.

# Chapter 15

## Wandering

Fat swine rolled in muddy puddles as the rain fell, large drops that obscured Kayce's vision and made the pigs and trees and fields seem far away. The rain drenched every inch of her clothing, falling with a lethargic monotony that was as

steady as a metronome. She stared at the swine for a good five minutes as she leaned against a tree, blinking robotically every now and then. The rain was like a curtain threatening her to come no further. She was cold. Finally, she took a step forward. "...Piggies?" she said, her shoulders sagging. She hunched over and began walking one burdensome step after another. Rain plastered her hair to her face like clinging tentacles and it got in the way of her eyes.

She reached the fence of the pigsty and collapsed against it. "Come now mother dear," she whined, "feed your darling. Come, mother dear." One pig looked at her, oinked, and turned the other direction. Tears began to slide down Kayce's cheeks. "Oh, only for a drink! Must I get it myself? Why do I have to do everything myself?!"

The swine, in philosophical style, contemplated this issue in impersonal silence, one of them turning over on its belly in a mud pit. With muffled sobs, Kayce climbed over the fence and swayed. Her feet sunk into the mud and resisted movement. She waded with unsteady steps over to a trough of water which looked no different from the mud the pigs rolled in. It was undrinkable. She stared at it dumbly for a moment, then raised her head. There, in the hollowed area of a tree where a branch once had been, was a cavity filled with water. She put her lips to it and devoured. The water tasted wonderful. When she finished drinking, a faint vitality came to her eyes. "Thanks, missies," she said, wiping her mouth and smiling at the pigs. "That's the best water I've had since...yesterday? I'll just be..." A thought occurred to her and she looked about for a nearby dwelling place. It was half a minute before she understood that the clump of cube shapes she saw in the distance was actually a village. She let out a childish squeal.

Her legs were steady now if her mind wasn't. She plodded forward, out of the pig pen and through a long green pasture with grass reaching her shoulders. When her feet touched a road for the first time since her escape, she felt like a new person. Warmth washed down her back and she breathed in the air with an infant's wonder and stared at the sky and laughed. "I found somewhere, at last!"

For some reason, she felt that she would meet a villager right away. It was not to be, for no one was abroad in the dolorous rain shower. After passing by houses as silent as gravestones, she settled her eyes on what looked like the village tavern. A dizzy sort of light flickered through its one window and it drew her toward the building. She reached it and opened the door. The first to greet her was a shaggy dog who slipped by without even the civility to bark. Feeling a sudden weight on her shoulders, Kayce squeezed her eyes shut and walked in.

It was apparently one of those dwellings where mankind boarded with his beasts, for she had to navigate around a slumbering donkey as she made her way toward the counter. Rain pounded on the roof like a distant mob and the voices of the three men talking inside were casual. The lighting was dim, but homely and

comfortable. One of the three men appeared to be the tavern owner and the other two at the counter his guests. There were only two other men in the room, both hooded and sitting quietly in a corner by themselves. A cat glared dryly at Kayce as if saying, "Might I remind you that I am related to the king of the beasts? Aspire not to be my equal."

"T-t-two gallons of rum, please," Kayce blurted. "I'll drink it all. I can't pay, I'm afraid..." she trailed off into vague apologies and tears almost fell from her eyes as she struggled to with an onslaught of emotions.

The cat seemed to sniff as if this were expected from a girl like her, crouched, and slipped away with its tail up. For the first time, the three men gathered around the counter noticed her. The tavern owner rose from his leaning stance and placed both hands on his sides, rolling his tongue along the inside of his mouth and raising his left brow. His eyebrows were thick and bristly, his eyes dark, and his muscles belonged to the wrestling type. He studied her with something between amusement, cynicism, and carelessness. "Eh, now, who might ye be, lassie?" His two companions looked at Kayce over their shoulders then exchanged meaningful glances and began to act inconspicuous.

Kayce stared confusedly at the tavern owner, then stuttered, "I-I'm Kayce." She held her breath.

The tavern owner frowned deeply though there was a faint twinkle in his eyes. He rubbed his thumb, middle finger, and index finger together by his side. He folded his arms. "Just escaped from some captors, haven't ye?"

"Yes. Why, how did you know?" Kayce smiled and came forward, but two sets of hands grabbed her from either side. She screamed and kicked out, but the two drinkers had her in a firm grip. She couldn't so much as bend her arm.

"That's right," said the tavern owner, nodding in an everyday fashion. "There's a handsome reward out for any who will capture 'ee. Many eyes have been on the lookout for where ye might be hiding."

Kayce found her legs suddenly wobbly, but her lungs filled with a sudden energy. "You ugly brute. I just want—" A hand clamped over her mouth and the arms around her tightened and she was lifted into the air.

"Whither to?" asked one of the men.

"The back room," the tavern keeper replied.

They carried her away. In desperation, Kayce shook off the hand covering her mouth and cried "help!" but the only answer was a grunt from the sleeping donkey. From his counter, the tavern keeper let out a sigh that said, "Ah, now that is done." At the same instant the two men in the corner rose slowly to their feet as if to leave. Kayce entered a dark room and the door was shut behind her. Her captors proceeded to bind her. "John," she whispered faintly, realizing at the same time that her call was futile. Rain splashed on the roof above. The winds howled

and she imagined they laughed. She felt her skin burning and tingling at the same time. She wished to fall asleep and wake up somewhere else—in a little kid’s play house, specifically.

Then something even more awful happened. The door opened and a looming form appeared, his figure deeply silhouetted. In his hand was a sword that glittered with a pale horrible light. There was the sound of fighting in the front room and the tavern keeper swore. *Maybe they’re fighting over who gets to capture me,* Kayce thought. *It doesn’t matter. I just hope nobody stabs me.*

She was vaguely aware that her two captors rushed past the man with the sword and that he let them pass. Then the sword-carrying man knelt in front of her and threw back his hood. She could not see his features in the darkness, but she felt him pick her up in his arms and carry her out the door. She didn’t resist. She felt like she could fall asleep any instant. In the tavern room, her three kidnappers were backed into a corner and a man she definitely knew kept them back with his sword. He was threatening them with death if they followed.

The man who carried Kayce took her out into the rain while his companion followed. Kayce’s heart throbbed in jarring bursts and she felt like she had just gotten off a roller coaster. “I-I-I’m okay,” she gasped, struggling. “I can walk on my own.” She launched with a sudden burst of energy onto her feet and rocked back and forth, conscious of her burning hot cheeks.

“J-John,” she said, and she couldn’t repress a faint smile. His eyes had never been so deep before, like the depths of the crashing ocean. They were dark, but they were pure, she thought. She detected the faintest gleam of moisture in his eye. If it was sadness, it was overborne by a deep grimness.

“We meet again,” he said coldly. The jester came up by his side at this moment. His face was slightly pale and his eyes red from past tears.

“I-I call it a miracle,” the jester choked out, tears welling in his eyes. “We thought thou wert dead.”

She wanted to laugh. To dance. “I thought *you* were dead.”

John shook his head. The skin around his eyes tightened and he hung his head, shaking it. “A narrow escape.”

Kayce looked back and forth between him and Tristan. “Where is the army?” She felt a hollow feeling in her chest.

The rain began to fall in torrents. She saw John and Tristan look between each other and she wished for something to hide behind. “What?” She didn’t look into John’s eyes.

His voice was deceptively calm like the quiet and tranquil center of a hurricane. “My army, lady...is no more.”

“A giant bird-like siege engine,” explained the jester, looking down.

John nodded in silence.

Kayce looked down at her hands—her small clean hands washed by the rain. Anyone looking on might have thought she was gazing at hands stained with blood. Sobs choked her throat.

“We’ll go to Almeley,” Tristan said with a faint note of hope, then added, “to die in peace if we are not hunted down like wolves.”

“The-the war...?” Kayce looked into John’s eyes.

He looked quietly and peacefully back, then at the grey clouds above. “Only God can save the war, lady.”

She fell into his arms weeping for all she was worth.

That night, as Kayce listened to logs of the fire crackling, a thought stole into her mind. She turned and tried to go to sleep, but only ended up rolling onto a tree root. She snuffed and crawled out of the shelter the men had made for her. She shuffled over to where the red embers blazed under the covering of a clump of trees. John sat crosslegged and hunched over, a simple hood drawn over his head. Patterns of light and darkness shifted across his face and his only movement was the slow heaving of his chest.

Kayce sat directly across from him and waited for a few moment. “Hey, John?” she said at last.

He raised his head unblinking. Somewhere a wolf howled and Kayce’s skin tingled. “You aren’t falling asleep, are you?” she asked.

He smiled—barely. “Nay, I can keep a long watch. Thou shouldest rest.”

There was a long silence. John stirred the fire with a stick. Kayce began stroking her hair.

“I can...take part of your watch for you,” Kayce said.

He looked up quickly, then back down. “Dost know that ‘you’ is a form of honor in this time. Say to me ‘thou’.”

Kayce shrugged. “Nah, that’s too inconvenient. You.” She tossed her hair back.

Again, silence prevailed. John stirred the fire some more, though Kayce doubted it helped it any. Kayce lowered her head and finally asked the thing that was on her mind. “John, if Trevor came back, would you accept him?”

John’s back went stiff. The stick he had prodded into the fire caught flame. He didn’t seem not notice it. He straightened and coughed lightly. “After he betrayed us?”

Kayce didn’t answer.

John finally noticed that the stick in his hand was burning. He dropped it in the fire where it could burn safely. After tapping his knee a few times, he released a deep sigh. “I must forgive all things. Still, I could not fully accept him unless he has changed. That is an unlikely thing.”

“Well, I think you’re in for a surprise.”

John smiled. “I am glad you are hopeful.”

Kayce laughed. “Well, you’re just a grump.” She got up, went back to her shelter, and fell asleep.

# Chapter 16

## Trevor’s Apprenticeship

The world was dark and still when Trevor finally arrived in London and the air was soft and brushed his cheeks like a fresh sheet. He found himself looking at places where he had fought just a short time before and he could still see the dead bodies in his mind’s eye. But it was only in his imagination. The streets were naked. Every once in a while, a scream would echo in his memory. Eventually, he ended up inside the Tower of London, though he was half asleep and hardly noticed his surroundings. He was led through a seeming labyrinth till he came to a princely furnished chamber where he collapsed on the bed. Though his dreams were hazy, every once in a while, some scene would prick his mind like a lance and he would stir in his sleep.

When he awoke, he found the bright sun streaming in through his window, which was unusual since he was an early riser. He blinked several times and groaned as he threw aside the blankets.

Setting his feet on the floor, he looked around him and took in the room for the first time. His first impression was that he must be in the wrong place, for his bed was covered in gold-laced draperies and a wardrobe that could hold ten of him sat at the other end of the room. Then he remembered that this was the room that had been given to him. Then he noticed how still it was. Shrugging, he walked over to a silver-cast pitcher of water sitting by the wall. For a while, he stared at his reflection, examining his weary eyes and frazzled hair. Someone knocked at the door and he jumped back, giving his hair a quick adjustment. “Come in.”

A page swung open the door and spied the room in a stealthy, half frightened manner. Seeing Trevor, he puffed out his chest and stomped in with a slight sneer on his lips. “His Allpowerfullness wishes to see thee, Trevor.” He waited for a response with his chin tilted slightly up.

Trevor took a step back. “The scientist?”

The page scrunched his nose, saying delicately, “Nay. We do not call him such.”

Trevor felt queasy and leaned over. "Just a minute." He turned back to the pitcher and splashed water in his face.

The page humphed and surveyed the room. His voice was like one admitting that an amateur painting possesses just the *slightest* touch of mastery. "Thou art being treated magnanimously," he said.

Trevor craned his neck over his shoulder. "Except in one area, it seems." He bit his lip, then turned back. The page made no response and Trevor splashed another handful of water in his face. He stood up and flicked his hands dry. "Okay. Where to now?"

The page turned to lead the way, then froze with a squeal. A man was standing in the doorway.

The intruder was gaunt with a long narrow chin and cold, mechanical eyes. He looked like an ex-homeless man with his prominent cheekbones, sharp brows, pockmarked skin, and a mat of thin wasting hair that fell to his shoulders. He had on a robe also, and it was pure white and brilliant.

"E-excuse me, your-your All..." stammered the page. Rising on his toes, he flushed and darted past the scientist and down the hall.

The scientist turned his head to watch the retreating figure. When the page had disappeared, he raised his right hand and gave a deliberate snap of his fingers. Trevor flinched.

There was something dreadful in that snap as if it were the signal for an execution. Finally, Trevor asked, "Did he do anything wrong?"

The scientist turned round and stared in confusion at Trevor. "No." He seemed truly abashed for a moment, then said, "...But he will someday." He twisted his fingers behind his back, looking at the floor. "You see, I've come to show you my production room." He smiled.

Trevor considered the figure before him. He appeared anemic and, when most excited, had an animal like awkwardness to his movements, but there was a sharpness in his brows that was striking—almost awful. Oddly, the quiver in Trevor's gut subsided in the presence of this man and he was able to say with only a slight stutter, "I'd like to know why you've kidnapped me."

The scientist took a step back, playing with his lab coat and raising his brows. "You mean you don't know?"

Trevor laughed wretchedly and his hand instinctively rubbed his empty holster. He paused, glancing toward his window and the view outside. "I understand you tried to kill me before."

The scientist muttered in undertones, then said, "...This will need explaining." He turned on his heel and headed down the hall.

For a moment, Trevor remained standing. The scientist's long shadow just lingered in sight, then disappeared. Trevor bounded after. He stuck close behind

the scientist like a shadow himself.

Along the way, they encountered a few watchers and Trevor always hid his face as they passed. "The citizens are becoming more manageable," the scientist was saying, then added after a pause, "You know, my engineers are more capable than a modern man would give them credit for. You may be impressed by them." Trevor tried to listen but had a hard time. The palace was wide and made him feel small. He noticed that the scientist had an uneven gait as if his brain were too focused on equations to operate his feet properly.

After a turn here and a turn there, they came to a set of thick double doors with an oaken bar fastening them shut. Trevor took a deep breath. The scientist stretched out his spidery arms and unlatched the bar, swinging both ends open as he did so. Whirling round, his eyes flashed with a sudden brightness and his lips formed a smile that might have been dripping with honey or blood. His eyes followed every move of Trevor's as he viewed the scene before him.

Trevor stepped forward, blinking. "It's..."

"Efficient," the scientist finished with a frown. He clutched Trevor's arm with hydraulic strength and hauled him forward. The insectile-like features of his face hardened. "This is my masterpiece."

When Trevor got free of the scientist's clutch, he found himself immobile like one at the edge of a precipice. Steam spewed in clouds, machines squeaked, and metal crashed together. "...Like a nineteenth century auto factory," he found himself saying. The room was a vast, box-shaped, artless addition to the medieval castle.

Assembly line after assembly line stretched down through the building, workmen hustling like bees in every corner. Simple machinery was stacked in different places and lines of finished weaponry and other products lined the empty space in the back. Perhaps it was just that he had been so long without a real hands-on task to challenge himself with, but Trevor felt the need to step into the room, grab some metal, and invent something. He could invent almost anything with the tools here. Basic car models, kitchen stoves, war equipment. He felt that tingling of one who stands at a great height. "...Impressive," he barely managed to say. His eyes strayed to the workers and the tingling feeling spiked. They were well dressed, healthy looking people. He couldn't see their faces very well, but he noticed they weren't slouched over or slack in their movements. The adrenaline rush slowed down and he thought, *perhaps they even like it here.*

The scientist looked on the scene with the expression of a miser eyeing his treasure mixed with something like jealousy and an empty hunger. He rubbed his hands sporadically together. "Yes, perhaps it is impressive..." he said at last with a growing smile, but then frowned. "But I need you."

Trevor tensed, pressing his lips into a frown. "Me?" His eyes traveled over

the factory again, taking in every detail.

"Yes!" The scientist turned on him with his hands shaking with a pent-up fervor and his wild hair flying with the suddenness of the movement. "Someone from my own era must run the work." He swept one of his hands over the scene. "They learn well—quickly—but there is too much to learn at once. They cannot keep up. They must have an overseer who understands the modern world. And..."—he whispered with a lilt that was faintly reptilian—"...I may be needing an apprentice soon."

Trevor tried to figure out where to put his hands as he looked deliberately away from the scientist. His eyes finally rested on a hydraulic press and he watched it on its long course going up and down, up and down.

"You need not decide now," the scientist hastened to say, alternately squeezing the fingers of each hand.

Trevor shook his head and his expression cleared. He narrowed his brows and looked at the floor. "Yes. Of course..."

The scientist gave a quick nod and sprang off in another direction, motioning for Trevor to follow. Trevor obeyed, trudging along and counting his footsteps in the drifting senselessness of his thought. After about a minute of silence, the scientist approached a small gate leading out of the palace which a guard hastened to raise. The scientist looked over his shoulder so that just one of his eyes was visible. "...You were a good friend of John Oldcastle?"

Trevor coughed and kicked his left leg carelessly. "...Not really, I guess..."

The scientist turned fully round in the open gateway, his white coat swishing. "Good." He gave a feline smile. "His army is gone."

Trevor stopped. "Gone?!"

"Gone," the scientist repeated, and without further explanation, he walked out of the castle.

Gathering himself together, Trevor rushed after him. The scientist was walking with swift strides, his grey hair flowing behind him. "Wait," Trevor gasped, grabbing his shoulder. "How? When?"

The scientist pushed his hand off and began to jog ahead of him.

"Come on, this—" Trevor stopped, his jaw sinking.

The scientist came to a halt as well and rested his hands on his sides with a small smile. "'The Red Rose' I call her," he said. His chest swelled. His eyes were glistening like the flash of a descending axe. "A machine of death."

It was an airplane before them, propeller powered and not very impressive from a modern standpoint, but it made no difference in an era where nothing could shoot it out of the skies. "A bomber?" Trevor asked.

The scientist nodded, too absorbed with his creation to speak. After a moment, a deadly fervor came into his eyes. A hunger also.

“Trevor,” he whispered, trembling from emotion. “Trevor.”

Trevor felt an unsettling weight in his chest and he wanted to take a step back, but there was something in the scientist’s voice which sent a thrill down his spine as if he had heard a wolf’s call or a flute coming from a haunted house.

“Trevor, come with me,” the scientist begged. He backed up toward the airplane, motioning for Trevor to come as if he were drawing him in with a cord. Trevor came forward. When they were at the airplane, the scientist ducked under and sat in the very darkest corner of the plane’s shadow. His eyes sparkled in contrast to the darkness. “Sit here.” He patted the ground in front of him. Trevor sat and folded his legs. “Now...” the scientist began. He bent his head and looked keenly about him as if expecting a spy.

Satisfied that they were alone, he leaned forward whispered, “Did you go to school? Answer me on your solemn word.”

Trevor furrowed his brows. It seemed to him that the grass was especially rough where he sat. “Of course. ...Until I was able to get out of it at least.”

The scientist nodded and rubbed just the tips of his fingers together. “So did I. Do you think I was made fun of? Tell me what you think.”

“I...”

The scientist snarled and almost leapt up. “Of course I was. I am thin and weak. But I have brains. Do you know what brains can do? What I did with my brains?”

Trevor held his breath.

“I beat them all,” the scientist nearly shouted. “I beat them all! There was a rich boy who hated me and I hated him. I could not have fought him outright, but through a web of deceit, I got him into my power, and do you know what I did with him?”

Trevor felt slightly nauseous, but more than that he felt a feverous anticipation. His ears burned and his hands were sweaty. He leaned forward.

The scientist held his breath, and when he bent down to whisper his secret, it was in such a hush that Trevor could hardly hear it. “I shot him. Took him to an abandoned spot and shot him seven times in the face.”

# Chapter 17

## An Execution

As the sun sets in brilliant shades of gold, a man kneels in grief. He smells

the soil and it is sweet to him—alive with uncounted life. Around his knees, ashes swirl in little tornadoes. He had a home here once—large, beautiful, full of industry. No doubt his birth had been mere feet from where he was kneeling.

The wind blows over the scene and the ashes stir like happy ghosts that are allowed one moment of precious life. The moment passes and is forgotten. In the forest, a bird calls. That tiny voice, thinks the man, captures the essence of all that is beautiful in the earth. With a small weak hope, he rises. The earth is wide for a man—too wide. Who can understand its breadth? Who can scope out its secrets? The man thinks about these things, though not so clearly or in such order. The lines around his eyes deepen. He nods as if for the first time in his life. One of those secrets the earth hides has just been made known to him.

Perhaps it is this assurance that makes him begin to walk. When men know the secrets of life, they do not remain still. The man walks with an ambling pace. A thought occurs to him and he looks down and wipes his foot among the ashes. Here they must be lying. He wishes he could bury them. There is a faint moisture in his eyes, but he has a slight smile as he walks. He goes to where the stables used to be. The tools catch his eye—rusty poles that are dead even though they never lived. He grabs the end piece of a hoe (all that is left of it) and rests the metal on his shoulder with the air of one who is assured that what he plants will grow.

Back to where his parents are lying, he returns with a spirit of peace. Down goes the hoe and up comes the sod. He forms it into a mound and the burial is complete. There is a flowering thistle nearby. He has rarely thought thistles of much worth, but now it occurs to him that thistles are pretty. Yes, they have a hidden beauty. He takes the thistle's seeds and sprinkles them over the grave.

Beside him, a woman comes up. She has stolen up quietly so as not to disturb him. Now she stands in silence. He knows she is there, but they are both silent. Then, as her face glows with the waxing light, she says very softly to him, "It was a beautiful place."

He nods. "It will be rebuilt," he says. He tosses the little piece of hoe on the ground.

"You've lost your social standing."

The man smiles and nods with more assurance than before. "That too will be rebuilt. Perhaps not the wealth, but the name."

"You will be generous?" She knows what is deep within him.

"It is practical," he says. He has a practical expression.

"That's good," she says, "but I wish Tristan could help you."

The man frowns. He sighs. "I hope he is well."

"It is strange that he left."

"He was gloomy."

“He is always gloomy.”

“He had something weighing on his mind. Trust me, he has a task to fulfill.”

“I hope he fulfills it.”

“Yes, I think he shall.”

The sun had turned a brilliant red. The world was now breathing as one soul of that sunset and, as the day died, life became more alive than ever. Now was the time that the two must leave the hallowed ground. As they turn to do so, they feel an assurance that it is best to leave, for this is only the beginning of their path down a long road ahead of them.

Trevor entered the throne room rubbing his forehead, then grumbling to find that his hands were stained with grease. He wiped them on his official uniform, a lab coat, then stripped the coat off and tossed it by the door. Staring about, he had to think a bit to make sure he really was where he thought he was, not because it looked any different than he thought it would, but because the room was so clean, majestic, and serene that he didn't feel like he belonged to it.

The dictator was squirming in his chair, such a minor figure in the room that it actually made him the only thing worth looking at. He didn't immediately notice Trevor, being caught up in some internal discussion with himself which had all the marks of a bachelor's family quarrel. He smacked his scepter down on his thigh and his lips curled in a smile that was laughable in its murderousness—like the smiles of villains in old cartoons. He then collapsed back in his throne with a pant and only when he had rested for a minute did he roll his head and see that Trevor was there. He sat up in a kingly position, but was silent, his expression blank.

Trevor came forward and knelt. He almost yawned, but he managed not to. His mind drifted to his ideal world with a shop all to himself and no bosses and a pond for recreation.

“My apprentice,” said the scientist, scratching his chin and frowning beneficently, “you are not accustomed to attend my executions, are you? You truly miss out. I want you to see this one, for it is an important capture. My watchers will be here with the man in a minute.”

Trevor rose to his feet and shrugged. He glanced back at the door he had entered by. “Death doesn't bother me.”

The scientist narrowed his gaze. His eyes fixed firmly on Trevor. He pursed his lips as if he had made a distasteful character observation. “But it is the method that is actually the entertaining thing. See here.” He pointed to a red button on the right armrest of his throne and hovered his finger over it. He squinted and frowned like those who find a hair in their soup. “What do you think this does?” he asked sharply.

Trevor found it difficult to concentrate with his mind still pondering his ideal world, but he half-consciously leaned down and squinted at the red shape. "Some sort of execution cannon?"

"An electric pulse," corrected the scientist, tapping the button lightly. "It is an execution and fireworks display in one." He flicked his left hand back and reclined, completely ignoring Trevor. His eyes stared off with a lustful desire into the empty hall before him, the few guards and councilors being as meaningless to him as if they were statues or ornaments or children's toys.

Trevor stared back at the side door until he heard footsteps coming, then he turned to face them and held his hands behind his back. The scientist for his part leaned forward in his seat.

The prisoner was a tall man, thin, dejected, head sunk, with blue eyes that seemed to take in the scene with an earnest fervor and at the same time rise above it. Had there not been watchers there, Trevor might have put his hand out on the very sacred throne for support as all thoughts of pools, workshops, and ponds fled him and he became conscious of existence—of the terrible weightiness of it. As he looked into the blue eyes of the captor, the man noticed him. Their gazes met and Trevor felt as if some invisible force had rushed over him like a wind—it was a vulnerable feeling. It caused him to take two steps backward. He felt as if the invisible force were tearing his soul apart. There was a thrill and also a nauseousness.

"Trevor!" the prisoner exclaimed and rushed toward him.

Trevor struggled to get the word out. "T-Tristan?"

The jester ran as if to tackle him in his joy, but he froze a mere pace away from Trevor. Six arms grabbed him from behind and the scientist cried out and leveled a revolver. Without seeming to struggle, Tristan held himself in place and stared into Trevor's eyes. The gaze seemed to say, not "so is this where you have come to," but, "at last! I have found you!" All of a sudden, the jester broke free from his captors and collided into Trevor, sending them both sprawling on the floor.

"Get him!" the scientist shouted, shaking his revolver. He might have fired if Trevor were not right beneath Tristan. Cursing and spitting, the watchers lifted the jester from the ground and hauled him off the ground. Trevor picked himself shakily to his feet, eyes glued to Tristan. The jester was letting himself be carried away as if to a long awaited rest. He had a slight smile and eyes that seemed to wink.

The scientist muttered to himself about sedition and restlessly hovered his finger over the red button on his throne.

Trevor kept looking into Tristan's eyes. "Say nothing," they seemed to say.

*You are going to die,* Trevor thought. He felt queasy and leaned down,

dusting his legs with trembling hands to give them something to do. From his position of safety, he had the feeling that he was the condemned one and was about to die.

The watchers placed Tristan at the point where he would be fried by the electric pulse and backed away. In that moment, the scientist truly looked like a sorcerer, holding his scepter forward like a magic wand ready to call down curses only the spirit world could have dared to conceive. He tapped the scepter on the edge of his throne and it rang with a hollow echo through the room, long and dreary so that the prisoner bit his lip.

“Now...” said the scientist, opening his lab coat and leaning forward, “I know who you are. I know what you have done...” He paused, looking up at the ceiling with a pondering expression and twirling one finger in the air. “So...are you prepared to die?”

The jester bowed his head in crushing defeat but there was joy in his voice. “Yes.”

The scientist nodded with an official and impartial expression and turned to Trevor. “Are *you* ready for him to die.”

Trevor was sure he said nothing—sure he was unable to—but he must have failed to communicate what he thought because the scientist nodded with the sense of accepting a benediction and pressed the button.

Trevor closed his eyes, but he still saw the blue arc as it flashed. Oddly, that flash of brightness extinguished a light from the earth—Tristan. The ceremony was over.

No doubt something happened after that, but all Trevor knew was that the next thing he did was open the door to his room, realizing he had come up there slowly and pondering something deep. He stumbled in and closed the door behind him, then became aware of a sweat in his right hand and he looked down with a sudden remembrance. Opening his clutched hand, he saw the note the jester had stuffed into his hand when they collided. He unfolded it.

# Chapter 18

## The Letter

The vast elaborate stone halls of the Hereford cathedral swallowed up the presence of the six men like a whale swallowing small fish. The men were perfectly still as men wait when they see the first signs of a sunrise. Although they

were close to each other, their lips were sealed, and if anyone had observed them he would have thought that none of them stood out as the dominant presence in the room, but that only the cathedral itself did. The cathedral looked down on them and one might have thought it could speak if it wished. It seemed its own entity with its own purposes and solemn conclusions on the world. Only castles and cathedrals have this aura about them, but a cathedral most of all.

The men were indeed small, but a casual observer could not have passed them by without glancing at them for a few seconds. Perhaps it was the cathedral working on their behalf, for cathedrals are built with the hope of reaching eternal purpose and there was a gleam of deep purpose in these men's eyes. They were a bishop, the local sheriff, and four prominent landowners from the region. No nobility were among them.

The bishop moved one foot forward and his robes swished—the one noise in the hall and astoundingly well carried. He wrinkled his nose and looked up at the ceiling, squinting as if searching for a sign in the heavens. “When comes he?” He paused profoundly, then lowered his head with a sigh.

The sheriff managed to express keen apathy and yet tap his foot at the same time.

One of the four landowners started pacing. Faint sounds of the summer birds could just barely be heard from outside.

All six men froze as a silhouette appeared in the entryway, light streaming around him. He stood there for a moment. The bishop rubbed his hands nervously and wet his lips, then the man began to advance. He had the walk of a military man—determined, possessed, and steady, and his strength and form matched the image. His head was slightly lowered and he took no haste in any of his movements. If an assassin had sprung on him at the moment, one might imagine that he would have reacted calmly, slain the fellow, and asked respectfully for a burial.

“Welcome, Sir Oldcastle,” began the bishop, motioning to a spot several paces in front of him. He raised his chin and his cold eyes settled on his visitor with that steadiness possessed especially by religious figures.

John Oldcastle stood before the council with one hand rested on the pommel of his sword and his expression that of one who would rather be elsewhere, but who would not say so. “I would wish to know the reason ye sent for me,” he said with a nod to those gathered.

Without any warning, the gentleman who had been pacing broke out into loud exclamation. “The taxes! 'Pon my soul, the taxes! Are we to be slaves? Are we chattel?” He hefted his arms and strained against an imaginary object with clenched fists.

The bishop's face flared with a brief spark of anger, which he quickly doused.

"Peace. Peace," he chided, raising his voice.

"They say Winchester is revolting," another gentleman noted, nodding as if he had prophesied it long ago.

"And others will," added the sheriff, looking to the floor, but casting a quick and meaningful glance up at Oldcastle.

John tightened his grip around his sword and took a moment to cough, lowering his eyes. "I have seen what this usurper can do and I am not the one to lead. I attempted it once before, and many men are dead." He stood awkwardly and then turned to leave. "Find a nobleman who will lead ye."

The bishop ran forward, raising his hand with all the appearance of having God's full wrath behind him. "Oldcastle!" he shouted. As John turned back, the bishop stopped before him and spread out his arms. "They are dead."

John's only display of emotion was that he didn't move a muscle. After a pause, he blinked. "...Dead?"

The bishop bowed his head and nodded distractedly. "Yea. Yea, half the noblemen of our country are gone." He managed to draw himself together stiffly and look off to a corner. "...They would not pay allegiance. All who are left have sided with the usurper." He took a deep breath, and then said, "Oldcastle, I have ever felt thee to be a heretic, but above all we must have unity in these perilous times. This usurper threatens the church and all else, and we must band together. If thou'lt have it, I would ask thee to take command of our town to war for its liberties."

The five others now drew around John, the sheriff foremost. "It will require new tactics," the sheriff said. "Since siege against our enemy hath proved useless, we must let ourselves be the ones besieged. The usurper cannot hold his sway over England unless he controls all towns and cities. There we have our chance."

Still, John refrained from making any movement or speech.

The gentleman who had broken out into exclamations over taxes held his breath and then blurted, "Oldcastle, we know thou art a brave man."

Some of the color drained from John's face. The six waited without daring to move. In a mechanical fashion, John stuck out his hand and his jaw hardened like stone. The bishop, seeing it, hesitated, then clasped it tightly. John returned the grasp with even greater strength. "I can do no less," he said, then bowed and went his way.

The piece of parchment was crinkled and covered in an ink of blood. It felt much heavier than the laws of physics should have allowed and Trevor's hands shook. He read:

*Trevor, how glad I am that I have found thee, for I know I have done so if thou art reading this. I ask no more, though I pray thou art lettered, for few are. If only I could speak with thee!*

*Thy sister is anxious that thou mayst return. John is at last willing to be reconciled with thee. I have heard that thou thought him dead, but he has in fact narrowly escaped such a fate. Now, he and thy sister tarry for a while in Almeley, where John's home once stood. The war hath been lost, as I knew must come. How long shall it be till the Sorcerer casts his shadow over all the world?*

*Yet, though I fear everything and always have, I pray thou wilt pity me and not think me utterly without hope.*

*I have meditated long on this, for I am in the dark with a small candle and though all around it is darkness, how can its glow diminish unless I blow it out and forget that ever I lit it? I only of all men am responsible for the world.*

*This is a heavy thing, and perhaps I am to die because I have not the strength to bear it, but it is also a good thing.*

*Thy friend,*

*Tristan*

Trevor's knuckles turned white as he clenched his fist around the letter. He could see his last moments with Tristian playing themselves over in his mind and he tried to remember all the conversations they had had together. The world seemed to float about him in vague abstract brush strokes where the shadows were accented. He was either floating in the middle of it or steadily sinking. He tilted his head back like one about to faint, but he never went so far. Slowly, he recovered, and his eyes fixed with a rigid fixedness on the huge portrait of a king hanging on his wall. Walking forward with steady impending steps, he reached out and grabbed the painting, then heaved it off its fastenings. He hurled it to the floor and it broke. Now he was scowling. Catching a vase he hurled it too, panting. He had snatched a pillow from his bed and was about to tear it in half when he stopped still and groaned. Tears welled for a period in his eyes. Hurling the pillow away, he fled the room, hiding his face. The impertinent page who attended him was strutting down the hall toward his room, but Trevor shoved him aside and ran

past. A weight clawed at his shoulders. There was only one image in his mind and he could not get it out. It was of the jester sitting cross-legged on the ground, staring morosely at his bowl of stew.

Finding a convenient nook, he hid himself and pulled out the note. Facing the direction of the room he had just wrecked, he held the note in front of his face and read it all the way through. Then he read it again. He buried his face in the note, then crumpled it up again and kept on running down the hall.

A pressure was building in his chest and his legs were becoming heavy. It was getting harder to walk. What would be even harder was stopping. He could not stop. He had to keep going. Sticking to the walls of passages instead of out in the open, Trevor's instinct guided him on the path he had subconsciously chosen for himself. *Get over this*, his mind said. *Go back and play some first person shooter on your hologram till the battery's drained, then figure out some way to charge it tomorrow. Keep living. Get over this. Just get over this.*

He kept walking.

At last, he raised his face and found that he was entering a room full of gentle light. He passed the entryway and a rush of tingles crept down his skin. Looking around, he thought the place seemed a completely different world. He stopped and stood in the center of the room like one who has gone to sleep and woken up to find himself in the middle of a fantastical forest. Stained glass windows splashed brilliant colors over the floor that were fit to carpet Heaven. He was in St. John's Chapel.

Trevor did not expect any sort of divine answer to his predicament, but for whatever reason, he sank to his knees and stretched out his arms like a pauper pleading before a magistrate. He felt a tremble flow through his muscles, a supreme emptiness inside his chest, and a tingling in his fingers. The muscles in his face relaxed till they had never felt softer and he panted as one who has finished a race—or perhaps lost a race, but if so the loss did not crush him.

It could just as easily have been a minute as an hour that he stayed there, for his mind was far removed from his surroundings. Gradually, some sense tingled at the back of his mind that drew him away from the distant country his thoughts traveled and back to the present. A distinct presence lurked behind him. Visions of watchers formed in Trevor's imagination and he instinctively tensed, but didn't move an inch, every moment expecting some movement from the man behind him.

Labored, shaky breathing drifted through the air and Trevor drew his brows together. After a moment of silence, he could hear the man behind him stealing forward, testing each footstep. Watchers were silent, but they feared nothing. This man was not a watcher.

The figure stole up beside Trevor, just to his left. His breath came quick and

irregular, then out in a deep exhale. "Thou art no guard?"

Trevor looked up, blinking as he took in the strange figure beside him. The man's face was cast in the deep shadow of a priest's cowl, but what was visible of his features was white and ghostly. "No..." Trevor responded, pursing his lips.

The priest let out an excited breath. "It is well for thy soul," he said, but his tone said, "it is well for thy life." A long poniard gleamed in the priest's hand.

Strange to say, Trevor was less frightened now and felt without any clear reason that there was a mutual understanding between him and the priest. He sat up on his knees and faced the priest. "What are you here for?"

The priest's eyes gleamed like stilettos and all his features bled a feverish anticipation. He shook his head and walked forward toward the altar.

For the first time, Trevor noticed the crude sketches covering the faces of the images in the glass windows. He fought over whether to smirk or frown when he saw the scientist displayed on them. The priest approached these drawings and Trevor waited.

The priest stood with his arms stretched out, no doubt eyeing what was before him like an arch villain who eyes the foes beneath his feet and only waits to savor the moment to its fullest before crushing them with a death blow.

The priest began sobbing. Trevor slowly rose to his feet and folded his hands in front of him. "Priest...?" he asked.

"Sacrilege..." was all that came in a whisper—a whisper that was more intense than a shout. The priest shook his head. "How...? How could I have done naught when I saw such sacrilege done with mine own eyes?"

Trevor paused and bowed his head.

"I was afraid!" the priest continued. "I shall die for this, but may it be so!" He sprang on one of the stained glass images, tearing off its paper mask. He crushed the paper in his hands. "Even so I wish I were crushed. I, who would not risk cleaning this defilement for my fear of the watchers. All that I am is dung and venom! Let me be crushed!" He tore another sheet from a window with a grunt of fury. Then another.

Trevor stepped forward, not quite sure what he was doing. The idea was only vaguely defined in his mind, but he wanted to take just one of those papers like the priest did and crush it. As the priest grasped the second to last paper however, his mind told him, *You wouldn't dare*. "Hey, priest!" He said it louder than he had intended. The priest turned to face him, the last sketch of the scientist folding beneath his clutch. "What do you think you're doing?" Trevor held his breath.

The priest hesitated, then with a few quick strides he came up face to face. "Trevor, apprentice of the sorcerer. I know thee," he said. "Thou too desire to be crushed, or I know naught of souls."

Trevor found all words out of his grasp, and then, after he had made a deep

swallow and the pressure inside his head had forced a thin veil of moisture over his eyes, he blurted, "W-what are you talking about?"

The face of the priest turned an even paler white, but Trevor noticed that his gaze was elsewhere now. It was directed past him toward the entrance of the chapel. With a hiss, the priest sprang past Trevor, poniard raised. There was a single cry and Trevor turned to see the corpse of a watcher lying on the ground and the priest fleeing off around a corner.

Fighting a brief dizziness, Trevor ran up to the corpse. He knew the face that looked up at him and recognized Wyot. Sweat accumulated on his forehead and he wiped it away. He felt the watcher's wound, then gasped. Tristan's note was still in his hand, but now it was soaked in blood. Scrambling frantically, he tried to wipe the blood off, but it seemed like all his best efforts only spread it further. His only reminder of Tristan lay soaked in blood.

A voice pulled his gaze back to Wyot who stared at him with his grey eyes shadowed by fast approaching death. His lips had an ugly twist, but his eyes glistened. "We know thee now, Trevor," he hissed in a straining voice. "Thou'lt not escape from us."

"W-w-what?" Trevor stammered. Something made him look up. There, staring down at him, was something he had never seen in the palace before: a video camera.

# Chapter 19

## Up and Away

Trevor rapidly thought through his route to get out of the palace. The chapel entryway seemed to stare at him, asking why he hadn't already passed through. He shook his head, and turning to Wyot, snatched a pistol off him. Taking one deep breath, he tugged on his belt and sprinted out of the room. No one met him at first, so he lowered his gun and ran faster. He reached the entryway of the Tower's keep and found only one guard there, leaning against the wall.

"After him!" Trevor heard someone shout behind him. Pairs of footsteps pounded all too close and he strained to lengthen his pace.

Crashing his fist into the guard, Trevor sent him careening on his heels. Putting all his energy into his legs, he was able to pull ahead of his pursuers just a bit. There were only two more gates to clear.

"Stop him! Close the gate!"

Trevor grimaced and drew his gun. There was a war going on, after all. *Crack! Crack!* The gate would stay open for him. He felt wind hiss beneath his ears as he rushed through the gateway, then a warm sting like a bee's as a bullet grazed his cheek. Whirling round, he slammed back into the wall of the gateway and aimed his gun at his pursuers. There were four of them. No chance to waste ammo. Every shot had to count. Two of the men fell and the others staggered. He didn't pause to check how well he had stopped them but turned around. By the last gate he could see two guards armed with halberds. Trevor calculated and found he had one bullet left. Casting about him, he saw a halberd in the hand of one of the dead guards at his feet and snatched it up.

Without a thought, he charged full ahead with the complete savageness of a seasoned warrior, screaming at the top of his lungs and tilting his head forward so far he was almost blind in his charge.

His opponents held their ground and operated with the coolness of machines. This included stepping forward and to the side to give themselves more room to swing. Just at the last second, Trevor saw his advantage and dropped his halberd in a diving roll, letting the two halberds sweep over him. Quick as a rabbit, he jumped to his feet and kept running.

A wide green field opened up before him and after that the city of London. Beyond the city gates stretched a long road and countryside and after that more roads and more long days and nights, each one bringing him closer and closer to freedom. Only, on a far journey he could not run fast nor hide well and London was a deathtrap. A powerful rumbling jarred him out of his thoughts and he stared about. Something swirled and he saw a red object as bright as an apple. An airplane. The airplane. An airplane that could hunt him down anywhere. An airplane that could take him anywhere.

It was running down a grass runway. In the front cockpit was the pilot and in the back cockpit the bombardier, their eyes straight before them and apparently unaware of him. Concealing his gun beneath his outer garment puffing out his chest, he laughed with a note of insanity and his eyebrows drew together fiercely. "Now, don't you go away without me," he ground out under his breath and dashed forward. Never had he run faster. His heart pounded against his head like it would burst out. Thirty yards. Fifteen. His chest burned with the exertion. Five yards.

The plane went airborne and, with a spring, he latched himself onto the tail, the metal hard and sticky under his clammy fingers.

For a moment, black spots appeared on his vision. He clenched his eyes shut as the wind beat into his face, making it hard to breathe. When his head had stopped spinning, he made the mistake of opening his eyes. His arms turned to jelly, his mouth tingled, and something rose from his stomach. He latched onto the tail tighter and gasped. It took him half a minute to conquer the nausea.

It was a pathetic victory, but it built his courage and he dared to look up at the vehicle's occupants. Their backs were facing him and that too made his arms feel like jelly, but in a comforting sort of way. He gritted his teeth and tried to hold on tighter.

It was perilous to crawl forward on the tail of a plane where each inch brought him to a wider part where it was hard to get a grip, but he pressed on. He was three feet away from the rear cockpit when he felt that the only thing keeping him from flying off was his willpower. He did the only thing he could think of and banged his head against the metal frame. It was hard to compete with the roar of the engine, but, after a minute, the bombardier finally heard him.

A pair of eyes stared at Trevor. He could hardly see them since his own eyes were dry, half blind, and could hardly open all the way, but he noticed that the bombardier was shocked and that brought a softening touch to his otherwise mirthless situation. A shout blew by Trevor's ears at too many miles per hour to guess. "What bastard of a fool art thou?!" Trevor shook his head.

The bombardier scowled and turned round to grab Trevor by the wrist. With an effort, he dragged him into the cockpit where Trevor was literally left sitting on his lap. Blinking his eyes open for a second, Trevor saw that he was in the presence of two watchers. Such a scene being less than entertaining to look at, he shut his eyes.

There was a moment of silence from the bombardier and then he said with a voice of lead (apparently into a mic), "Control, we have Trevor in the plane. Requesting orders."

Over a fuzzy speaker came the reply: "Standby." A minute later, control gave the order: "Continue with the bombing mission. Trevor is to be returned immediately afterward, whole and well. He hath attempted escape."

"Understood," said the watcher.

The bombardier made contact with the pilot and then there was only the sound of the incessant wind. Its screech was like that of a bird of prey or a dozen whistles blown off key. After a minute, Trevor felt a thick cloth tied around his face that protected him from the winds. Perhaps it also served to keep him from trying any tricks.

Trevor's mind had taken over for his legs in the job of sprinting. Thoughts raced through his head of Hereford, John, and Kayce. Even if he managed to shoot both watchers, he couldn't land the plane, that he knew without thinking. He couldn't threaten the watchers into letting him down, for they were callous drones of obedience and murder. There was no chance for him if they landed back at the Tower. More than ever he needed to concentrate, but something happened with the darkness behind his blindfold and the constant white noise of the wind. Before he knew it, his head drooped and he had entered the world of dreams.

Trevor heard a sound like the roar of a monster and images entered his mind of giants peeking over mountains with a blood-red horizon behind them. Stumbling out of his imagination, he plummeted into reality. He flailed like a wild man and almost flew from his seat before an iron grip pulled him back. The still present anticipation of falling sent chills all down his back and he breathed heavily. He wanted to strip the mask from his face and see the sun shine in its brightness, but he didn't dare. He could see a faint glow through the cloth though. An unnatural glow. One he struggled to understand. Needles stabbed his mind as another crash echoed in his ear. *Oh*, he thought. *Those are bombs*. His heart leaped within him as a metallic taste formed beneath his tongue. "Oh, enough of this!" he cried, and struggled to break from the watcher's grip, but couldn't. He had to give in. There was no other choice. He hunched over and listened to the echoes of the blast ringing like the cries of lost souls.

"What are you trying to do?" he asked, then realized he had spoken so low the watcher couldn't have heard. "What are you doing?" he shouted.

The watcher was as silent as a mystic. Trevor felt fingers on the back of his head and then light stabbed into his eyes as the blindfold slipped from his face. The sky was cold but the sun was bright. Trevor stared ahead, waiting for the watcher to speak. Thinking for some reason he might explain things—what had invoked the bombing mission; what was being bombed. He didn't. Trevor leaned over to look for himself.

Below was a medieval city, flames licking every thatched roof like children fighting over their favorite dish. Strongholds and great buildings had the look of ill-kept rock quarries. The Sahara could scarcely have looked more like a desert, though lush foliage grew around the city. Trevor strained to see some form of movement—some life. There was a speck of black. He leaned forward, experiencing a flutter in his heart. He strained to make it out. It was flying. It was circling.

A vulture. Mechanically, Trevor sat back and stared at the cold sky and warm sun as if they were irrelevant objects. "What crime did they commit?"

A hand gripped him and he felt compelled to turn around. The eyes that gazed back seemed to know every wrong deed he had ever done. "They offered resistance," said the watcher, his lips closing slowly on the last word.

Trevor looked down and turned away. A hard feeling settled in his chest and he pressed his lips into a thin line, gazing back at the ruins. He noticed a few specks in the fields outside the town and wondered if they were people. "Some must be left as slaves, I suppose," he muttered and began to wonder where the scientist would attack when he had gleaned England dry. Suddenly turning around,

he stared his captor in the face and asked, "That wasn't Hereford, was it?"

A thin smile crept over the watcher's face. "No. Winchester. Hereford is next."

Trevor's heart thumped "...Hereford..." he repeated, then turned back and looked at the sky with a stupid expression.

The plane zoomed on.

Some forces men have no power to resist. If somehow they succeed, it is not by their own power but by a fluke in the system.

Something happened. A streak of purple entered the sky and transformed the world into a painting. It was beautiful. Then, suddenly, the wind changed. It felt cooler, but crisper too—like the few choice winds of autumn that are supposedly full of death but feel more alive than the winds of spring.

Night began to steal over the sky, darkness reaching out its hand to claim the earth, but Trevor didn't give it a thought. He put his blindfold back on and relaxed. He had actually forgotten the existence of the watcher he sat on. Suddenly, he laughed. When the sky got completely dark, the bomber probably wouldn't be able to find his targets.

The pilot radioed to his companion, "Approaching Hereford. We'll finish here then head back."

That euphoria vanished in a flash. It could not remain crushed forever though. It had fallen a thousand feet, but it would rise again. Perhaps it would not soar on wings, but it would scale the mountain somehow.

As he ripped the blindfold from his eyes, Trevor rose and turned to face his captor. Two eyes met his like dark caves where bands of cold murderers made their secret hideaway. They dared him to approach.

Trevor let the moment sink in then pulled out his hidden gun.

"Fool!" hissed the watcher, livid with the excitement of meeting someone so hopelessly beneath his power. As one hand unbuckled his seat belt, the other shot out and knocked the gun from Trevor's grip. Arms grappled around his chest, knocking the wind out of him and pinning his arms to his sides. Black flashed across Trevor's vision.

Then the whole world lurched as he was lifted off his feet. He looked down at a blurry world of dark-green that reminded him of a deep pond. The fall would be a long one. He would have plenty of time to think before he hit the ground.

He didn't really know how he did it. Some actions are like that. Two shots rang out and the superhuman grip around Trevor weakened. Trevor saw the watcher's head tilt back and red blossom in his abdomen. The watcher gave one gasp then tumbled out of the plane.

Trevor held the watcher's gun.

A dizziness overtook him and he had to wobble about to keep from falling after the watcher. He crouched down on his knees and looked behind him to see

the pilot with his head cocked over his shoulder and bewilderment painted on his face. The next instant, the plane spun on its side.

Trevor shot out his arm as he dropped, somehow catching the seatbelt of the bombardier. It felt like a wet noodle at first, but he tightened his grip till he wondered if he could even let go. The pilot looked back, saw him, and readjusted the plane.

Trevor breathed again as he tried to swing himself back into the cockpit, but the wind pulled him back like physical arms tugging constantly.

The pilot turned back around and this time he had a gun in his hand. Two shots whizzed by Trevor's neck, ringing in his ears and disturbing his meager feeling of balance. Fumbling with his new pistol, Trevor returned the fire, but it was useless. Another shot grazed his side, and he howled into the wind, long and full of more than just pain. He emptied his whole clip, but nothing hit. Scrambling for some new weapon, Trevor threw his gun.

By some miracle, it struck the pilot in the head and Trevor clambered back into the plane. With a desperate spring, he latched onto the front cockpit and hauled himself in. There was a brief struggle over the gun in which it was lost and the two fought hand to hand.

From the outset, Trevor had a sense that he was the stronger man. He had always worked out every morning and it paid off. After a minute, he had his hands around the pilot's neck, choking him. "Just. Give. Me. Your. Parachute," he panted, sweat jumping from his skin. "That's all I want."

The watcher's face turned a grey pallor and he was unable to pry Trevor's hands off, but in a sudden spasm of energy he jerked himself free. "No!" His hands flew to his controls. "We die together!"

Trevor had to lean forward as the watcher tipped the plane into a steep dive. Looking down, he saw the ground.

# Chapter 20

## A New Beginning

Hereford had become one massive organism of festivities, one fountain fed by emotions which scattered its bounty to the skies above. They had not only repulsed the corps of fifty gunmen who had attacked them the day before, one hundred foot, thirty horse, the scientist's puppet governor, and other officials, but they had done so with decision, sending their foes flying back with the speed the

bomber had flown toward them, nearly destroying them if they had known it. They were ignorant though of how close they had come to death, and so they were merry.

Under the stars and full moon—which are the greatest festive lights, more so than any man has ever made—much wine was drunk, much provender consumed, and all who could bend an instrument to their will did so. It resembled a carnival, only with much less organization, or perhaps a picnic, only with much more energy.

Under a chestnut tree, a man with one eye and a crutch danced with an old woman, both wearing expressions that for a moment lent them the prime of beauty. To the right was a group laughing uproariously like best friends in which were several yeoman farmers known to constantly quarrel with each other and a miller who was generally disliked. Yet further off wrestled a flock of boys, some thirty in all of various ages. They looked a good deal beaten up, so most certainly they were happy.

Similar sights were all about and in every corner. Perhaps the most lively demonstration was a dance going comprised of men and women of all ages in which two rebecs, a lute, and a pipe accompanied. The dancers whirled like spinning wheels and turned with irrepressible movement. Even to look on inspired the idea that stillness was an impossibility. Just at the peak of the dance, Kayce (who was one of the party) broke from the ring with a leap to the center and began a high-speed freestyle performance with many whoops and outbursts of laughter from the other dancers.

John saw all this from his solitary position and he gave a slight smile, folding his hands and nodding once to himself. He saw Kayce rise and swirl and leap and turn. She was not quite natural in her energy. At last though, she reached the summit of human endurance and collapsed on the ground in a fit of laughter. John himself chuckled slightly, and then something cold and sharp pricked his heart and he turned his gaze impulsively to the stars. They were bright and impossible to count. They were like one vast blanket of light across the sky, and yet each one was individual and set apart from the others. He thought long about this.

Someone came up beside him and rested a hand on his shoulder. It was Martha, his old servant and she gazed at the same spot he was gazing at, which was now Kayce and the dancers. “They celebrate because of thee,” she whispered, rubbing her hand into his shoulder.

He laughed, gently shaking her off, then grew sober. “The sky,” he said. “It is dark. Thinkest not so?”

“No...” she replied slowly, “the moon is bright.”

Briefly, he furrowed his brows as if he had not noticed it before. “Ah. So it is.”

“Thou’lt not join the others?”

“Nay,”—he half-bowed—“but do so thyself.”

She gave him a motherly scolding face, but slipped away.

He stood there for another five minutes until his gaze traveled down from the lofty stars to settle on Kayce. She had left her dance and was walking toward him. With a slight down to earth smile and a faint laugh puffed through the nose, he greeted her. “I do believe a knight would tire before thee.”

She flashed a smile, panting heavily, then spun on her toes. “Yep! I’m all made of lighting. Lightning bolts and firecrackers. Limitless energy.”

He raised one brow and looked inconspicuously in another direction as she began walking around in circles trying to recover her breath. She flopped down a few feet beside him and, in her characteristic way, got right down to business. “So where are you going to send me now?” she asked, brushing the hair from her face and frowning.

He pinched his brow. “What mean’st thou?”

She crossed her legs as she let out a pant, throwing her head back. “Don’t think I don’t eavesdrop every time I get the chance. I heard you tell what’s-his-name that you didn’t feel right keeping me and you wanted to send me to a proper home. So where am I going?” Her face was bold, but her breath was shaky.

He flinched before he realized he should relax. “I know not yet. I hope that yet thy brother may return.”

She bowed her head. “Yeah, well...”

“Well,” said a voice, “hope’s a bland thing compared to reality.”

Kayce sprang to her feet and in an instant she had tackled Trevor. “Whoah! Whoah,” he shouted, shaking her off wildly and scowling. He rolled his eyes as he got to his feet.

“Trevor,”—she bounced around like piece of rubber—“but I thought—”

He lifted a hand emphatically to quiet her and walked past. “Yeah, I’m sure you probably thought a lot of things. Well, I’m back now.” He went up to a very startled Oldcastle who only managed to blink in greeting. Trevor stuck his hand into the pouch hanging from John’s side. He pulled out a small loaf of bread which he slashed his teeth into like a ravenous wolf. “I was”—he quickly swallowed and took another bite—“eavesdropping on your nice little conversation and”—he ate some more—“I think it’s safe to say we can all stick together now.” He held out the half-devoured loaf at arms’ length and frowned at it as if he would rather not make such allies, but found it necessary.

Kayce had a ludicrous smile. Trevor saw it, rolled his eyes again, and turned swiftly to John with an even deeper frown. “You ever tried to keep a plane from crashing while battling in mortal combat with the pilot as you try to steal his parachute?”

John shook his head. His mouth formed a small “o”.

Trevor flung his arms up in the air, sending the remainder of the loaf flying. “Well don’t you dare try it! Don’t you dare! The only way you can possibly survive is if the fates want you to have fun trying saving the world from a nutcase scientist who’s out to kill everybody and your only friends are a bunch of buffs in scrap metal and a sister whose tongue is sharper than their swords.”

Kayce wept at this, but she had a bit of hysterical laughter mixed in that made Trevor look down for a brief moment.

John came up to him with his hand proffered and Trevor had to think hastily how he should respond. Somehow, he didn’t think it would be right for him to shake it.

John settled the matter for him, taking his hand and gripping it so hard Trevor worried his bones might crack. “I shall be glad to have thee, Trevor,” John said, then added, “If thou’lt only let me say who dies and who lives.” He smiled and Trevor blushed, drawing away his hand.

“Yes,” Trevor said, drawing his hand behind his back. “A-a-and the gunpowder?”

“It is assumed. I shall do all I can to help thee.”

Trevor smiled for the first time and sat down as he brushed his hands together hard enough to make them clap. “Well, well! Why doesn’t somebody call for a feast? It looks like there’s plenty of food out there and that’s the proper thing to have at a council meeting.”

John ran off and had food brought and they all three sat down for their first chat since their last parting. “Did you really come in a bomber?” asked Kayce.

“It wasn’t planned,” Trevor answered quickly, then paused. He poked a knife dejectedly at a piece of roast. “...Tristan’s dead.”

Kayce dropped her knife and John turned his face away. For a long time, Trevor continued to poke the roast, never piercing very deeply.

“I met him at the palace,” Trevor started again, speaking in a faltering tone. Then, in a low voice so that the others could barely hear him, he finished, “I guess you can thank him I’m here.”

Kayce pushed away her plate and her face had a hint of green. “He was the best person I ever met. I mean—the *niciest* person I ever met. Absolutely. I don’t know about best. I wouldn’t want to marry him or anything. I mean...” She bit her lip hard, half grimaced, almost cried, and then said very quietly, “Go on.”

Trevor opted for silence, but John asked, “Is this...“bomber”...still nearby then?”

Trevor shook his head. “Crashed. I parachuted and let it drop.” He grew restless and shifted positions. “But be assured they will build a new one.” He got up and began pacing. “I’ve seen the scientist’s factory. It’s—”

Wheeling suddenly, almost aggressively, on John, he said, “I’ve been thinking.

If the scientist can bomb us, we need to change our strategy. Have you ever heard of guerrilla warfare?"

John sipped his mead in silence and gave a faint shake of the head.

"Basically, instead of having your whole army all together, you spread out. You don't fight battles, you pick your opponents off in skirmishes. You attack when you have the advantage and retreat when you don't." As if to illustrate this idea, Trevor advanced. "We might never have the numbers to go offensive you know, but I have an idea for how we might make a defensive strategy work. If we can camp in a thick woods and hide in ditches with archers in the trees, we might be able to draw the enemy in where they would have the least advantage. They would risk almost as much as us, even with guns, and a bomber couldn't annihilate us if we were spread out."

John pulled heavily at his beard, sipping his mead some more as the silence dragged on. "One trouble," he said with a drawl, "is the supply trains. How would we provide food and drink to an army scattered in every direction? And how should we guard the wagons in their route?"

Trevor shrugged with an impatient flick of his hand. "I think the real problem is how *they* would guard *their* baggage trains when surrounded by enemies."

John's eyes seemed to deepen like fathomless wells in a forgotten glade where no one drew water anymore. He shook his head. "We will not *only* face the scientist's men. There are noblemen who have pledged to follow him."

Kayce—who had been quiet with her knees tucked up and her head buried in them—broke in by raising her head and moaning, "I just can't believe Tristan died! I keep thinking it's my fault. I knew he was going somewhere. I just didn't think—I didn't think..." She whimpered, then buried her head in her knees.

John turned toward her with a distant gaze and pulled on the bridge of his nose. There was a pause.

Trevor let the silence hang for a moment, but then he continued. "We need allies," he said, gesticulating despite the fact that neither John nor Kayce were looking at him. "We need landmines and snipers and cannons. We need anti-aircraft and we need—"

John rose to his feet. "To rest." With this piece of advice, he stretched his legs and ambled over to join the general party.

Trevor stared at him with a brows-narrowed expression as if he were working on a mathematical equation and John's departure was forcing him to make serious adjustments. He stared for about a minute until Kayce interrupted him with, "Hey, Trevor? Is Scotland an independent country in this age?"

He frowned as if this distraction had ruined his mathematical calculations, but he answered, "I don't know. Ask John." He left and wandered into the scattered crowd.

As he wandered among merry faces, people hooting, and voices singing, he drew in their joy, but in an observational way, empathizing with all that was done without being a part of it.

As he passed a group of three men, all topped in funny medieval hats, he was amused that they called out to him to join them. He did so, and one of them cried, “Drink with us to the joining of the two ages! As every day comes, we watch”—the orator, his face flushed and grand, drawled out the last words—“for the glorious offspring of this betrothal. Two are better than one and may they both live peacefully together!”

Trevor was handed a beverage and he smiled as he drank along with the rest.

“And four are better than three,” added the orator, shaking in silent laughter and thinking himself witty.

Trevor laughed on the inside and for the first time since his arrival in the medieval ages, he felt at home. “Here,” he said thrusting his mug forward, “Let’s drink again.”

He felt that way all night while the party lasted, which was until the moon had reached its noontide in the sky. As everyone else left, he lumbered off to bed, thinking for sure that he was so tired he would slump off asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow. It was harder than he thought without air conditioning, but he managed.

# Chapter 21

## Tests and Trials

“Everyone back!” Trevor shouted. He accepted a candle offered by an assistant as he walked toward the large flat rock sitting on top of another one with powder packed in between. A wave of tingles rushed down his arm at the thought of what was about to be decided. Slowing down to a creeping pace, he closed the distance between him and the rocks. The big question was if the powder packed between those rocks was *gunpowder*. If all was quiet and peaceful, the scientist would probably destroy them with overpowering technology. A loud clap of destruction and doom, however, and they had a hope of success.

A wick suck out from between the two rocks and Trevor lowered his candle to it with shaking hands.

The wick caught flame and Trevor threw the candle and ran pell-mell in the opposite direction. Fifty yards away, he dove and rolled behind a tree, sticking his

fingers in his ears. Five seconds passed, perhaps longer. Trevor crawled back to his feet and poked his head around the tree, his features sinking.

The next instant, the powder exploded. Shouting like a sports fan after a fantastic play, Trevor leapt to his feet and shook his fist with a cheer. A hundred more cheers bellowed all around and pieces of stone fell from the sky like confetti.

The debris finally cleared and Trevor rushed forward to the spot, where he met his blacksmith assistant and the rest of the crowd arriving soon after. Trevor slapped the blacksmith's hand so hard it sounded like a mini replication of the past explosion. "We're modern at last," he laughed. "You're going to have to stop using all your 'thee's and 'thou's now. It's a new era."

The blacksmith shook his head, pinching his brows together. "'Twas more than I expected," he said, crossing his arms. "I'll betake me off to my shop now and craft those iron boxes thou spokest of."

"The grenades? Haha! Well, good luck. I don't see any reason to stick around, so I'm off to enjoy myself. I need to recoup after all that work." Trevor jogged off amid cheers from the audience and a warm lively gust of wind. As he left the field, he glanced back over his shoulder and saw one of the peasants sitting on the spot of the explosion and mimicking the scientist sitting on his throne. Flinging himself into the air, he faked a scream and the whole crowd roared with laughter.

Trevor's cheeks were comfortably warm and he smiled. He ran hard against the wind and leapt over a creek. Next, he stole through a pasture and then arrived at the house where he, Kayce, and John were staying. It was the home of John's friend, Peter, a well to do yeoman, bachelor, and a forcefully beneficent fellow.

Jogging up to the front door and recovering his breath, Trevor opened it and hollered in. Only Kayce replied. Trevor waited, and after few moments she poked her head out. First, she swiped the hair out of her face, then contracted her brows, then looked at the ground. "Hey," she said casually.

"Is Peter home?"

"No, he's out."

Trevor wrinkled his nose and glanced at the roof of the house. "Drat. I was going to ask to take one of his horses out."

She raised one brow. "You? On a horse?"

Trevor decided this was an insult and sniffed. "Of course. I've decided to improve my battle skills."

Kayce shrugged. "He'd let you. He told me we're open to use anything of his."

Trevor nodded and stood awkwardly there for a moment like a neighbor considering whether to invite himself in. He and Kayce exchanged glances. Kayce clutched the door frame and pulled herself toward it as if she might slip behind the wall and vanish at any moment.

Trevor cocked one eyebrow at her. "What?"

"Can I come with you?" she asked.

Trevor hesitate. It wasn't that he didn't want her to come, she just never asked to come. She'd either totally not come or she'd come without asking. Every once in a while, she'd ask, but that was always as an afterthought. Also, Kayce never clutched door frames; she sprang through them like an acrobat.

Trevor stared at her for a moment, then shrugged his shoulders, turned about, and waved for her to follow. In ten minutes they had saddled the two horses and were on the road. Trevor had an idea to make the most of the experience and began a series of trials in his horsemanship, racing his beast, turning sharp corners, and executing battle-like maneuvers of his own invention. To the great impediment of his efforts, his animal was as genial as its master, Peter, and equally unambitious. Trevor made it work however. Whenever he got far ahead, Kayce would catch up with him, but for the most part she lagged behind and said nothing.

After a good hour, Trevor quit his exercises and rode on at a gentler pace. The birds provided all the background music he needed for entertainment purposes. They were boisterous when Kayce was silent. Trevor felt a bit of the boisterousness himself, though he also had a certain lethargic wandering sense at the same time. He didn't want to practice maneuvers anymore, and there wasn't much else to do. He began to reminisce on how things had been in the future when Kayce said, "I talked to John and he said Scotland *is* independent in this era."

A fly buzzed around Trevor and he had trouble shooing it off. "Might as well be," he snorted. "I don't live there, so it doesn't really matter." When he had managed to rid himself of the supreme insectile model of persistence, he glanced at Kayce and a thought hit him. "You aren't wanting to tell me something, are you?"

She turned her head slyly toward him and searched his eyes. Her gaze lingered just long enough for Trevor to notice it was lingering, then she looked away with a pose of offended grace. "No," she said. "Of course not." She bit her lip, then faced the road with a heroic posture and pointed off into the distance. "See that hill way off there? Ten to one I'll beat you to it."

Trevor snorted almost as loud as a horse. "You couldn't do it if I were a grandma," he said. He kicked his horse's side, Kayce's eyes flashed, and the race began.

If a comedian had been there to observe on the spectacle, he might have made something newsworthy out of it. It was hard to say whose horse was the swiftest, because swift did not describe either of the beasts. It was neck and neck the whole way according to the general sense of the term. According to the technical sense of the term, however, it was not neck and neck at all, for each horse kept passing the other in something like a leapfrog game. As they neared the

hilltop for the finish line, Trevor's mount finally grasped that something like an effort was wanted of him and he picked up his pace to a strong canter, clearing the vague end mark in a small lead.

"I take the win!" Trevor shouted as he wheeled round to face Kayce.

She came in panting. "No you didn't! It was only your horse. Don't call yourself a centaur."

"Sore?" he asked, pulling up perpendicular to her. The spot around them was shaded by trees on either side. The branches stretched over them like arches in a cathedral. It was an especially quiet spot and thickly shaded.

Trevor frowned and squinted, examining the scene. Something about the place scratched at his subconscious and unearthed troubling thoughts of many of the hardships he had suffered since coming back in time. He scratched his head as his gaze focused on a thin trail through the forest. "I think..." he said, "I remember this place."

"Trevor..." Kayce bit her lip, casting a glance behind her and pretending to be quiet and timid.

"Yes, this place..."—Trevor urged his mount to the very start of the trail—"I know this place for sure. This is where we came from the time machine." He began to feel that terrible thrill that one feels when they listen to a ghost story.

Kayce said nothing. She tensed and looked down.

Trevor looked over his shoulder at her. "Wouldn't you like to see it again?"

"No," she snapped.

Trevor rolled his eyes. "Come on. It's not going to hurt anything. Besides, it's a kind of monument, don't you think? A historical landmark."

Kayce said nothing.

"Well, I'm going."

"No!"

Trevor sighed. His sister was rigid in her saddle. "No what?"

Kayce bowed her head and her rigidness began to melt until she was nearly sagging. "If you're going, I'm coming with you."

"Suit yourself," Trevor muttered, turning back and shaking his head.

It was a long route they followed and eventually Trevor knew they would have to leave it at some point and break off into the pathless woods. He could feel the time machine in his mind like a mystical force, and it guided him, or so it seemed to him, like a pulse that got stronger the nearer he came to it. The forest was especially quiet, as if everything were watching them with interest, perhaps distaste. "I'll find it no matter how crooked this forest," Trevor grumbled as he headed off the path through an especially dense part of the woods.

His instinct had been true, and a minute later they exited into a small clearing of overgrown grass. A light began to shine in Trevor's eyes and he set his jaw with

a grim smile.

It took him another five minutes, but at last he found it.

“Well”, said Kayce when they pulled up, “now you’ve seen it.” She looked over her shoulder and hesitantly began to turn back.

Trevor only dismounted and stared in wonder. The time machine seemed larger than he remembered it. Centered right in the middle of a ring of trees, it looked almost like a pagan shrine, only darker and less mystical—very sure and dependable in its power.

“And to think that I thought my gunpowder an accomplishment,” he whispered. “I’m a fool. This—this is real genius.” He walked around it, some superstitious reverence keeping him from approaching it.

Kayce dismounted and followed him with sunken shoulders and a glum frown.

“It makes you think how easy it is to deceive yourself, you know Kayce? To be honest, I’m not suited for this time period. Things were so much simpler back in the future. I knew what I could do and what I couldn’t.”

“I seem to remember you didn’t think you could do much at all,” Kayce grumbled.

Trevor ignored her and went on. Now he felt brave enough to approach the time machine. “It’s too bad I’m stuck here. Things were better back then—in the future.”

“Why?” asked Kayce.

The metal felt smooth as Trevor traced his fingers along the time machine’s door. “Things weren’t as chaotic back then. They were tough, of course. I don’t deny that, but that was just the way of life. Here, you feel like every moment you’re just trying to just make it through, hoping that someday you’ll reach a point where you can settle down. But there is not settling down. Each day has more troubles than the one before.”

“What you really mean is that you preferred your old lazy life to trying to do something important.”

Trevor wheeled around with a gaze like a lazily smoldering volcano. “You judging me?” Subconsciously, he stroked the gun at his side.

“What? It’s true,” she said.

Trevor heaved a breath and shook his head, taking a deep breath. “Look, maybe the responsibility of trying to save the entire world isn’t a burden to you, but it is for me. I’m not a demigod or anything.”

Kayce bit her lip and her voice hardened. “It was no different before. You had to save Jerrold, but you didn’t. You just ran away. Ran like a coward.”

Trevor yanked the door to the time machine open so that it slammed with a crash against the wall. “Okay. *You* want to go save him? ‘Cause we can leave right

now. Come on, get in."

Kayce's eyes widened. "No, Trevor. *NO!*"

Blood pounded in his head and his vision blurred. "You can't stop me." He realized he had shouted. He shouted again. "I've had enough of this!"

Kayce lurched after him as he dove into the time machine. The inner door was hanging open just like he had left it long ago. He charged toward it like a bull, but then Kayce latched onto him around the waist and caught him off balance. He straightened and yanked to get himself free, then, in a madness, he drove his left elbow into her face, sending her crashing against the floor.

A sweat broke out over him and his feet grew unsteady. "Why can't I be dead?" he gasped. Kayce was choking down sobs on the floor and he turned to her at first with a bitter expression, but then his face softened slightly. "Do I have to give everything I have? Do I have to suffer every step of the way?"

It was this, not his violence, that made Kayce's sobs break out in a stream. He waited for a minute, then shut the door to the inner time machine and leaned against it, sinking to his knees. He put his chin in his hand. Kayce was passionate in this way sometimes. Those rare occasions, it seemed, were happening more often now. Her only words when she recovered were, "I'm sorry, Trevor." Trevor didn't bother asking her what she was sorry for because he didn't feel in the mood, but he did lay a apologetic hand on her shoulder. He opened the door for her and they left.

Their horses were waiting for them—faithful creatures. The ride home was mostly silent, but it was not frigid. There was an understanding between them.

## Chapter 22

### Lords of the Mighty

The archbishop's routine was regular and, due to his position of authority, he was much more accustomed to giving orders than receiving them. Nonetheless, when he was awakened at the very earliest hints of a rising sun and informed that the scientist wished to see him, he quickly rose from bed. He only spent a few minutes on his toilet, which was less than was accustomed to spend.

As he was conducted through the palace by a watcher, he was silent and agreeable. He did, however, blink and rub his forehead when they passed out of the Tower and under the raven-black sky. A vague feeling of walking through a vision or experiencing something beyond the natural stole over him as he noticed

a faint luminescent figure in the distance, white and ghost-like. The figure was waiting—waiting for him.

The sharp, bony features of the scientist's face became discernible as he drew nearer. The ruler was clad in his white lab coat according to his custom and his hands were folded together in a way that suggested he was about to perform an experiment.

Courtenay paused before the scientist with the silent watcher on his left. He held his breath and felt as he gazed into the scientist's stern eyes something like a man would feel standing on the edge of a huge precipice over a vast, never ending valley. He felt small and bowed deeply with the most sincerity he had ever bowed in his life.

The lingering feeling slowly drifted away and gradually he became conscious of the firm realities of life—his own solid stance, the thin smile on his face, and the fact that the stars were dimming, though the sun was only known by faint streaks of grey on the horizon. Courtenay thrived in grey, that borderland where all was dark, but not pathless.

The scientist raised his chin, which accentuated its sharpness. "Are you ready to see the end of the world?"

Courtenay lowered his head bashfully and tapped the toes of his right foot twice. "Your Allpowerfulness, I am a man of faith. It would crush my traditions to speak of this as the world's ending. Let us rather regard it as the world's beginning."

The scientist took a deep breath of the night air and exhaled with a sense of mysticism in his voice. "Well said. Follow me."

In truth, Courtenay did not know what might lie ahead, though the thought crossed his mind that the long delayed second bomber had been completed. The scientist led him up a flight of steps to the summit of the outer walls of the imperial castle. Courtenay drew his arms together to block out the chill air that blew steadily, but he also took deep draughts of it, feeling a sort of electricity, as if there were a tempest building unlike any tempest that had ever been—one that would shape the world according to a new standard.

The scientist stopped ten feet in front of him and spread his hands out like a priest. The open flaps of his pure white coat gathered the wind and billowed out behind him, lashing and twisting at the will of the weather. "Tell me, Courtenay," the scientist asked, and there was something in his voice rich, terrible, and tragic all at once, "what do you see?"

Courtenay looked out over the parapet and saw only grey before him. The Thames flowed by sluggishly, droning through its labor of delivering water to the ocean which would eventually find its way back to it again. Then a rustle below met his ears. He squinted and began to see what had been invisible before. "Is it..."

but..."

The scientist half smiled, half grimaced. "It is my long labor," he said grimly. Both men leaned over the edge and watched as the growing sunlight revealed row after row of soldiers, uncountable, all in ranks from the very walls of the castle to the edge of the river. Each man held a raffle.

"At last, no corner of the land will be left untouched," said the scientist.

Courtenay had not moved and could only ask breathlessly, "How many are there?"

The scientist stroked his chin and closed his eyes, tilting his head toward the skies. "Five thousand."

It seemed that those words 'five thousand' spoke all that ever needed to be said on the earth and that the final order of things could now come and wipe away the petty disputes of men. Certainly, it seemed so to Courtenay. No words came to his mind to compliment the mental feast he partook from the moment, but the scientist spoke on.

"The people will give in. There is no doubt of that. There are always a few fools who will start a quarrel, but most will see that their lives will be happier if they will bend to my will. Do you know, Courtenay, what it is that all men desire?"

Courtenay started and it entered his thoughts to reply as if the idea had come from some far, almost unreachable recess of his mind. "I should think—if so required to give an answer...that it is power."

There was a faint streak of orange on the horizon now, but the wind seemed colder than before and it blew away the martial voice below that began calling out orders to the soldiers.

The scientist's eyes developed a steely glint and he inhaled deeply, then replied, "No. It is something far more simple. To feel at rest. Those who seek power only seek it for the safety it brings. But not everyone can have power. Some must crawl beneath the feet of the demigods who rule them. In turn, the demigods will keep them safe."

"As long as they crawl," added Courtenay licking his lips.

The scientist turned and stared hard at him. "Yes...as long as they crawl." His jaw worked up and down and then he leaned against the parapet with an at-ease posture that might have been called alluring in any other man. "Courtenay," he said, "I command this army, but I shall need captains of whom I can expect absolute obedience."

Courtenay's hands became suddenly sweaty and he looked away from the scientist's eyes. He felt a strong urge to back away. He clutched at his heart. Still, a heat flushed in his face and he stammered, "I-I should be honored."

The scientist smiled mechanically and grabbed Courtenay by the shoulder and turned him around toward the stairs. The strength of his grip was shocking, coming

from one of such a lanky frame. Courtenay's heart beat quickly as he thought about leading soldiers. Suddenly, an idea came to him. He gave a twisted smile and said, "Should we not bring Richard with us to see the desolation of his kingdom?"

There was a long quiet from the scientist and then he said, "Yes. A master touch, that."

At that moment, five thousand boots stamped in the grass and a roar of deafening voices broke through the air like the crack of a whip.

## Chapter 23

### Meetings and Partings

John calculated that they were almost at their destination. His muscles ached from sitting so long and his clothes stuck with sweat to the saddle. His brow, nose, and cheeks were covered with perspiration, and the familiar reek of horses and men drifted filled the air. Looking back, he examined his following—a host, if not a great one. The two thousand men he commanded held their heads high even after their long journey. John ran his tongue around the inside of his mouth and turned back, nodding.

A falcon caught his eye soaring high above, and he watched it, thinking. He would command this army in their final battle for freedom. It would be final—that he knew. The side that carried this day would win the country. He furrowed his brows as he stared at the setting sun, almost as if he were trying to discern a mystery there. Indeed, there seemed to be a mystery in it. The sun was a deep fiery red, bordered with purple like a pluming wound in the heart of the sky, a sign that the day was dying. Somehow though, it seemed more full of life than any sunrise could ever be. John started to smile ever so slightly and he closed his eyelids half way.

A blacksmith beside him gave a loud cough followed by several grunts. "Sir Oldcastle, I have given this matter much thought."

John shifted and half his brain began to listen. "Mhmm," he said, tugging at his beard and gazing at the same plume in the sky.

Seeing that he was paid little attention, the blacksmith gave his voice a hearty ring like something between a gruff song and the clang of a hammer. "We have once before been betrayed by an earl. How shall we assure ourselves this is not some similar devilish trap?"

John quirked his lips and laughed lowly in reply, rising from his stupor. "A trap? It may be one. Who can know?"

The blacksmith chewed on the thought for a moment, then shrugged his shoulders with a careless grunt and spurred his horse forward. No doubt he had come to the conclusion that bleak odds were a curiosity that ought to be experienced if only for a change of pace.

After they had crested one hill and the sun had nearly fallen behind the world like a stage curtain snapping violently closed, John saw what he was waiting for. Down in the valley below was an array of some three hundred men. Slowing his mount, he took a good look. They were all in haughty steel and ready for battle. The sight of his army on the crest apparently had no effect on them and they waited almost carelessly. Lifting the horn slung around his shoulder, John pulled it to his lips like a wearied man partaking from a flask. He filled his lungs, then blew three blasts.

The constant tramp of feet and hooves behind him cut short and men murmured or hollered. The air hung still as all waited for a sign from those below. John pulled his helmet off, scratched behind his ears, then put it back on. Soon a group of horsemen rode out from the three hundred to toward him.

John watched carefully and the figures turned from small dots, to figurines, to full men in armor. He grunted when he saw their figures and bounced slightly in his saddle. All were clad in light armor save the foremost on whom he fixed his eyes. The man rode like a champion and he wore a thick embroidered coat shining with gold. He had a sharply pointed beard and thick, brilliant grey hair fell about his head. His face was toward John, and it was stern and noble.

John's armor clanked as he dismounted. He faced the noble, then leaned at ease with his left hand on his mount's shoulder.

The band arrived and their leader pulled up perpendicular, with a giant swoop of his cape. "Sir John Oldcastle!" he shouted. The lines in his face were cut deep and his eyebrows bristled like a row of spears.

John stepped forward and took a knee, facing the brown earth. "My lord Northumberland."

The earl rode his mount closer with a laugh. "Prithee, rise. Hast brought no more than this, Sir Oldcastle?"

John rose and folded his hands behind his back with a slight bow. "None, my lord."

The earl scratched his neck. "...I see." He sat up straighter and taller than he had before. "Well met, Oldcastle. When I have conquered, I shall make thee as my right hand man, if ye serve well."

At this moment, those around John came forward and a few held weapons in an almost offensive as they faced the earl. John held out one hand and turned his

head around to give them a scowl.

The earl raised one brow. "Thou *dost* agree to my terms, dost not?"

"Aye," said John, though his men grumbled, "the kingship...*shall* be thine."

"Well said," the earl laughed, and his voice rang deep and gruff. "Ride with me, Oldcastle, and we shall wend our way a short distance to my castle."

In a moment, John mounted amidst silence and the two rode forward together a ways in front of the men. John's army followed first and then the earl's small detachment. When they had gone some length ahead, the earl began to speak in a low confidential tone, letting one free hand swing at his side. "One must assume a guise of confidence before the soldiers, but betwixt thou and me, I have little hope of any crown save some dirt to cover my rotting skull." He stroked his beard and his eyes took on a ferocious, but firm gleam. "Upon my life! I am thrice a fool for beginning this war, but what the hope of a crown will make a man do..."

"I look forward to a different crown," said John simply. "That is, to have it said that I was faithful with what I could do."

"Hmm! Hmm! Not utterly foolish, I say. I shall, I think, do much good if I gain my crown." The Earl curled his right hand into a fist as if he already held a crown and was holding it close to himself lest anyone should try and steal it. His teeth were clenched, though not ferocious.

"But tell me," he continued at last, "Thou spokest of some 'tool,' if I might phrase it so, within your possession. Is it true that ye command a youth from future times?" He laughed halfheartedly.

"He is capable, and I might say a friend."

"'Pon my soul... 'Tis true then!" The earl frowned and stroked his beard with deep, long strokes. "It is hard to doubt that a man has come to us from the future, but that *thou* shouldst know such a man—that makes the absurdity too real."

"He will be very useful," John said with an air of hesitation.

"Aye, verily, but he—"

John interrupted, this time boldly, "He knows more of our enemy's ways than either of us, and more of our enemy's weapons also. I should hearken well to his council, for he may well be all we have in this war."

"A boy?" the earl scoffed. "I might concede to say that he is valuable, but thou dost exalt him too highly. How now is he greater than any other boy? Boys are fools, or is it that I am dreamer and only imagine what I see them do?"

A slight smile curved on John's lips as of a distant memory. "He is no greater than others,"—the smile changed to a momentary frown—"but any man or woman may be the voice that saves many in the dark times of their age. It is something, I think, that they must learn how to become."

The earl raised one of his brows. "Is this boy such as you speak?"

John laughed a high, lingering laugh. "Life...requires many things of us. One

can never say for certain how we shall respond.”

The earl gave an exaggerated grunt followed by a snort. “Well said. I often consider that it asks too much of me. Ah! A matter you would wish to know. I have found another thousand soldiers for our ranks.”

They proceeded in such conversation until they came to the earl’s castle. It was a ludicrous thing, that bulwark upon a gently sloping hill—something as silly as a feather in a dandy’s cap, for it promised infallible protection but could offer no more against their enemies than a simple hole in the ground.

The night was dark by now—very dark—and John felt restless. He was under the impression that there were many tasks he needed to do and much that depended on them, but what they were continued to evade him. He also felt much like doing nothing and so, when at last he slept, which was very late, his sleep was fitful.

It was past noon on the following day when John emerged from the earl’s compartments after a long talk. He breathed a deep sigh and brushed the hair back from his forehead, laughing through his nostrils. If one had looked into his eyes then, they might have thought that they lacked some of their normal luster, but also that there was something strangely playful behind them as if he were at once rested and toying with recklessness. From his long session with the earl, he had learned to trust his ally much more and also to trust him less. Taking his first step in a long and slow stride, he continued confidently and casually.

His boots clomped on the floor and reverberated in his ears with an airy hollow sound.

At his personal headquarters waited an attendant and John nodded to him, then walked in and collapsed in the nearest chair, leaning back and gazing at the ceiling. He crossed his feet, then, a moment later, got up, put a map away at one end of the room, aligned a chair at the other end, and sat back down.

His mind drifted back to his late conference and he raised both eyebrows as he chuckled dryly to himself. It was an eccentric ally he was dealing with. The earl had somehow received a hint of the attempt to assassinate him even when all others fell without a cry. The earl had handed over his rule to a pompous fool and watched from the shadows while he waited for his enemies. They came suddenly and slew his replacement with peerless efficiency, secrecy, and brutality. But the watchers had met their match, for they themselves were watched and on their way back to London, they disappeared.

Yawning, John rose with the weary acceptance of one who has long repeated the same task and walked to a stand where he had parchment and ink. He wrote on one page:

To Sir Walter Briggstone,

Take thy command of three hundred and seek the quartermaster to equip them with shovels and other instruments for digging. Speed then with all haste westward to the borders of the forest and there have them dig pits among the trees as thou hast been instructed, no less than a quarter of a mile within the border of the forest. The pits shall be dug in two lines, irregularly laid and stretching in arc down southwest and turning back after three miles northwest.

Rations shall be delivered to thee by cart at forenoon day by day.

—Sir John Oldcastle

Taking the next note, he scribbled:

To Sir Humphrey Kent,

Take thy grenadiers and train them in the use of their slings. Stones are to be used in replacement of the grenades to conserve them for the time of battle.

—Sir John Oldcastle

“Noll,” John called, and his attendant stepped in with a bow. John took the notes forward, saying, “Deliver these to those ascribed.”

Turning round as his attendant left, John began pacing. His face began to look long and dry like a desert over which harsh winds blow clouds of abrasive sand. He ran soiled fingers through his hair several times.

Soft clicking sounds came down the hallway and John cocked his head to listen. He knitted his brows and wondered if it was his attendant returning, or if there were urgent news, or if he had received a dispatch. Yet his emotional reaction was too strong for any of these scenarios.

The sounds came closer. They were light and soft, but hesitant—pleasant, but strange.

John straightened stiffly, but he smiled and nodded to himself. Kayce entered a moment later, looked at him, then looked at the ground. She hung at the doorway with both hands on it. “I’m not interrupting or—bothering you, am I?”

He frowned with shocked eyes. “No,” he said, then stopped to consider if that were true.

Kayce licked her lips. “Good.” She pinched her lips and stared at the floor so hard she might have pierced through it. All of a sudden, she raised her head and

blurted, "I'm really glad to have known you."

John froze except for one muscle beneath his left eye which twitched. Kayce pulled her shoulders in as if hiding from something and added hastily, "I mean, I still know you and all...It's not like I'm planning to stop knowing you.... Are things coming along?"

John nodded very slowly. "They progress well."

A sheepish smile spread gradually over her face and she laughed. "Well, I guess I should have expected that. Silly me." Her eyes sparkled, then she looked down again. She stuck forward her right foot with the toes pointed in the way a dancer might have done and brushed the floor with them. "Um, I just wanted to say..."

Since the silence lingered, John assumed a more proper waiting posture.

"I just hope that things go well and you don't overwork yourself and—" She held her breath, looking almost frightened. "You were doing important things when I interrupted you, weren't you? I shouldn't be here." She began to back away.

John took an impulsive step forward. "Wait," he called, then stood rigid. After a pause, he said, trying to sound reassuring, though he could tell himself that for some reason his voice was slightly unstable, "What do you wish to tell me? I would hear it."

She smiled—sudden and brilliant, red dashing her cheeks which had previously been white. "Oh, nothing. I just—I hope I can be of a great service to you and I want to do all I can and I-I..." She suddenly stood up on her toes, caught her breath, and her face turned mostly pale with only a tiny showing of the previous red. "Goodbye!" she said, then ran away.

John stood there for several minutes gazing where she had left and rubbing his right temple. At last, he scratched his head and turned away with a weary sigh. That added one more thing to worry about in the war. But it was only one thing. Why then did it make his load feel double?

The earl was drilling a division of his forces in the castle courtyard when John passed by the next morning. That is to say it was clear the earl *had* been drilling his forces. John's attention was snagged by words Trevor spoke as he faced the earl, standing rudely close and speaking loudly. John turned aside to hear more.

"I tell you, she's completely gone," Trevor was saying. "Don't think I can just make her poof out of thin air when she's not here."

The earl breathed in heavily and authoritatively, squaring his shoulders. "Sirrah, I perceive thou failest to grasp the import of what I say. Thou *must* find her, for it may be that she would betray us, and she knows a great deal—more than I

would have had her know if I had had my full way. Her disappearance is a danger to us all."

Trevor tensed like a snake about to strike. "Look, she's not that crazy. I know her better than you do. Something's up—perhaps trouble, but it's not the type you're thinking of."

John intervened at this moment. Rather, the debate evaporated in his presence. His face was stony. He looked from the earl to Trevor to the earl to Trevor. "Kayce is gone?"

"Mhmm," Trevor said.

A low rumble came from John's throat, but not a harsh one. He pursed his lips and breathed in heavily. He hesitated a moment before he asked, "Did she leave any hint of her journey?"

"Well, her horse is missing and I can't find her," Trevor said rather loudly.

"Which is an ill token," interjected the earl. "She is journeying somewhere, and it may be southward if thou dost take my meaning."

John seemed to grow older in that moment and wrinkles formed in his brow. He bent his head and shook it. "No," he said quietly, almost as if he had spoken without realizing it. He raised his eyes to the sky as if he sought a guiding star, but the sky was grey—grey and miserable. "No, she would not desert us. Of that I am confident."

The spell dissipated and John shrugged and then laughed outright. "What is the good, after all, of a woman if she doesn't believe in her cause?" He turned around and began to walk away, but then he turned back. "But there is one thing that troubles me." All signs of laughter were completely erased from his face. "For years, Scotland has been our bitter enemy."

## Chapter 24

### What Kayce Did

"There it is, Jessie," said Kayce, stroking her horse's neck. "That's Stirling Castle." She nodded in the direction of a sizable medieval bulwark which sat, as it

were, at the end of a jutting ridge overlooking the countryside. Dismounting, Kayce led her horse to a clump of woods far away from the road. There, she tethered it.

Standing idle among the herbage, her mount stared at her with idiotic sympathy.

Kayce stared back, leaning forward with her hands on her hips and puckering her lips. "Waza wrong wid you? I gotta go to da castle and I may meet no-nice men that a' be rough to deal with. You no be helpful."

This time the horse nodded slowly and, one could imagine, with complete comprehension.

Kayce patted the horse's shoulder. "You're pretty strong for a girl. I'm glad you're a girl. Boys are terrible company for a long journey." She pulled something from beside her waist and held it up in front of the horse's nose. "Guess what this is?"

The horse sniffed.

"That's right, it's a grenade. Not as good as the ones from my time, but Trevor did pretty well. You don't worry about me. The worst thing that could happen is that I'll turn all of Scotland into an ash heap." She winked, then whirled around and leaped away with a short ripply laugh.

As she skipped up the road, Kayce had the strong impression that she would meet many people and that all of them would be peculiar and lively folks with dramatic life stories and funny accents. She never actually happened in to anyone, but she kept imagining the type of people she would meet so she never bothered about the fact that she was actually alone.

Soon, the entrance to the castle appeared up ahead and she began to wonder if she should try to act normal or whether a reckless confidence would best ensure her the guard's favor. She was about to tell herself that it was always best to act one's self, but then she reflected that she might seem just a little *too* odd if she went that route. Instead, she decided to assume the demeanor of a girl she had once known back in the future who sold useless junk door to door and who had a way of making you buy even though you didn't like her. All it took was half a minute looking at her medieval dress to work up the state of mind. *I hate this dress*, she flat out lied to herself. *This is a peasant's dress*, she added, though she

had never thought that before. *I bet you if I got a new change of clothes nobody would even buy this one from me*, she concluded. She rubbed her hands, feeling proud.

In her new personality—cold, logical, overbearing (though she couldn't keep a tiny spring from her walk), she advanced toward the gatekeeper. "How go things?" she asked, making sure she spoke first and with plenty of brashness.

He shifted his halberd and stammered, "Th-they progress." He peered at her askance with his brows ever contracting, then added, "...as always."

"It is well," she said, now drawing near. "I have a cause that needs progressing."

He took a quick step in to guard the gate. "And, pray, what may that be?"

She stopped before him and raised her voice a notch. "That will be business for the king."

"The king!?" The guard's eyebrows raised like they would soar into the sky. He laughed a deep, harsh, belly laugh with words to complement. "Who art thou, lassie? Ye wish to see the king, ho ho! No,"—he shook his finger at her, then shook it harder—"no, we need no jesters here."

Kayce deflated like a popped balloon and her shoulders positively sagged. "Don't you speak of jesters. You don't know anything about them."

The guard wavered and his mouth formed a small "o". It almost seemed he would let her pass but then he tightened the grip around his halberd. "Well, off with ye!" He shouted. "The king is no laughingstock to bemuse common waifs. Off!" He shook his halberd. "Off, off!"

Kayce turned and ran. Her lungs began to burn and she felt that if she met anyone on her way, she would push them aside. She fled until she was out of sight then disappeared off the side of the road. She came upon a bush, stopped, folded her arms, and kicked it. "Well don't just sit there," she said.

The bush continued to sit there, so she let out an elaborate snuff that was a half sigh and sat down beside it with her head buried in her hands. "Maybe I shouldn't have come here all by myself," she said. "Maybe if I had John or Trevor or...or Tristan. That horrible guard! No sense of honor. Now what am I going to do? Climb the walls? Without a rope?"

She folded her arms decisively, "Yes," she spat. "You'll climb it without a

rope, or your name isn't Kayce Monica Allen."

She noticed that a cloud above looked particularly like a hippo. "...I bet a superhero could climb without a rope," she mumbled. She pinched her brows and twisted her lips. "Yeah, Kayce, why can't you climb without a rope if a superhero can? ...Because you're not a superhero..." She muttered her last bit of monologue like a curse. "...*Fuzzballs.*"

She froze suddenly, cocking one ear, then slowly putting her hand to it to hear better. At first, her lips formed a small "o" and she seemed inclined to scratch her head, but then her eyes lit up like she had seen a guardian angel fly by overhead. There was a rumble of wheels and a voice accompanying it—at once both rich and homely.

*"I wedded Winda in spring's fair weather  
Widdy doom, diddy doom, fither feather*

*Me back's an oven when the sun takes longest  
Trumby drum, Tumby dum, makes me strongest*

*Fine is the season when the flower falls  
Makey dack day and mead in the halls*

*I wait for winter, but it never comes!  
Hark for the whistles of the little ones*

Rising slowly to her feet with her hand to her mouth like a child who sees a circus, Kayce waited. Up came the cart into view—a broad, oversized and heavily-piled cart for the horse that pulled it. The man who drove it had wavy brown hair and sang at the top of his lungs.

"Well, my guardian angel," said Kayce with a mischievous smile as the cart passed by, "since I don't have wings, maybe you can give me a piggyback ride."

Like a dog after a mail truck, Kayce chased the cart from behind. She spread out her arms like wings and could hardly even feel the ground beneath her feet. The cart driver's singing drifted over the scene like a blanket, overpowering even the sound of her footsteps.

When she was so close to the cart that she could leap out and touch it, she

caught her breath. Her hands shook with a tingling excitement. Quickly sprinting the last few feet and ducking, she dove under the cart. The cart was in no hurry, so, with an energetic crawl, she was able to keep up with it. "Ah, it's not so bad under here," she whispered to herself. The horse at the front turned its head around and peeked under the floorboards. She waved to it, then held a finger to her lips. *That's right, she thought, be friends with the cool lassie. Let's keep this a secret from the cart driver, that fine fellow.*

The beast nodded in agreement and Kayce continued to crawl along on her hands and knees. She cast a few glances under the side of the cart she suspected the gatekeeper would be on, then shifted the opposite direction.

Just by the time bumping her knees against the road began to feel like grinding them against sandpaper, she heard the memorable voice of the guard call out, "Ho, McCallum, what's it this time?"

"Fine herbs and fruits," hollered the singer. "The finest ye may find at this season, 'an no less."

"So any man claims," grumbled the guard.

"Aye, and I will prove it," responded the other. The cart came to a stop and there was a brief silence then the soft thunk of something being caught. "Taste it and see I am right."

There was an acknowledging grunt and then the cart moved forward again.

It was sudden and jerking and Kayce had to lurch forward to keep from being seen. Even so, she glanced behind her and imagined every second that the guard would shout out that he had seen her.

She entered a spacious courtyard and peeked from under the cart, looking right and looking left. She contemplated whether she should follow the cart to its destination and then sneak away, or take her chances right then. She listened carefully and tried to block out the noise of the cart. It seemed to her that she could hear a mixture of faint noises from within the castle walls, but all around her was quiet save the chirping of a few birds.

She darted out and collided into something that had poky metal pieces in some parts and soft cloth elsewhere. "By me sword!" shouted a knight. "Who may this be!?"

"Uh-uh, no one!" Kayce hollered, stumbling and falling on her back as she

saw a flash of steel gleam before her eyes. She clawed her fingers into the dirt and tried to crawl away, then froze. Her eyes grew wide at the sight of the knight before her, clad in full mail. His thick mustache twitched with excitement and he held the tip of his sword close to her as if she were a wolf crouching to pounce.

Slowly, the knight drew his sword back and his thick mustache hardened like a rod of steel as his jaw dropped. "Forsooth, 'tis but a lass." He seemed for a moment prone to bow his way out and make a hasty retreat, but then his expression hardened and his voice rose with harsh accents. "What seekest thou? I see thou'rt but a common lass, and no cook or maid here!" He squinted at her. "Hear, waif. I have a mind to throw thee out head over heel." He gave a harsh shout to the guard at the gate. "Ranald, who hast thou let through but now?"

The guard shuffled over with the air of a dog reproved by its master—a shaggy wayward dog particularly. "This 'ere lassie?" he asked, squinting at her as if he were looking at his mother's ghost. "I only just sent 'er away. What trick be this? 'Twas McCallum let you in, was it not? Tender rascal. I shall slice his ears, I swear by—"

"No, no," Kayce gasped, backing away. She ran into the knight, flinched at the contact, and jumped away.

The knight gripped her by the shoulder. "What excuse dost thou make?"

She twisted her fingers together in front of her, in and out and in again. "I've come to see the king."

For what seemed like a long time, the knight stared down at her, his jaw hard. "Ah, have ye now?"

Kayce stamped her foot as hard as she could. "Yes, I have, and if you don't let me see him you're a coward and a villain and deserve to have your head chopped off."

"Ooooyy!" roared the knight, reeling back, then practically charging at her and heaving her up by her collar. "How dare...?"

"If you care anything for England," Kayce choked, "if you care anything for anything, you'll show me to him."

He growled. "Not as he'd wish ta see *thou*."

The blood swelled in her head and flashed on her cheeks. "Then he's a coward too."

She hit the ground and lay there stunned.

The knight grumbled and leaned over her, then inclined his head toward the gatekeeper. "Lock this fool away till she may be properly dealt with and keep watch that she does not escape. I shall find another to take thy duty."

"But-but—" Kayce gasped.

"Aye, right willingly, sir," replied the gatekeeper and immediately jerked her by her right shoulder. "Let me go!" Kayce screamed, but there was nobody to pity her and she was soon locked away in a sort of closet of the royal castle.

Kayce scratched absently at the stone wall, but otherwise there was no sound. She stopped scratching and cocked her ear. She had not heard the guard for a while. She tiptoed over to the door and gave it a light tap.

"Eh?" came the response.

Kayce scrunched her nose and turned away with her hands on her hips and looked at the wall with a gaze that said, "You think you're nice company, huh? Well, yeah right."

She sat down to think about how John must be doing. About the battle strategies she had managed to pick up on and the allies she knew he needed.

Her throat began to ache and a thin film covered her eyes. Kayce took a quick breath and held it, making two fists. She mastered herself and then rose to her feet. "He *needs* allies."

The world seemed to hang still as if waiting breathlessly for what she would do next.

She nodded and looked at the door. Her hand settled on her grenade and froze. Slowly, a weak troubled smile came to her face. "Well..." she whispered, "I can't think of any other way..." She took the grenade and crouched down by the door where a faint light seeped through the crack at the bottom.

The grenade was a round blob of metal with a tiny hole at the top where a fuse stuck out. At the tip of the fuse was a match-like substance that could be struck on any rough surface.

Trying to suppress her breathing, Kayce plucked the fuse from its hole and clutched it tightly in her hand. Then, rising slowly so as not to make any noise, she tilted the grenade and spilled some powder out of its tiny opening into the

keyhole. She filled it as full as she dared, then set her grenade on the ground. Now she took the fuse and went over to the stone wall beside her. One strike and it sizzled into a white-hot flame. Flying back to the keyhole, she stuck it in, then fled to the other end of the room where she curled up in a ball and covered her face.

Shattering and screeching split the air as wood shrapnel flew in every direction and stabbed like tiny needles into her skin. Kayce waited only a split second, thinking to herself, *I am still alive*, then fled out the open door.

Her guard was clutching his hand to his heart as she came out and his pole axe had fallen from his hands. His face was plastery, white, and he looked like he needed a medic. Kayce rose on her toes and spread her arms out with her fingers curled like claws and boomed in her most dreadful and queenly voice, "Move no muscle, or I shall smite thee with such fire as ye have not yet fathomed!" Turning on her heel, she ran as fast as she could out of the castle.

In the courtyard, she made it only a few yards, then stopped in her tracks and looked every way for a path of escape. The whole castle seemed to have woken like a long slumbering cyclops at the sound of an intruder. The gate was blocked, she couldn't turn back, and there were many knights coming from every direction, charging at her. One fair lady had come out with her maids (their faces all unceremoniously aghast) as well as squires, servants, lords, and she wasn't sure who all.

There was only one thing to do. It was her duty. Kayce took a deep breath and ran toward her assailants swinging her arms and contorting her face like a crazed prophet of doom, half mad with toxic mushrooms. "Hear, ye!" she screamed fit to shatter glass. "Turn back, all who have heard the thunder of Aglathran! Doom shall overtake thee. Doom!"

It failed. Failed like trying to entertain a two year old in a tantrum with wooden blocks. She was surrounded by three swords and five pointy sticks—very pointy sticks—spears. She had to give it one last effort though. For Trevor. For John. For everyone whose lives hung in balance. "All who dare to move shall be consumed in everlasting flame. I, Delizahaba have spoken. Fear, for the eternal flames and the ice that sears the flesh! Fear for the beast of terror and the worms that consume!"

A hysterical feminine voice cut over all other noise. "Kill her! Kill her. I

know she shall do it!"

A youthful figure before Kayce raised his sword above his head. He trembled, but his eyes burned with an icy, fanatical flame. "We take no sorcerers here," he breathed. He hesitated but one moment as his face turned white, then he swung.

# Chapter 25

## The Calm Before the Storm

Ancient trees—dull, pale, ghostly ones—loomed over John, Trevor, and the Earl of Northumberland as they gathered together in council under a late star-ridden sky. It was as though the trees were listening. The three held their voices low. Ever in the background there was a constant cool wind, whispering among the trees like spirits waiting—devious spirits, amused at the plots of men, planning their own courses, their own ways, their own purposes.

The earl made a sudden movement for a stick and drew a line through the leaves in the shape of an arc. "This is our line," he said, rubbing his thick mustache vigorously to remove the perspiration from it. Above the first line he drew another, bent and wandering. "This is the river AIn. Now, if all thy defenses hold fast, Oldcastle, against our enemy's tactics, then we shall be well in the front, but see how easily an army could take us from behind? It is agreed we shall have to face more than one army. All under the sorcerer's command, but brought by different nobles. I urge that my own troops be placed in the rear in a central position where they could be sent to anywhere at need. Also they could do battle with any who seek to take us from behind."

The only sound for a while was a small animal skirting with cautious and frightened steps through the leaves. John stared at the ground, the moon glinting off his eyes and giving them a cold sharpness. He nodded several times very slowly, then shook his head once. "No," he said at last, pointing at the earl's markings, "if we mass in any size to make a resistance in open battle, we will be decimated by the bomber. We must, above all things, be scattered yet strong.

Mayhap we could dig pits and entrench ourselves in another line facing north, but I like it not. We have not enough grenadiers to spare for two lines and I like not that we should be cut off from a retreat. My forebodings tell me we shall have to give much ground in this fight."

"We *shall* be assaulted from behind," replied the earl and he spat it out as if annoyed by the uselessness of John's statement.

Trevor rubbed his stinging eyes, bobbing his head to concentrate. He lost the train of argument for a moment as the conversation switched to arrow production, then rations, then the cooperation of local villagers. His eyes fixed on a particularly bright star overhead. The star just stayed there, shining and never changing brilliance. It wasn't going anywhere in a hurry. It could be relied upon. Looking at it was sort of like curling up in a bed on a fresh spring night or waking up to find that food was already prepared—and coffee. An empty feeling formed in his mouth. Trevor swallowed.

"...If there were any way to make the river impassable," John suggested, "perhaps we might need little defense in our rear." *Oh*, thought Trevor, *back to the same subject, are they?* He rested his hand on his chin. After a moment, he lowered his gaze back to eye level.

The earl raised his hands to shoulder height and shook them. "Oldcastle, thy wit is as poor as a rusted tub for armor. What an absurdity! Tell me how thou wouldst block the river, and I shall listen."

A glint came into John's eyes and the form of his jaw hardened, but he bowed his head. There was a tense silence such as was incapable of existing long without some hasty word or movement. What conflict might have arisen was never explored, because the next thing that happened was completely unlooked for.

"I guess...I *can* think without coffee," said Trevor. Both the others snapped their gazes toward him. He rubbed his hand up the side of his nose, bunched one cheek, then bunched the other cheek. "Yes..." he continued, "it's all clear now." He took a last look at the bright star, nodded, and smiled. Turning to his companions, he quirked his lips downward. "Is it really such a bad thing if we get attacked in the rear?"

The earl's mouth opened, but the rush of words were unable to come out.

"It seems to me," Trevor continued, "that nothing better could happen to us."

The earl burst out laughing. "I swear, thy impish—"

John raised his hand sharply and cut him off. "Wait..." He softened his voice and lowered both hands gently as if dampening a ringing cymbal. "Speak thy mind, Trevor."

Trevor took a step closer and folded his arms to keep warm. The feeling that the trees were listening was especially strong at this moment, and he lowered his voice. "If we are attacked from both front and back, that means the opposing army will be divided."

John nodded.

"Likely one party will be the scientist's own men and the other will be his allies. We can't face them all together but maybe we can face them separately." He let his words sink in a moment. The others were utterly motionless, hanging on his words.

"What is our greatest disadvantage?" Trevor asked. He directed his hand toward a space of empty air as if there were a whiteboard levitating there.

"Well...with the desolation their guns can cause, it would be weaponry," the earl muttered.

Trevor latched onto this reply and nodded. "Then what we need are our enemies' guns. Suppose the scientist sends his allies around behind us. We could wait and be pinned, but suppose we didn't wait. Suppose we took the assault on the scientist's own men while his allies circled round us. If we could win there, we'd have the guns to fight off any army."

The earl began to twirl his mustache with vigorous strokes. "Faulty, but not so foolish as I had first expected." An owl hooted overhead. The earl bent his head and rubbed the back of his neck as his eyes narrowed to slits. He turned around and paced away, then paced back. He kicked a stone and sent it flying several yards. "No, but mayhap..." He set a piercing gaze on the darkness that could have made the darkness afraid. He snatched up his former stick and began drawing vigorous lines in the leaves. "Here again is our position, marked by this arcing line. An army"—he drew an arrow curving from the pinnacle of the arc to around behind it—"is sent around to our rear. They could circumvent us from either side. The breadth of their march might span over a mile, for they must needs navigate the forest. Of course, there would be scouts also. Thus, we could not hide a

detachment of our soldiers off to our flank except for several miles aside, and then they might be late to come to our assistance.

“Yet consider,”—he marked a spot southwest of their line of defense, a spot the enemy would have to march past to reach their position, but off to the side enough to be missed—“if we were to position men here, well hidden in the woods and took every measure for secrecy, we might remain hidden as the enemy attacks our front lines. Just as the battle commences then, a messenger pigeon could be sent and the detachment creep in close behind the usurper’s men. When our opponents divide and circle round to our rear, another pigeon could be sent with a message and then they would spring the ambush.”

John knelt down and pointed his finger on their defensive line marked on the ground. “That might well work, but perhaps it is the usurper’s *own* men that attack the rear. What then?”

The earl thought for some time. Then he slashed out his whole diagram with a stroke of his stick. “If they take the western route, then the ambush need only march a little further and they could circle round them. If they attack from the east, then—well, then let them attack from the east! Perhaps the ambush might still arrive in time, though it would be when the defenses are nearly overrun.” He began pacing back and forth again. He came to a stop before Trevor and pointed his finger at him. “This demands more thought, though I have yet to see a better solution. If this is to be our plan, art thou willing to stake thy life on it?”

Trevor blinked several times, then he passed his hand over his brow, bowed his head, and said quietly, “Yes, but...why? How?”

“How? Thou and Oldcastle will command our defensive line. Those who are set in ambush will be the five thousand I command. Why? Because thou art from times far after ours. The men will revere thee for it. Do not let them think that they may be defeated.”

Trevor wiped the sweat from his brow as he bounced in his saddle and wondered how those digging ditches could survive the heat. “How much farther till the lines?” he asked. The sun was at its summit like a proud king looking down on his slaves.

“Just ahead,” John answered. He alone of all the people Trevor knew seemed

unaffected by weather, scorching or bitter cold. Trevor eyed him through slitted eyes and shook his head. At last, they entered the trees and the temperature grew more bearable. The moisture in the air, however, tugged down on his garments, placing a heavy weight on his shoulders. He grabbed his outer coat at the chest and pulled it in and out to let some air come through, but it didn't help. If he wiped his sweaty hands on his sides occasionally, he wasn't to be blamed for it. The closer he came to his new troops, the more his heart pounded.

He swallowed a bitter taste when he caught sight of the soldiers working ahead and bent over like one exhausted from labor. His breathing thrummed heavy and irregular in his ears. When he raised his head, he pulled back his shoulders and affected an aloof, observational demeanor.

Bareheaded men in bedraggled states scrambled up from the mud pits of their labors and grinned as he and John approached. "Good morning," many said and a few tried fruitlessly to neaten themselves. Trevor gripped his reins harder and tried to mutter a few words in response, but they didn't come out.

Looking behind him where no eyes were on him, Trevor imagined the ranks of gunmen that would come charging through the woods before many days had passed.

"Trevor is to be a new commander over thee," John began, his voice like a trumpet. "He answers only to me and the Earl of Northumberland. If ye have never yet seen him, he is before thee now."

There was a murmur of many voices and short comments. Trevor turned back from imagining the carnage in the woods behind him. He stared at his troops. It seemed to him that the men would stand before any storm. Either that or their universal death would inspire songs that would be passed down in secret from generation to generation. He was sure they would not be forgotten. The murmur of their voices was pleasant to him.

John was saying something, but Trevor didn't register it. He rode forward. He had his eyes fixed on the warriors. Some were young and some were old. Their eyes as a rule shone clear. Not in the wild laughing way of the earl, nor the cold assured way of John, nor even the pure glittering way Tristan's had. They were earthy gazes. And the men were rough, yet they listened like the perfect pupils. Faces counted for something, Trevor thought.

He spoke, for the first time in his life confident in speaking to others. He realized with surprise, though at the same time it seemed natural, that everyone was listening to him. "I won't hide from you why I was appointed your commander," he said. "The earl wanted me to inspire you by the fact I came from the future. I was to be a sort of wonder, or superstition, or something. But in my time, at least among those I knew, we weren't likely to do this type of thing. I mean, we were willing enough to see injustice and get angry over it, but we weren't...I don't know. I guess, maybe we're all just a bunch of morons and maybe everything we're doing is wrong, but something about it is right. Something somewhere is right and I have one thing to say. If all of you die and I'm the only one who is left alive, I know what I'll be doing. I'll try again. Maybe I'll butt my head up against a wall and never find what I'm looking for, but I'm going to keep on trying, and the bruises on my head will have to be a good enough crown."

The men cheered.

## Chapter 26

### The Candle is Extinguished

"Wait!"

The sword stopped inches above Kayce's head and her assailant stepped back and snapped to attention.

Kayce slowly lowered her arms from before her face and listened to the voice floating through the air that had saved her from the sword. "What is this?" asked the manly voice. It was weary, but aroused like a wounded lion that, even as it lies in its death throes, snaps at the dogs and chases them off. Around her, everyone stood to attention. Kayce, slowly daring to raise her head, turned and looked.

There was a figure such as she had never seen the likes of. He was clad in rich apparel and flowing robes which he wore with a perfect grace and ease—perhaps too much ease, as if he were disenchanted with all, even himself. His

nose was plain—his whole face ordinary, but nonetheless something about him made her feel like she knew him. It was his eyes. They seemed to have two layers: the first dull and the one behind it sharp. If he had called her by name, she would not have been shocked.

He advanced toward her with inexorable plodding steps. She discovered when he was only a few feet away that she had noticed nothing else, not even sounds, as he approached. He stopped and looked her over with a deliberate but unassuming gaze. “Why have these fine courtiers beset thee, child?” His voice was gentle, but one could not say soothing. He rubbed the fingers of his right hand together and looked down at them for entertainment.

Kayce felt her feet rooted to the ground and realized several moments later that she was supposed to make a reply. She fell to her knees and she felt all the blood rush to her head and her throat swell. She wanted to kiss the king’s feet. “Sovereign, your majesty, I—that is, the English—the faithful English—good ones you would love—they *need* you. John Oldcastle, the knight—he’s the only one who stands against the scientist (the sorcerer some call him)—is now in Northumberland and will be attacked.” She dared to raise her head. “Your majesty, he hasn’t more than seven thousand men and he will be attacked by far greater number with weapons you can’t imagine. And”—she breathed for once—“...I beg your help.”

She held her mouth open as if she would speak endless more, but no words came out.

The king continued to gaze down at his fingers. He rubbed them together for a long time. Or perhaps it was not a long time. Time was a hard thing to grasp at the moment. “So,” he said at last, “hath thy great nation been reduced to sending young maidens for their messengers?”

Kayce felt her cheeks flush, started to speak, and then clamped her mouth shut. She bowed her head. “No, I haven’t been sent. I just came.”

“Then mayhap thy message is faulty.”

“No!” she jerked her head up. “I swear. Hasn’t anyone told you what’s been happening in England?”

The king looked up for the first time and gazed at her steadily in the eye. His lips twisted into a bitter expression and he sighed. “Thou art brave, but foolish,

daughter." He held her gaze for a few moments, then looked about him. "Leave," he said sharply. "All of ye." A rustle disturbed the air like a passing breeze, then everyone left and there was an intense stillness.

Kayce watched as the king began to pace about as if leisurely inspecting a garden. "Prithee, rise," he said, signaling with his hand. "It is some consolation to me in these days to see England bowing at my feet, but I shall not keep thee there forever."

Kayce rose, twisting one finger around another.

"Tell me," he said, turning in a slow arc in her direction, "for I am curious, art thou from across the seas, or truly so ignorant of the ally thou seekest?"

Kayce rose impetuously on her toes and stammered. "N-no. I'm from the future."

The flame of royalty burst forth in the face of the king and he took an impulsive step toward her. "I shall have no mockery from thee, daughter. Speak the truth, or I shall have thee beaten."

"What?" Kayce felt very hot and wanted to slap the king. Her arms shook at her sides on their own accord. "Don't tell me you didn't hear that noise just now! You got something that could do that? Or...wait, you do have gunpowder, don't you? Well, you've got to believe I'm not a witch at least. A witch!" She guffawed before trailing off into muttered excuses when she saw the king's face.

As suddenly as the king had turned on her before, he turned his back and walked away. He folded his hands behind his back. "Perhaps I should not have saved thee." He came to an abrupt stop. The sun partially silhouetted him and gave him more the appearance of an assassin than anything else. He gazed up at the sky as if reading dark omens there. "Long I have fought against the English crown. Long I have waited for my own crown, and what has it come to at last? Here I am a king, and yet what is my labor? To toil incessantly for a people who will never be satisfied and to guard those few pleasures I can keep from the groping dogs who would take them for themselves. England is such a dog. Didst know what thou asked, maiden, to request my aid for such dogs who lap the blood of my very wounds?"

Kayce nibbled her lip.

"Little thou canst comprehend what thou asketh, or...perhaps thou knowest

all too well." He said the last words in a vengeful tone and his shoulders broadened and his hands clenched out in front of him. He lashed out his right hand toward the south and half turned so that she could see a bit of his face. "Look to the borders of thy country, maiden, and thou shalt see it: blood—pools and pools of the blood of Scots and English intermingled."

"Then maybe it is time for them to be intermingled again," Kayce said, "as brothers."

A laugh came from the king—a thin trailing laugh. "Brothers in only one thing: a doom overshadows us all. One wolf will devour another. England would devour Scotland at any chance. Now they are devoured by one greater than themselves. It is the way of the world that all things should be devoured. Who is secure?"

"No one," Kayce snapped, "so get over your stupid weakness and come do what needs to be done."

The king turned his head ever so slightly as if he would have faced her but thought better of it. His voice lowered. "I could come, but why *should* England prevail? Why in the grand course of things after all? Will not all civilizations someday crumble away till savage beasts again own the land? I shall not stay them. Let England fall and let the forests regrow where she lies and all wild things reinhabit their haunts." He sucked in a violent breath through his teeth and clenched his chest with a fist.

Kayce watched with riveted eyes, numb to all the rest of the world. The king stretched his arms wide as if seeing in a vision before him a realm of primeval monsters and he let out a cry of anguish. "No," he shouted, "I shall not come to England's aid. Why does she come like a leech to suck the last blood of a dying man? Let her suffer all the terrors of the ill she has wrought on Scotland. God Almighty knows she should suffer!" He turned on Kayce and his eyes were sharper than a falcon's and all the features of his face were taut enough to snap. "What spell art thou trying to weave over me? Thou art a sorceress and I shall have thee in irons!"

In the oppressive darkness of midnight, Robert III of Scotland paced in a solitary room of his castle, quiet, with the air of one who has not even thought of

sleep. He was alone, save for the shadows cast by the few candles in the room upon the cold stone walls. When he became restless and moved in bursts, he sent a breeze over the candles, bringing turmoil to the shadows as lawless as the primeval sea.

With a quick dart, he brought himself leaning against the single table in the room. Awe-filled and still as stone, he stared down as one hypnotized. The three candles on the table highlighted out the sharp contrasts of his face. One might have thought by his reverential stillness that he was looking down at a newborn infant, or else by the tautness of his features that he beheld a Pandora's box full of limitless demons. It was, in fact, his sword.

Long his lips moved, but no words came out. He looked like one praying before a relic. Perhaps he was.

When he was done, he took the sword and held it at a distance as if not yet sure whether it was a tool for good or for evil. "Oh, Bruce," he whispered, "where gone are thy glorious days? Where now the times when Scottish kings rode forth their forces victorious into battle? ...Yet 'twas not for England that they spilled their blood in those times." He clenched his sword tighter till his knuckles turned pasty white. Suddenly, he dropped it from his hands as if a snake had bit him. He recoiled back, leaning against the wall and covered his face with his arms. "Verily, I am the least of all kings."

The flames of the candles flickered brilliantly for a moment and then dimmed as if they had hushed themselves to listen. Robert edged from the wall and walked wearily over to his sword and picked it back up again. He held it in a loose position and squinted in confusion at the empty space before him. One would have thought he was trying to discern an enemy well hidden in the darkness.

"War..." he whispered, "what an absurdity. Can Scotland sustain another war? And Parliament, what would they think? My brother—would he were never born! ...He would have much to say against it. The wise fools! They know how to sustain themselves. I..." He squeezed his eyes shut as if trying to relieve a sharp pain in his head.

He laughed. "Go to France, daughter. Perhaps they will forget the long years of bloodshed brought on them by the English. Ask of Ireland succor. Go to the

Orient! Anywhere but here!"

He let his sword hang to the ground and its point trailed across the floor as he began to walk in vague circles. "But as for myself, this is not a question of a mere foolish request from a girl, but it leads to something greater. How shall I mend this reign that is so torn and tattered?"

The light of the candles caught his eyes. He stood frozen as if a revelation too awful for him had been revealed.

He had not received any revelation though. He had merely gone beyond the point of contemplation to that realm where all is aimless wandering and the world takes on elusive shapes and cannot be understood. In a flash, all becomes something beyond itself, as if from a fairy tale world, but more undeniably real than what the eye sees. All Robert could think about was the candles. Not in a direct way, but as if he were walking round and round them in his mind. It felt as if waves washed over him, and he blinked his eyes to keep them from sleep.

It was as if, after a moment, the candles had almost entered his mind. Their light was like a warm blanket, but mysterious as if he was gazing at a creature from another world. *Light*, he thought to himself. *Light*. He walked forward toward the candles.

Placing his sword on the table just as it had been before, he stared at the candles in much the same posture he had when he first came for his sword. What he noticed this time was how the candles were decreased in size from when he had first lit them. "The flame consumes the candle," he muttered. "It devours the source that nourishes it." He rubbed his chin, then nodded slowly to himself and rose.

"It is settled then. What dying man can lend of his strength? The cost of light is too much to pay." He walked with his sword over to its scabbard and slammed it in. Then, in repulsion of it, he cast it aside.

He returned back to the three candles and bent over them as if over an infant child. With three gentle gusts, he extinguished their flames. "Live long, my candles," he said. "Let no one devour thee." He turned and headed for the door.

## Chapter 27

## The Duty of Kings

Trevor was stuck in a hole. He was stuck by the fact that he had nowhere else to go, but whenever the scientist arrived and warfare broke out, he would be truly stuck.

He sized up the youth huddled in the hole with him and decided that his wavy, dusty-brown hair and quiet eyes were none too frightening. Placing his gun off to the side and coughing lightly, he asked, "You a farmer or something?"

The young man wiped the hair from his eyes, smearing mud on his brow as he did so. He had a round freckled face and seemed of the type who are always amicable, but rarely excited (unless, perhaps by music). "Aye, father plows two-score acres," he said. He fingered the messenger pigeon cage he carried with the care of a fine craftsman, humming some low tune.

Trevor leaned back and rested his hands casually around the ledge of the pit. The sky was a light grey and the trees perfectly still. "You do anything in your free time—I mean, once you're done with farm things."

The young man looked up and a slow smile spread across his face. "Yea, I do love to play the pipe."

Trevor started up with a small smile. "I had an uncle that liked to smoke a pipe," he volunteered. Seeing his companion's face, he made a belly laugh that eventually trailed off, leaving the air more lacking than it had been before. "You don't play cricket, I suppose?"

"Nay. I know not what that be. We wrestle oft though."

Trevor nodded. "Good thing to do. Everybody needs a bloody nose now and then."

A horn blast sent forest birds flying.

Trevor started from his position then scrambled out of the hole. "Looks like I might be in turn for a bloody nose myself. Maybe a bloody forehead and chest too." He raised a horn to his lips and gave a blast in reply, raising the forest to a racket.

Others began clambering out of their holes nearby and gathering toward him. More horn blasts came, this time much nearer and Trevor returned the reply.

After a minute, a horseman burst into view, riding through the trees like a gust of wind, his coat rippling. He drew up suddenly before Trevor and saluted.

“Captain,”—he clutched his chest and leaned over with winded breath—“the wizard’s army has been spotted.”

Trevor swung his horn over his shoulder, scowling. “How far away?”

The messenger snatched another breath and sat back up. “Two leagues, sir.”

Men murmured and clutched their weapons or rasped them against their shields. One or two shouted challenges to their distant enemy.

“How many?” Trevor calculated the preparedness of his forces

“Not easy to say sir, but it might have been twenty thousand, and well nigh a quarter in uniforms.”

“Very well.” Trevor clenched his jaw. “Thank you for the information.” He nodded, then headed back to his foxhole as the others huddled together and exchanged short whispers, waiting for him to give instructions—a thing he never thought of doing.

“You didn’t come to hear the news?” Trevor asked his pigeon keeper companion as he climbed back into his hole.

His companion appeared not to notice this comment and stared at the sky like a connoisseur studying a master painting. “Sir,” he said quietly, “I feel a storm in the air. It will be here soon.”

“Ah, the beautiful one. Here he comes.” This statement was finished with something between a whimper and a snarl.

It was the first time Richard II had heard his companion speak well of another human. He looked up from his dreams of blood, darkened skies, and shattered crowns and tried to spot the man. As his sight was blurry from dreaming, he did not at first see anything other than distant soldiers and the grass and trees all around them. Then, as his vision cleared, he was at a loss as to who his companion meant, not because there was no one nearby, but because he defied the term beautiful.

“’Tis some good omen for thee, that visits thee,” rasped his companion—the same who had called himself a king in Richard’s chamber. He laughed with all the

relish of a simpleton and the twistedness of a schemer.

Now Richard saw who was spoken of and he experienced a feeling like melted ice running down his back, burning his skin with its coolness. He wiped his forehead. For the first time, it struck him how similar the two were, the alchemist and the king of the scum—that was the title he had given his companion. The two men nearly seemed twins.

Richard pushed the thick clouds off his mind with a wince and rose with unstable feet. His eyes were on the approaching alchemist but he spoke to the king of the scum in slow, dragging words. “Thou art no king if thou bowest to such as he.”

He heard a sound between the snap of a ferocious dog and a squeal and then he collided with the ground and looked up to see his companion glaring down at him. “*Thou art no king! 'Tis thou. One day I shall be greater than all. I will not remain so forever.*” The king of the scum spat in his face. Richard began to shield himself from a second assault, but then a brilliant white figure lifted the king of the scum from the ground by the collar. He hung like a fly in a spider’s trap, then the alchemist flung him aside. He landed with a powerful thud, groaned, and then groveled, whining like a beggar before mighty Zeus with his thunderbolts.

An ache pressed on Richard’s temples as he stared into the face of the alchemist. He had a strong urge to back away, but still he remained motionless. “Rise,” said the alchemist with icy grandness. His face was expressionless and sharp, like a stone that had been crudely chiseled, and that much too deeply. His brows were contracted and the grey lighting gave his face a harsh silvery appearance. He reached down his hand, saying, “I have work for you.”

Richard yanked his own hand away and heaved himself up. He took a step back, and for a moment, there was silence. It was the king of the scum who spoke first. “Richard is an idle cur, my lord. Crush him. Crush him so that he may learn to labor.” He cast Richard a glance and snapped his jaws.

The alchemist nodded and still he and Richard looked each other in the eye. “You must do all that I tell you.”

Richard said nothing. He felt a warm sweat all over his body and an ache in the muscles around his jaw.

“I have no desire to slay every last rebel that takes arms against me,” said the

alchemist. If only they are leaderless, they are no threat to me. I want you to convince these rebels to lay down their arms. Perhaps they will heed your voice, for they have thought you dead. If they do not heed you...there will be torture."

Richard was studying the alchemist and the king of the scum. The similarities between them were remarkable, only the alchemist's hair was less ragged and more silvery, his jaw less round and sneering and more lordly, and his eyes less animal like and more like white flames. Richard vaguely registered the word "torture", but it meant nothing to him. Though the king of the scum had described it often enough, it seemed like no instrument of torture could touch him. At least not where it mattered. He gave a mechanical nod and felt empty inside. Then he wondered why he had nodded and could not answer himself.

He became aware of a great need to understand his existence and searched for answers. The need pressed on him like a physical craving. Questions flooded through his mind that he could not answer until he began to wish they would go away. In the midst of his confusion, he strangely began to feel invincible as if he were a demigod. He sneered and growled. "And who shall be my guard, most excellent ruler?"

The king of the scum rose to his feet and it seemed that this was the alchemist's unspoken answer, as if the alchemist had commanded it to happen. The alchemist also added, "Thirty watchers shall accompany you."

Richard looked grimly at the forests before them where the rebels lurked. "Saddle a horse for me."

"No, you shall walk on foot."

He nodded. "So be it."

Time was as a ghost to Richard until he found himself at the head of a procession of thirty watchers following behind him like the fringes of a royal robe stained black. He left behind the camp of the alchemist's army and entered the ancient forest. Time was a ghost to him in that it was stripped of its robes. It was a falsehood that shunned even its own self and the rest of the world also. The world was a ghost. When Richard looked at the skies, they were the color of bones.

He had to catch his balance as the king of the scum collided into his shoulder. "Bah! A plague on thee!" yelled the tramp. "Watch where ye stop to stare at the sky." The king of the scum gave Richard an extra shove. Looking

upward himself, he stretched out his hands and sucked in the air so deeply it hissed through his teeth. He devoured it with the haste of one who snatches coins from the ground before any other can share in the spoils.

The air was still. The still before the storm. It was dark and all the colors were accented.

“’Twas on such a day,” whispered the king of the scum, pointing Richard to the skies. “I remember it well. That day I betrayed all my loyal followers and turned them over to be hanged. ’Twas a glorious day such as this. Then I knew beneath the deepest depths of my heart that I was a king, for I did all that pleased me, and lo! Who has stood in my way? Perhaps—perhaps that day may come again.”

Richard felt the slightest breeze that told of the coming storm. He walked ahead.

“Thou, of course, shalt be a slave,” spat the king of the scum. “’Tis thy way. But mayhap thou’lt evade dishonor. There is ever hope for one who has royal blood in his veins.” He laughed with the hungry screech of a carrion fowl. “But royal blood may be spilled like any other. Remember well the word of thy lord! Remember!”

“I need not torture,” muttered Richard with childish simplicity. “How should I even feel it?”

“Thou wouldst feel it,” answered the other, peering at him with a cocked eyebrow and a hesitant frown.

“Would I? Yea, I think I already do,” answered Richard.

“Bah! Thou art weak!” The king of the scum raised his voice in both pitch and volume. He placed some distance between himself and Richard, then muttered to himself, “At least thou knowest somewhat of kingship. Thou’lt see this through for honor. None shall say of thee that thou feared to manifest who thou wert. *Never!* Cowering is a *sin*. Let the wolf with fangs boast in them. Boast!”

The king made no reply. His lips were tightly pursed and his head bowed. Both his hands were clenched into fists.

They entered into a denser part of the woods and the leaves were a thick canopy to hide them. It gave Richard the feeling that whatever he did, no one would see him. No one would ever know what he did there. The watchers and his

tramp of a companion would know, but they mattered not at all. The watchers were base and scum. His companion was the king of the scum. Richard pulled his hood over his head so that it half covered his face.

An arrow whizzed overhead and instantly, ten bowmen leaped from behind trees, bows partially drawn. After them came twelve spearmen from seemingly nowhere. "Halt!" they called.

"Dogs!" cried the king of the scum, waving a small white flag. "We come in peace, though ye merit naught but death."

Most of the archers lowered their bows and the spearmen stopped behind them. The foremost archer spoke. "If ye seek a conference, then seat thyself. We shall name this the place of meeting. Ye, be patient, and wait for our leaders."

As they complied, the king of the scum scooted so close to Richard that Richard leaned away to avoid the foul smell of the tramp's breath.

"I should dearly like to see Sir Oldcastle bow before thee," hissed the king of the scum. "I should almost kiss him for his humility. Keep up thy spirit, Richard. Glory shines brightest where there is the most blood. Some, surely, will still bow before thee. How I envy thee!" His face was ravenous and despairing. "Never did any man bow the knee in my presence. I must find some imp when all has been done here and club him till he bows the knee and clings to my ankles for mercy. Ah!"—tears came into his eyes—"I am no king. How I have lied to myself and poured vinegar on my festering wounds by saying to myself that I was a king. What king is there to whom no one will bow? There is none."

Unmoved as an ancient pillar by the tides of a tiny puddle, Richard fixed his eyes on a vulture soaring overhead. He could only see glimpses of it through the trees, but it seemed to be circling above him.

"The vulture?" asked the king of the scum, looking up and quirking a brow. "He waits for the flesh of Sir Oldcastle."

"I wonder," responded Richard dreamily, but he did not say what he wondered about.

In a minute, a youth came scampering through the woods and stopped at the line of bowmen, putting his hands on his sides. "What's up?" he asked. "Who's this?"

"A delegation, sir," answered one of the bowmen.

The youth snorted. "So I've heard." Richard noticed that the youth focused entirely on him, though it was the king of the scum who bore the flag of truce. Richard bent his head lower to conceal his face.

A minute later, a horseman rode up and dismounted. He walked, Richard noticed, like a lifetime soldier. There was absolute assurance in his every step, but he was not quick or hasty. The archers and spearmen parted without command and he passed through to join the youth.

The king of the scum rose and pointed the white flag at the soldier like a spear. "Oldcastle, I perceive, but who is this youth?"

"One greater than thyself," said Oldcastle, batting the white cloth aside. "But let me ask the questions. I ask nothing of thee, but who is thy companion?"

The king of the scum yanked his flag back and hugged it to himself, sneering. "Nay, if thou'lt not answer me, then neither will I thou!"

"Peace!" thundered a voice and everyone jumped, then fixed their eyes on the man. Richard rose like a giant stretching his legs and slowly, ever so slowly, pulled back his hood. Out flowed short rich locks. His face was as clean as a woman's, a fact accented by the inferno of red on his cheeks, and though his eyes had the appearance of marble for the most part, there was also some of the inferno there.

He took three steps forward and snatched the white flag from the hands of the king of the scum. "Thou treatest this emblem of peace as a sword or spear of combat. I shall bear it for thee." He turned on John and seemed to grow in height so that he stood beyond doubt the taller of the two. "Who am I?"

For some time, John stared intently as one who has been told some terrible news he does not quite understand. Then he swayed ever so slightly and his face tightened. Then he flung himself on his knees. "My liege. My liege."

"Aye," said Richard dully, looking away. "It is I."

John raised his head. "Why hast thou hidden so long from thy loyal followers?"

"Perhaps because I could not do otherwise for threats." Richard's words were thick and choppy.

A slight noise came from among the watchers.

John felt a hand on his shoulder and Trevor whispered, "That guy a king?"

As if in response, all the bowmen and spearmen fell on their knees. Trevor's hand fell from John's shoulder.

John focused on a piece of ground. "It is thy captors that we fight and would free thee from. We did not know that thou yet lived, but give us thy blessing, and every man shall fight with thrice the valor."

"Some are bravest who do not fight at all," said the king. His voice dry as a dead leaf. The winds began to blow in steady gusts and a stray drop fell on John's face. The brilliant grey lighting of the skies gave every detail an intense vividness, especially Richard's eyes. They were fiery, like the rage of a trapped animal.

"It is an honor," said Richard, "for a man to put away his sword when it will only bring hurt and no good." Richard now seemed shorter than he had been before and weighted down like the clouds above. "So now I say to thee my"—he closed his eyes for a moment and seemed to grope for words as faint sounds came from his mouth—"faithful servant"—he paused—"return to thine own hearths. There is naught before thee. Naught but *death*." This last word he said with ghostly drama and blinked awkwardly afterward.

Trevor grumbled something aside, but John rose. He wiped a hand slowly down his face and gazed into his lord's eyes. "A subject is loyal even unto death."

"And a king also," said Richard, nodding his head, "for I am indeed a king." He looked down magnificently at the king of the scum. As the wind blew across his face, he seemed sterner than he had ever been. He turned back to Oldcastle. "Come, wilt thou deny my authority? I order thee, Oldcastle, to put away thine arms. Why has England become a field of blood?"

"Not by thy will or mine," answered John. He nodded, but when the king still waited, he answered, "Between two duties, one must choose carefully. And so"—he backed up five steps and began to turn—"I shall ask thy leave before I make my answer." He motioned to the archers and spearmen and walked away.

Trevor remained only a few seconds to stare at Richard, then he ran after John. As for Richard, he turned his back and looked at no one.

Deep in the solitude of the woods where there were no eyes or ears, Trevor and John held a meeting. "What was that?" Trevor blurted. "Did you just bow to someone who told you to flee like a coward?"

John turned as one who absently parries a weak dagger thrust as he still

keeps his eyes on the main opponent. "Not like a coward." He glared at Trevor, then turned his gaze elsewhere. "He has given thought to this matter—what the outcome of our struggle must be. He begs us to consider the good of our country... What is the good of our country?"

"Probably to throw a grenade at that king and get this battle started."

John made a sound between a grumble and a snort. "Ever thou art thinking of bloodshed. It is our duty, nonetheless, to think of those under us. If we bring on this battle, what shall we gain? Thousands dead. Widows as thick in the country as grass and children fatherless. Farms untended. Starvation. Then the years of oppression as every last resister is rooted out of the country and the peaceful rooted out with him."

Trevor folded his arms, looked left, looked right, then looked up at the sky. "Surely, you're not thinking of this *for the first time* right now."

John's voice lowered, seeming to become one with the gust of breeze that blew past at the moment. "Nay, and that is why it troubles me. This is not the first time I have thought of it. Ah, no..." He gazed straight at Trevor, deep lines forming around his eyes. The first bolt of lightning appeared off in the distance. Then another one. Both Trevor and John looked at it. They seemed unaware of each other's presence for a while, but then John said, "What is defeat compared to dishonor? How could I condemn so many thousands to darkness?"

"The Earl of Northumberland would curse you if you left him."

"Let him curse into the air!" John laughed. "He will never gain his crown whatever happens." John dragged his hand across his brow and then practically yanked it away. His hand rested around the hilt of his sword. "But I have not yet decided. Let none say I am rash, or worse yet, cowardly!" He drew his sword and slashed at a tree, then he turned and faced another one. Drops began to pour. They gathered on his deeply cloven brow like a sheet of sweat. Slowly he advanced, the point of his sword directed before him.

Instead of thrusting at the second tree, he ran forward toward it and slammed the sword's flat part against the bark, holding his sword at both ends and burying his face against the tree. His hands curled around the sword. Gradually, the sword slipped down and John backed away from the tree. He turned around.

Trevor waited. John had a look of calm on him. He sheathed his sword and

began to advance. "Give me some reason to draw my sword again. Give me some reason to die. For glory, for duty, or for hope. Anything, but give me one reason other than thy tempestuous whims." He stood a pace from Trevor and rain dripped down from his hair and beard.

Trevor took some time swallowing and then he leveled his shoulders. "All right," he said, breathing hard. "All right." He lifted his chin. "I think I have a reason." His chest heaved and, though he spoke deliberately, his voice was breathless as if he spoke too fast. "I admit I'm not a very sensitive person. It's never troubled me a whole lot how much death this battle could cause. It's just a fact, but there's other more important facts.

"Because what are we asking for if we don't fight? Oh, yeah, the future will be glorious, of course. It will be great. The healthy men who survive this day will become the world's greatest soldiers. The women too, of course, and any children that can be spared. They'll go across the channel and win Europe for the scientist. And, of course, why stop there? You know that one country would be a threat. So everyone will be a citizen of the great society and England will be the richest land of all. Everyone will eat well. Probably sleep poorly too. They'll grow the largest crops and the most will be taken from them. And then maybe some will lose the will to work, and then there will be the starvation and the years of oppression when the resisters will be harried out of the land. There will be more resisters than now, but they won't have much of a chance.

"So the point is, maybe we will fail, but I can't help but think that maybe some sort of seed will be planted here"—he paused, realizing he had just used a farming analogy—"or maybe we could be like a good virus. We'll infect the world and—"

"Why?" asked John. "Why should our sacrifice be for good? Have not bad men sacrificed themselves before?"

Trevor stumbled over an attempt at words, then scratched his head. "Well, you're good," he said, "and you're the leader."

John gave a hearty laugh and shook his head. "No, I am not. In time, you will understand this better, but till then thou hast renewed my courage. There is something in what you say and I thank thee for it."

The rain began to obscure both the men's sight by its violence. They didn't

notice it particularly.

John took Trevor's hand and they exchanged a hearty shake.

Richard trudged through a fast-flowing rivulet as the pouring rains drenched his skin. He was hardly cold though. His skin burned like fire.

The king of the scum drudged on behind him, muttering insults about Oldcastle. Richard remembered an old conversation with his uncle. *"Between us two, my uncle, I would rather esteem the English heroics. Are not the glories of Rome exaggerated by idle minds while none appreciate the works of our own days?"* John of Gaunt turned to him. *"Ah! Pardon, my lord, I was listening to some thunder afar off. What didst thou ask?"*

Richard's foot caught in the mud and he yanked it out. In his mind, he saw England and Rome embroiled on a vast field with swaying grasses and still more swaying odds where the valor of single men for a time turned the tide of the battle. Almost, he imagined, it was the same battle that was about to begin. He clenched his fist as if holding a sword.

"Thy arguments were impotent and foolish," said the king of the scum. "I vow, I shall relish any torture that is given to thee. Much dost thou deserve it."

"Aye, that I do," said Richard, concentrating on freeing himself once again from a puddle of mud.

The king of the scum came to a sudden halt and stared blankly at Richard who trudged on. Then, grinning like a scientist inventing some unnatural monster, the king of the scum stepped forward and jabbed Richard in the back with a finger.

Slowly, Richard turned round. There was a look of flint in his eyes. He twitched his mouth in a lazy, only half committed scowl, as if he did not even find disapproval worth his effort. "Thou art the king of the scum. Go rule thy kingdom." He seized the tramp beneath the shoulders and, with strength fitting for a titan, he threw him like a sack of chaff head first into a puddle of mud.

Instantly, hands grabbed his arms and pulled them back. His face stung with the smack of a watcher's hand.

Richard struck out with his feet and head. "Wouldst thou dare touch a king!"

Hands covered his eyes and he was thrown to the ground. The watchers yelled to one another, but loudest of all was the king of the scum. He was standing

over Richard and practically dancing in his frenzy. “Bind him! Bind him up! The murderer! The traitor! Where are the shackles?”

“His Allpowerfullness would wish it,” agreed one of the watchers, coolly.

Now Richard was shoved to his feet, but so many arms were grabbing him that he could move little more than his eyes. He saw one watcher coming toward him and in his hands were two sets of manacles.

Richard strained to tear himself away. “Where have these come from?” he roared.

“They have always been at hand,” said the watcher, “waiting for the sign of thy rebellion.”

An iron—cold and choking as claws of death—was fastened around Richard’s neck with a long chain hanging from it. Then irons were clamped around his wrists and the King of England looked like a beggar brought forward to be punished for stealing a loaf of bread.

“I am a king,” Richard wept. He roared and held aloft his chains above his head. “I am a king!”

## Chapter 28

### No Turning Back

It was a diabolical storm that raged above them, broiling in the skies with the malice of a witch’s stew, lightning flashing in the heavens and their thunders dwarfed by the bombs that went off every minute. Rain drove down into their faces and Trevor and all the defenders were stuck in swamped holes or the cramped branches of trees.

They were waiting.

Trevor crashed against the side of his foxhole as a blast rent the very earth. “Great Scott! They’ll get us next.” He kept repeating that to himself and shivering occasionally in his waterlogged hole.

To his left, the forest opened in a circular blast where flames licked the fallen trees as long as they could last in the rain. “That’s gotta be fifty men dead,” Trevor

muttered. "Lucky the bomber can't see our positions through the leaf cover." Just then there was another explosion, this time close behind. Trevor fingered a grenade and scowled at the sky. "They can't keep doing this to us forever, can they? Would someone please punch a hole in that abominable plane engine? It sounds like a buzzing fly."

A bullet smacked into the earth mound right in front of him and he ducked his head, crouching like a hobo under a bridge and facing his quiet companion. "Would they go ahead and charge already? I don't call this a battle. It's a mockery of one."

The pigeon keeper reclined with a dreamy philosophical look. "I care not. They can wait."

Just then, there was a cry like every star falling or every mountain calling to another. It was like a thousand lions roaring and all the ill-treated of a country crying out together in their wrath against injustice.

Trevor scrambled to pick up one of his grenades and the lacrosse-stick-like implement he used as a novice's version of a sling. "That would be their battle cry." He peeked just enough of his head above ground to see the forest with one eye. There were faint black swarms in the woods like waves of a dark sea. Trevor couldn't hear anything because he was hearing everything. Nothing was distinct. ...Except for the screams. There were plenty of screams.

Bows twanged from the trees and then the black waves of soldiers roiled in confusion. "Will the soldiers fall back?" Trevor asked himself. He dug his free hand into the soil. Pulling back, he lit his grenade with muttered blessings for the death of many victims, put it in his sling, then flung it with all his might.

The black wave had met a dike. It did not retreat, but it receded for a moment, searching the trees for the hidden archers and shooting blindly for them. "Our only chance," Trevor breathed, his throat aching and blood rushing to his head.

He put his horn to his lips and blew as if he were belting the climax of a heart wrenching solo. He blew again. And again. Up rose his soldiers in a long line on either side of him and other horns sounded in reply. Now was the time for death and glory, or perhaps just a childish little gambit among the great wheels that spun the machine of a coming new age.

A lesser roar came from the defenders as they charged, but deeper and richer than that of their enemies. Trevor raced to the front, sprinting as if there were prize money involved. He slung one grenade, then another. He met one of the dark soldiers and tackled him. They rolled in a suffocating clutch. Somehow, in the tangle, he ended up with the gun. He shot his opponent dead.

Up he rose as a hundred figures swarmed around him. The soldiers of darkness and soldiers of the forest grappled hand to hand or blew each other to bits with the recklessness of toddlers playing a game with no rules. Trevor shot down three opponents, then nabbed as many cartridges as he could manage and made a break for it, covering his retreat with random pop shots.

Diving, he landed in his foxhole and looked around to see if any others had made it. There were many, but he did not smile. He took a deep breath and braced himself for more.

“Does that mean hope?” asked the pigeon keeper.

Trevor looked up. “As long as the rest of our strategy works out. We’re better armed now.”

The pigeon keeper nodded and opened his mouth to speak but shouting from the left cut him off. Trevor rose to his feet with an oath. “They’re storming that bombed section.” He grabbed his new gun and got ready to charge, but cooled down and instead drew out his horn. Blowing a short tune, he placed it down and began sniping.

Suddenly, out of the forest came horsemen of Trevor’s command, and the crater entered a realm of chaos beyond what any bomb could perform. In half a minute, the horsemen had cleared the area of the enemy. Swift as they had come, they departed on the order of another call.

Trevor plucked a leaf from the ground, stripped it down to its stem, and began chewing absently on it. “This won’t hold up,” he said, his teeth still clamped on the leaf stem. “We can’t have nice pathways for them to waltz up through like this is a coronation ceremony or something.”

Feeling an arm tug his shoulder, Trevor wheeled about. “Watcha want?” He spat out the leaf stem as he saw a messenger on his belly before him. “News, is it?”

“Yes, sir,” the messenger responded, covering his head with his hands and

squeezing himself tight against the ground. "The enemy hath made no flanking maneuver thus far."

Trevor picked up another leaf, put its stem in his mouth, and spat it out emphatically. "Don't they have any common sense? Get out of here and report to me when they do. It can't be more than a few minutes before they begin their march. There must just be some delay."

"Yes, sir." The messenger wormed away at a speed fit to race a snake.

Trevor was just about to tell the pigeon keeper to shut up under some instinct that the command would be needed when he realized his companion was respectfully silent. Feeling that he still had to say something, he supplemented with, "Hey, what have you been thinking about? You've been acting like this is all some dream to you."

Now the tide of war was advancing again and gunfire whizzed through the air. The pigeon keeper blinked and smiled faintly. "Many things, but mainly of my sickness. I was once caught out in storm like this and I fell sick for months."

"It's not so bad out here," said Trevor, turning around with clenched teeth and shooting down two soldiers.

"Aye, but it was autumn then, and cold. Also, I have ever been weak in health."

"What did you do?" Trevor had to duck as an enemy soldier spotted him and sent bullet fire racing past where his head had been. He squatted, but didn't face his companion.

His fellow whispered softly to his pigeons to calm them. Then, almost as a continuation of his comforting whispers, he said, "My mother cared for me, sir. She tended me back to health. That was how she was in all things."

Now Trevor did turn around. He lowered his gun without seeming to notice it and stared at the pigeon keeper like one who has a confession to make or is deeply hurt. He bit his lip, then leapt up to spew fire across the forest. He ran out of ammo and exchanged his clip. "Tell me about something else. Do you have a girlfriend or something?"

There was a long pause. "Sir?"

"Er, a...betroted...whatever you call it."

For the first time, it seemed that the pigeon keeper was not wandering in

another world, but fully present. "Aye, sir. You would like her very much."

Trevor guffawed, and what was more, he thought others should laugh too. Even his enemies, if they had a moment to spare for it. "Would I?" He continued to fire and a thin smile appeared on his lips, to all appearances as if he were sharing an inside joke with an imaginary third party.

Someone stumbled into his foxhole and he wheeled around with his barrel leveled. "Who's that?"

It was only a subordinate of his. The man rose from the mud pool at the bottom of the hole and wiped the hair from his face. He was wild in appearance and more wild in expression. "Sir, how much longer must we hold this line? We shall all be slain within the hour if they do not relent! I am not the only one who says so."

"We *can* hold out longer than an hour and we'd better. Get back to where you belong. They're bound to circle us in a minute and then we'll spring the ambush."

The wild man blanched and backed up against the foxhole wall. "Yes, sir." He crawled over the lip of the hole but then let out a cry and collapsed back in, blood pouring from his head.

Trevor caught the pigeon keeper's glance and he steeled himself. "Shouldn't be more than five minutes. You think you can make it?"

"Aye, if thou canst."

"Whatever you do, keep your head below ground. Just—"

He said no more. Something hit his head like a tremendous backhand. Blood poured from the left side of his head and he slumped forward, black shades surrounding him. He felt only the mud envelop him and he saw clearly in his mind a dark path surrounded by what seemed a blackish-blue water and a spidery-grey mist. The path led ever down, down, down down.

Kayce was there and she was farther down the hole, but she was struggling to return. She could not though because invisible arms drew her away. Still she stretched out her arms to him and screamed, "Turn back! Turn back!" And then the words changed. They said, "Wake up! Wake up! Oh, wilt thou not wake, sir? What shall we do without thee?"

Someone raised him from the mud.

"I'm just diving," Trevor stammered, trying to remember where he was. "Don't worry. It's deep water down there, but there aren't any fish." His thought returned to him. "How long's it been?"

"Oh, thou livest! Thou livest!"

"Yes. Yes, it only grazed me. But how long have I been out?"

"I know not. Thou—"

A battle cry cut Trevor's faithful companion off. It was far too near.

"This is it," Trevor muttered. He snatched his gun, swaying from loss of blood. Then, heedless of his life, he stuck his head above the ground and poured out a rage of fire. As his last bullet left the barrel, he grabbed his last grenade, threw it by hand, not needing to sling it very far, and then ducked.

He had no need to check its effectiveness. He sat waiting and giving his head a quick bandage. He waited some more. There was nothing else to do. He had nothing left to fight with. He looked behind him, hoping a messenger would come saying the enemy had divided to take them from behind. He knew the scientist. He knew he would not waste an opportunity. That was, unless he had no need.

Here came his messenger angel. He was crawling on his belly. Would he nod or would he shake his head? Were they circling around or keeping all their forces for the main assault?

The messenger shook his head.

As if life had ceased to matter to him, Trevor commented out loud that they needed more weapons. He remembered to tell the pigeon keeper to send his message. It read, "The enemy remains together. We receive a full on attack. Come at once." Leaping recklessly out of his cover, Trevor blew the signal and called for the last charge to claim the weaponry they needed to keep fighting. As he did so, a pigeon soared overhead.

This charge was easier than the last one, for they only had to strip the dead, and there were many close by. This charge was harder, for they were ill armed and some not at all. Many fell. None could be spared. Trevor could not expect otherwise. This was what he had to do.

Trevor blew another signal. This was for retreat. All the archers who were left dropped from their trees and everyone from least to greatest fled like scared

ostriches and just as shamefully.

“Come with me,” Trevor said, grabbing the pigeon keeper’s hand and drawing him out of the pit.

“Aye, sir.” Strangely, the youth had a smile on his face, not because of anything that had happened, but despite everything was happening. “Here I come. All the way to the end.”

It was made easy for him, for his end was there.

Trevor stared dumbly at the corpse and it seemed to him that he was descending deeper and deeper into that stormy pit of swirling darkness and he heard the cries like before, only this time saying, “Get out! Get out!”

## Chapter 29

### The Last Stand

Trevor bent his head down and raced at the head of his company with one goal. Distance. To get away. More men fell around him, but the only one he ever thought of was the pigeon keeper. He realized he didn’t even know the fellow’s name.

“There is a slight hill crest up ahead,” said a voice.

*A natural leader, Trevor thought. Well, let him take over. I’m just about done with this thing anyway.*

They veered toward the right, their numbers thickening as they joined with others heading in the same direction. Every once in a while, a brave fellow turned around and lay down a cover fire to keep the enemy at bay. Trevor saw this. He roared to those around him to run on ahead, then turned and faced the path of his flight and waited like a grim statue that guards the border of a country. It seemed that he was alone in his stand. “The leader fellow will keep them in order,” he muttered. “This is the one thing I’m actually good at.”

Seeing a soldier leveling his gun at him, Trevor fell to his knee behind a tree. Some of his hair tore off in the gust of the bullet and he jerked his trigger reactively. The soldier dove for cover, and Trevor finished him off with a careful

shot.

Someone collided into his back and knocked him off balance.

Trevor's face planted in the mud, then he heard the man grunt and a firm hand pulled him up by the shoulder. "So our paths have met," the man said.

Trevor wheeled around. "John, what are you doing here? You're an idiot. One of us needs to stay alive to keep leading."

John made sure he was well covered by the tree and drew his sword close up to his face—the only weapon he bore. He raised an eyebrow. "Little difference it makes one way or the other."

"Well, that's true." Trevor exchanged his clip and rapidly emptied the rounds on oncoming soldiers. "I'm out."

"Canst divert them for me?"

Trevor mocked his tone. "Aye, verily. Guess that's all I'm good for now."

"I will remember the favor."

Trevor rolled his eyes. "If you survive." He leaped out from behind the tree, hurling his gun for a distraction, then dashed away, howling, zigzagging, and diving into a roll as he saw fit.

A few shot at him but, finding he was too wild to hit, they ran forward to get closer. Just then John sprang from behind his tree and, with a swiftness to shame a deer, he thrust them through, then snatched up one of their rifles.

"Trevor," he shouted, then caught up with him and tossed him the gun. "Send a horseman to me if I am needed." He waved his sword toward the right and sprinted off in that direction.

Trevor caught the gun and saluted. "My thanks for your good play there." It was strange, but he felt a strong desire to tackle John and wrestle with him. More than that, he had a strong imagination that he would actually win the match, something he could not have done in reality even had Kayce implored John to spare him.

But Trevor did not take the situation as a game, and he mentally prepared himself for the duties ahead.

He now had to lay down a random cover fire to give him a moment of safety before he ran off to catch up with the others. He realized after about fifty yards that he was not being pursued and risked a glance back. The dark soldiers of the

scientist were amassing themselves, waiting until they were all gathered.

Perhaps he really did think of himself as a leader, or maybe it was just that his mind was suddenly consumed with thought and strategy like a fire of dry thorn branches, but when Trevor made it behind the lines, he kept moving—running round here and there, giving no orders, but feeling the need for much organization. The natural leader fellow was doing smart things like having fallen logs placed in line so that those with guns could lie behind them to shoot.

Trevor had no time for such things. His legs had a dull fire in them and he couldn't stop moving and he compressed and uncompressed his lips over and over. His eyes roved all about.

"You!" He grabbed a horseman and spun him round to face him. The fellow cowered at first from instinct, but then he listened. "I need you to deliver a message to John. Tell him I want to take the offensive."

The messenger's eyes widened. "Offensive? Art certain?"

"Maybe I should say it louder." Trevor faced the line of his men and shouted so that everyone could hear him, "I vote we consider taking the offensive." He was keenly aware of what a terrible leader he was, especially with the natural fellow doing such helpful things while he did practically nothing. The thing that was even clearer to him though was that he could strangle anyone who suggested they give up.

He gave a slap to the messenger to send him on his way, then stepped toward his men, carrying himself like a champion about to taunt his enemies. Then he stopped. He swallowed as if he had just had a bitter taste and his face cleared as if it were washed by a rain. His voice was more pleading now, though still rough and demanding in some ways. He tried to look his men in the eyes and he felt his own self very small.

"What use is it to keep retreating? We can't win that way."

A stiff breeze stirred many of the leaves, but otherwise there was no movement. Then many of the men bowed their heads as if for their departed friends, or for something more grave than that.

"And if we can't win by retreating, then why not lose by attacking? At least it will be over then." He hadn't meant to say that last part, but it came out.

Then one man stood up. One would have thought him angry except that he

was evidently holding back tears and spoke deliberately and almost too calm. "Sir, I have a family—" It seemed he would have said more, but he clenched his jaw and stood rigid. Many more rose to their feet. They were silent, but that was how they spoke.

"You think you'll be able to see them again by retreating until we're annihilated?"

"Nay...but we might escape."

Trevor looked over his shoulder. Lines formed at the corners of his eyes and he pursed his lips. What was in his mind was the idea of flight, but it looked like he was gazing on a left behind country, steeling his gaze to hide his longing for the place.

"That's betrayal!" shouted someone.

"That is not what I mean," shouted the other, jerking his hands in a circular pattern for lack of further words to say.

A racking breath stole through Trevor's body. More of his men were taking up sides in the debate, yelling things to one another. The natural leader fellow was in a frenzy to stop it all.

Trevor turned back. Hands at his sides and head bowed, he strolled over to the soldier who had suggested they flee. He did it almost as if he were at a casual event and walking up to someone he wanted to meet. He clapped the man on the back. "Go if you want."

The man recoiled from him, eyes wide. "W-w-what?..."

Trevor held out his hand. "Here. Shake it. I want you to go back to your family. Seriously. Come on. This is an order."

Holding out his arm at full length as if to keep a safe distance, the man who wanted to flee took Trevor's hand and hesitantly gave it a little shake.

"That's right," said Trevor, in a voice a car salesman might use. "Now don't waste any time. I want you out of here as soon as possible. The fight will start up any minute."

Dazed, the man walked away. After he had walked thirty feet, he turned around and bowed, then he walked further away, turned, and bowed again.

Trevor smiled, then spun on his toes and spread out his arms. "All right, anyone who wants to leave, this is your chance. Nobody will think the less of you.

I want anyone to leave who could use their life better living than dying. I'm asking you as a favor. Those of us who stay behind will buy you plenty of time to make your getaway."

His men seemed confused and didn't make a reply. "I said, anyone can go who wants to. Don't waste any time. You can do so with honor. Hurry up."

About a third of those under his command lay down their arms and, with long looks at him, they made their departure. He saluted them, then, when they were gone, saluted those who were still left. "So you want to die, do you? Well if any of you don't get your wish, I'd like to be buried right here. I've grown to like this spot." He marked an X with his foot into the leaves. "You all remember to do that."

Amid the silence, it was easy to hear the breathless messenger riding up. "Sir—Trevor. Sir Oldcastle gives the order that we shall attack as thou sayest."

## Chapter 30

### The Great Horizon

"Sir, the woods are cleared. It is safe to proceed."

"Ah, very good." William Courtenay lifted his boot out of the mud and placed it with meticulous precision on a less muddy piece of ground. "Wouldst thou believe it? I fancy I was born for soldiery. Never have I been so fulfilled in an occupation." He turned his face skyward and breathed deeply of the pure, bullet-free air. Rain drops crashed into his face and lightning flashed. "Though I should have wished for fairer weather."

His warrior companion refrained from comment.

"See here"—Courtenay pointed to a corpse on the ground of one of John Oldcastle's men—"were I suddenly to be assaulted in this place, I should not act as a common soldier but would garner my surroundings for my benefit. A corpse is noble protection. One hiding behind it could hardly be noticed and might even be taken for another corpse."

"A tree or a hole such as these around us might serve better," suggested his

companion.

“Holes?” Courtenay gazed around as if suspecting one of those “holes” might run up behind him and attack him. Spotting a hole, he charged toward it. “Aha! Is this what Oldcastle’s slaves hid in? How cowardly! Out! Out of there!” This last order was given to two gunmen who had taken shelter there. In his wrath, Courtenay grabbed them both by the collars and attempted to drag them out, an operation which succeeded well due their terror of him and readiness to comply.

He waved his hand over them like a harsh school master threatening a whip. “Is there no thrill of battle in thine hearts? Is this some hunt or sport in thine eyes? What good is all the power in the world if ye have no courage to use it?” He pointed to their guns. “Here have been given thee weapons such as thy grandfathers would have searched the world to find, and ye hide in holes. Holes!” There was a hole in his heart that could only be filled by unleashing the passion within him. It seemed now that he was the one reprimanded by the hard school master. Tears gathered in his eyes and he raised his hands to the skies.

“Amend for thy sins! Go, and wherever thou findest any in *holes* or behind *cover*, order them out and forward. Forward! Forward to the battle!”

His eyes shone as one who sees the end of the world and a glorious battle as its culmination, and who says in his heart, “I shall fight foremost in the battle on that day.”

The subjects of his wrath had their eyes open to the fullest and immediately sprinted to obey him, possibly even convinced of his words.

Courtenay found a rifle on the ground and he picked it up like a lost purse of money. He held it incorrectly and did not even place his hand on the trigger, but he looked frightening enough despite that. He was slothful by nature, and therefore, being aroused, he was terrible, for he knew no rules and thus transcended the scale of ability and inability.

Everywhere he went, he sent soldiers out of holes and forward with a slurry of words. Any who took defensive precautions were sent flying forward to the field of victory and glory. It was true that he remained behind, but in his heart he truly intended to join the others when he had turned all out of their holes.

At last, he had completed his job and he heard a horn calling far ahead. *That must be the sound of the charge*, he thought. *I must join them, or I shall miss*

*the fighting.*

Running at what he thought was a great speed, he tripped and fell in the mud, but set himself back up and kept running. He heard many battle cries ahead and shouted out, "I come! I come!" He held his rifle aloft like a club, truly thinking that the way to use it. He burst through a dense thicket and arrived at the line of battle.

He cried out one last, "I have come!" and fell with a bullet through his head, for he had arrived just at a point where Oldcastle's forces were breaking through the line.

Thus Courtenay died in glory, holding aloft the banner of courage that he had so quickly come to admire. In years after, he was immortalized as a hero and became much discussed among philosophers who found him good fertile ground for their imaginations and various conflicting theories.

Trevor ran forward with all his speed. The very elements seemed to encourage him. The winds pushed him from behind, whisking about him, and blowing rain in the faces of his enemies. Shadowy figures fled from behind every tree—shadows are unable to exist in a world lit by lightnings.

Crash. Gunfire. Victors screamed. Rivulets ran through the forest, red with blood.

Trevor leapt over a corpse and caught black figures in his peripheral vision. He let his feet slide from under him and a series of bullets hit the air above his head. There were cries of fury and he heard what sounded like return fire. He got back to his feet. That was the first resistance he had met. He would look out for more. He sprinted ahead with the same speed, the only difference being a sharper gaze. He slipped once and got up.

In the distance, he could hear cries as if from ancient colosseums, cheering or screaming over the lives of men. From the distance he was at, it all combined into a single shriek like a bird in the night descending on its prey. He wondered if it was the Earl of Northumberland at last.

Trevor passed by the line of foxholes and couldn't help glancing into them. They were all empty. That made no sense to him. He shook his head, charged on, and shot down a soldier he saw hiding behind a tree.

Words shoved themselves out Trevor's mouth as if they could not bear the restraint of his throat. "No one dies until we clear the woods! Drive them all the way to the Channel!" His heart throbbed—it had been throbbing so hard he had not even noticed it until that moment. He would break through. He would make it.

He hit the ground and blackness enveloped his mind. His teeth ground so hard he thought they might break and then he felt very light and dizzy. "What the —" and then he felt a throbbing burn in his leg.

It was troublesome forming words. "H-h-help. Someone, help me!" No one could see him though. They all rushed by, flashes and smoke shooting from the instruments in their hands and faces lordly and terrible, then they disappeared ahead and it was as if gods of wrath had passed by who had no thought to spare for mere mortals.

Trevor's face at first twisted till he looked both shriveled and ready to burst, but then he formed a rough, deep set grimace and staggered to his feet, growling like a bear. He stumbled, but charged on, finding that his leg wound was bearable. The way was clear before him. He would yet make it out of the woods and give those gladiatorial spectators a few things to think about.

There could be, perhaps, nothing more awful for him than charging into the battle alone. The quiet was audible as if it clung to him and wrapped about his legs, pulling him back. There was much time to think while he was alone. Yes, and there was much to think of.

Lightning flashes and far away cries. Trevor kept pressing onward.

Then, at last, he reached the end of the woods and he had to stop. He looked out before him and supported himself on a sapling. It was the greatest boundary he had ever sought to trespass. Beyond the line between battle and woods was a portal to another world. Beyond that line immortal gods battled. At least, there was a sense in that there were factors at work beyond him and stepping past that tree line would be like throwing himself into a whirlwind that would toss him up and down and throw him against cliffs as it wished. Trevor looked behind him, thinking of the spot he had marked for his resting place. Smiling meekly and wincing, he crossed the line.

The rain began to slow as if to better reveal the chaos of the scene. No sky or

star had ever looked down upon such a scene. Sword and knighthood, rifle and chaos, the old and the new, the deadly and the valiant—all died, all mingled in warfare, in blood, in dying hopes.

Trevor estimated no more than four hundred of his rebel brethren still left, fighting at close quarters with knights and modern soldiers combined. He limped forward, fired a few shots, then scanned the battlefield. It seemed to him that there was nothing he could do. Lowering his gun without consciously intending to, he gazed toward the horizon. There was nothing he was looking for, but his eyes were merely drawn there. He knew, or at least he had a sense of that great truth, that hope lies on the horizon. He squinted and looked harder.

“Great Scott,” he breathed. His legs felt weak and he whispered a light crazed-sounding chuckle. “Kayce, you’re a witch. You’re definitely a witch. No doubt about it.” He kept up his light chuckling, then, with a burst of energy, he snatched the horn from his side and blew it, then blew it again and again and again and again. Both armies sensed something amiss and the clamor of battle stilled for a moment as every gaze scanned for a sign of what the horn blows were about.

Now other horns responded, faint but many, and the earth shook with the tramp of horses. With the dying of the storm, the first ray of sun shown through. Trevor let out a battle cry.

The scientist’s men churned in confusion like a stew mixed by a giant hand. Every sign showed that they had lost their nerve. In a moment, they would turn. In a moment, they would flee. It would be a rout.

Then an opposing wonder appeared in the sky. At first, Trevor thought it was a dragon. Something small but at least the size of a human soared into the air and columns of scorching flame proceed from it. The figure advanced in Trevor’s direction, and then he saw more clearly. It was a man, dressed in fantastic armor that seemed out of a sci-fi movie. He had a jetpack on and it was from some device on his hands or wrists that he launched the balls of flame.

The fire was directed, not at the rebels, but at the scientist’s own men who were fleeing, to keep them in line. Then, as he calmed the tide of war, he flew over the ranks of soldiers, turned on the resistance soldiers from their rear, and began to burn them.

Trevor aimed a careful shot and pulled the trigger. The scientist jerked around in the air like he had been taken by a gust of wind, then he regained himself and kept flying. Trevor fired again. There was no comfortable nudge against his shoulder this time. He felt in his pockets, then realized he was completely out of ammo.

He gazed toward the embodiment of his hopes in the distance and found that the rescuing army would be too late. He rubbed distractedly at the pommel of his dagger. "Well, I guess this is it then," he said with an air of final resignation. Even as the words left his mouth though, his hand stole to his horn. He put it to his lips as if it were a bitter draught.

His blast came out feeble, but he tried again and it was stronger and then again and he had never blown so loud.

There was a flash of blinding white and then a shape in the sky turned and it looked both ways.

With his free hand, Trevor drew his dagger and waved it overhead. He blew again, and his chest burned from the exertion. Another blast and then the white speck flew toward him like a swan diving from the air.

The scientist raced to within fifty feet of Trevor and then swayed back, balancing in the air. White armor covered his form with his perpetual white lab coat covering that. The only colors to offset it were a black material at the joints and splattered blood staining his coat. Trevor met the gaze of the suit's expressionless mask directed down at him. A muscle twitched in his neck. He wiped the sweat from his face. His voice cracked. "What you staring at? Here I am."

Instantly, the scientist dropped from the sky and landed with a crash on his feet. He rose out of his crouch and carefully lifted the visor on his mask. As he did so, a thin laugh trailed from his lips that sounded crisp and sugary. "My apprentice is poorly trained." His face looked half-starved, but his eyes had a luminance to them that one might see in a sensualist or a cutthroat who has a nobleman in his trap. Trevor felt as if he was being scientifically examined and picked apart.

The scientist took a step forward. Trevor couldn't move, either forward or back. He caught his dagger slipping from his grip and clutched it tighter.

"You think you can fight me with that knife?" The scientist's voice was one of

wisdom and his tone was cold as well as respectful.

Trevor slowly extended the dagger in front of him. "You want me to go fetch a gun?"

The scientist wet his lips and his eyes flashed. He raised his arm an inch, exposing the contraption that shot flames. "No, I take no risks."

"I *will* attack you with this then."

The scientist raised both arms, pointing two barrels at Trevor. From the right one came a short puff of flame as of a dragon slowly emerging from slumber and opening one malicious eye. The scientist's voice was low, but bordering on a shriek. "Would you really? Would you dare touch me? To burn alive?"

Trevor extended his dagger further. He took a faltering step forward.

The scientist spluttered another flame. "Listen," he shouted in a desperate voice, "Trevor, you don't need to endure pain. There is always a way out. I am willing to let you go."

Trevor took another step, stronger this time. His eyes widened as he saw the scientist straighten his arm completely. He saw the orange burst coming and he staggered.

A moment after he covered his eyes, the flame hit him. Then another, and this one engulfed him. He screamed—like a woman, but worse and sank to the ground, rolling to put the flames out. They extinguished quickly and he lay face first in the dirt, shaking like a freezing child.

A hand gripped his shoulder and turned him over. The merciless sun stabbed through a sliver in the clouds and smote his eyes. "You *fool!*" the scientist spat. There was a sharp hiss as he sucked in breath between his teeth. "You *fool!* I gave you everything. *Everything*. A world to bow the knee before you, and you threw it away. A world without tumult or chaos. What thanks have you given me?" He put his foot on Trevor's neck and pressed down. Trevor gagged.

The scientist leaned down so their eyes were inches apart and Trevor could see every detail of his gaze. "If pain is what you want, then I'll give you some." He grabbed Trevor's neck.

Black flickered in and out of Trevor's vision. He choked on tears as he tried fruitlessly to laugh. It came out as a feeble jumble of noises. He did manage a twisted smile though. "At least I did my duty though. That is something, if not very

much.”

“Yes,” said the scientist solemnly, “it’s not very much.” He raised his boot to stomp out Trevor’s life, but then something more terrible came up behind him.

Trevor gasped when he saw him. He focused on the new man entirely. He was tall and masterful, but his face was dark, savage, and tortured. It was especially savage because of how beautiful it was, and noble too in a sense. Chains were about his wrists and he lifted them on high as if swearing an oath or lifting up a sacrifice. A moment later, he threw them around the scientist’s neck and pulled back.

The scientist stumbled and his face turned white. “I am a king, thou devil!” the dark figure cried in something between a roar and a wail. “Thou didst imagine I should soon forget my high order, but let thy death teach thee. I am Richard. I am *the king!*”

With the spasms of a dying animal, the scientist clutched at his side until he pulled out a small pistol. Trevor tried to shout a warning, but it was too late. The scientist placed the gun against Richard’s side and emptied every round.

Trevor wanted to hide his eyes, but couldn’t. The king stumbled backward with a groan but kept himself from falling with a herculean will. By his strength of madness, he pulled the chains tighter and tighter, even as the life fled from his face. He pulled until sweat seemed to leap from his brow. He pulled until he seemed to sense within him that his work had been accomplished and he fell back dead.

The sun shone down brilliant through the parting clouds and the world felt still. Trevor crawled to his knees and inch by inch he pulled himself along to the fallen monarchs. Disregarding the scientist, he looked into the face of King Richard. The king’s face was frozen in an everlasting groan. Trevor stretched out his hand and touched Richard’s face. A chill raced through his burning skin like ice, then blackness began to cover his eyes and he fell to the ground.

When Trevor opened his eyes, he felt unusually drowsy as if he had slept far past the hour when he should have awakened. He propped his head up and rubbed his forehead, squeezing his eyes shut to clear the haze he was seeing. He frowned and his brows came together as he tried to concentrate. He had a feeling

something was different and he realized it was the sounds. There was no longer any fighting.

He didn't move for fear of inflaming his agonizing burns. His mind naturally gravitated toward the voices around him. There were two near and very distinct and others murmuring in the background.

The first one was quiet and broken, like a dark tiny pool, its stillness broken by a few faint bubbles. At the same time it had something deep and majestic like a snow covered pine tree in a dark forest. "I look on these thousands dead, and wonder what it was all for. 'Twas a vain fantasy that drove me hither to waste my men on this battlefield. I thought to unite my people through the glory of battle, but yet, all the while, I knew in my heart that it should not be so."

"Then why didst thou?" asked the other.

Trevor shook as he heard the voice, for he knew it.

The quiet speaker was silent for a time, then he answered, "It was that girl that came—and..." He seemed like he would leave it there, but then he unexpectedly roused himself to finish. "I blew out the candles." He made a short sound vaguely similar to a mirthless laugh and paused for another duration. "In the dark I stumbled."

"Well, you acted rightly, sire. England shall ever praise thee."

The other spat out a laugh. "What care I for that? I see little but darkness ahead. Thy hour is here, Oldcastle, but for some of us, the veil never lifts."

Trevor made himself sit up and he saw a kingly figure on a horse turning around to leave. Next to him was John.

"Then let this be thy consolation," said John, "that thine eyes cannot see very far."

The king half turned and looked at John strangely. For a moment, his face had a look of yearning, but then he turned his head back. "Farewell, Oldcastle." With that he departed.

John stared after him, leaning on his sword for support. He was covered in crude bandages, but he looked more whole—more complete than Trevor had ever seen him.

Slowly, he turned and saw that Trevor had risen. A smile lit his face. "Ah, I thought thou wouldst wake soon." He came forward, limping with the aid of his

sword. He offered a hand. "Art well?"

"No. Well—no. The flames passed over me quick, but I'm in bad shape. I suppose you have salves for this type of thing?" Trevor rose on wobbly feet. He looked John up and down. "But how about you?"

John grimaced and patted his right leg. "'Tis in far worse condition than I act. That is a small matter, though." He paused and his look changed. "Kayce should like to see thee. She, at least, is in good health, if it were possible for her to be otherwise. Stay here and rest. I shall have her brought to you and a physician also."

Trevor nodded and for some reason he looked up. There, soaring through the sky was a pigeon. "You know," he said, "I've heard that pigeons are related to doves."

# Chapter 31

## To Soar on Eagles

Wonderful are the ways of life—both wonderful and terrible. To live is much like soaring on the backs of eagles, for at times they will climb you into peaceful clouds of prosperity and the next moment plunge you in a careening nightmare in which you dare not breathe or open your eyes. Still, through it all, you remain on your seat, for the eagle watches that you never fall. It is your doom, as well as your hope, that you must experience the ride to its fullest with both heights and valleys.

Sometimes there are sharp turns where those who ride on the backs of eagles soar over lands they never dared to explore. For John, after the battle had finished and the recovery began, sent a message to the Earl of Northumberland to take full command. He began personally to prepare for his return trip to Hereford with his handful of remaining men. He spoke constantly to Kayce and Trevor of his plans for when he returned home—how he would do his best to mend the place and especially the old manor.

Yet his dream was stolen from him, for it is the habit of men to dream of things much smaller and much less terrifying than their destinies. The messenger

sent to the Earl of Northumberland returned with grievous news. Amid the thick of the fallen, the earl had been found with an axe blow to his head.

In every age, the people are always the greatest force of a society. John was denied his wish to return to his long awaited home and, indeed, he never saw the place again. Up rose the army, and if they did not represent the people as a whole, they at least represented the best of them. It was not yet the age of republics. Therefore, the army would have a king.

John bowed and it was natural that Trevor and Kayce should go to London with him.

Life has many turns, and some we can see coming. We brace ourselves, thinking perhaps to avoid them, but in the end we must face them. Kayce began to act strange in London. She would lock herself in her room for hours on end and it was reported that moans and tears came from inside. Then, when they had silenced, she would come out as beautiful as a goddess and she would talk endlessly, almost voraciously, with those at court, and act and do and fill her life with anything as long as she never stood still. If she were still or alone, seeing her would break one's heart. She avoided John at all opportunities and never spoke of him. She behaved better than ever, suddenly took an interest in learning, and held conversations with the wisest people in the land about deep questions that all centered around the meaning of life.

As for John, those most astute noticed that he always sought to speak with Kayce when he happened into her by chance, though as she always excused herself from these situations as soon as possible, this was never accomplished.

Trevor was independent in all his actions, though he sometimes took long counsel with John. Kayce refused to be involved in these, though occasionally she did happen into John on accident, in which cases she acted with flawless etiquette.

One day, Kayce wept long into the afternoon until she became weak. John apparently heard of it, for he came to visit her. He stayed (the average observer might have thought) much longer than he had intended to, but the wise men of earth know that the plans of a man are often far deeper than anyone but himself can understand.

After this event, it only took the natural flight of the eagles ever onward for

the matter to come to its conclusion, and John and Kayce were married. When Trevor heard of their betrothal, he smiled the most pleasant smile that had ever been on his face, but a few who knew him well thought that something lay hidden behind that smile—almost as if he sensed the oncoming of a mortal disease, but would not trouble anyone about it.

The tale of that grief he hid is greater than the tale of his fight for England, because it is a tale that cannot be told. Mortal understanding does not reach so far.

Be assured that life is more than to soar on an eagle—it is far far more. Yet in these three things the metaphor will always hold true: there is no turning back, the journey must be faced with bravery, and when the ride is done, one will either reel or stand in awe.

On a certain day, Kayce was walking in the palace gardens. She had turned every foot of unused ground into a garden, though really her skill lay in envisioning gardens, not in growing them. She merely touched the dirt every now and then because she liked to and left the rest to the gardeners. In the palace, there had been great labors to accommodate for the eccentricities of her whims, but if pressured on the point, none of the servants could deny that they forgave her all her faults a hundred times and more.

It was on this day that a little servant girl came prancing up to Kayce—a personal favorite of Kayce's. Kayce tried not to have favorites, but she always neglected that inner battle the instant it arose.

The girl bowed. "My Queen," she began.

"Call me Queeny," said Kayce, rising a little on her toes, biting her lip, and holding her breath to see if the girl would.

"Queeny," the girl said as if it were the most natural thing in the world, "thou'lt remember asking me to keep watch over thy brother."

Now Kayce held her breath even more. "Yes...well?"

"He is with the preacher from the country, Queeny."

Kayce caught a short breath and froze. "...O-oh," she said. Her hand stole down to rub her gown as if it were a lucky charm. "Thank you," she said, then turned and ran away.

The rest unfolds like a dream that we are a part of, but unable to touch or act in. Kayce goes in search of her brother. She worries about him. She worries too

much perhaps, but feels she is justified. It is highly abnormal from him. She holds much the same views as her husband in all things, but her brother holds his own counsel. He never had any opinion except the agony of choosing one. It is a weighty matter, she thinks, that makes him seek spiritual guidance. She rushes along.

Her brother has no haunts, but many places he spends time. She visits them all. She doesn't find him. She bites her lip.

Still, she is a queen. Duties press. There are engagements. Important people. She thinks he must be wandering alone somewhere. She determines to find him the next day.

The day passes along like a dream that seems it will never end, but seems so short when it does. The next day comes. Kayce rises early and greets the sun with her smile. Her smile fades though and she wrings her hands on her clothes and gets to work. She asks a few servants if they have seen Trevor and all of them say that they have not. She is now feeling dizzy and not quite sure what to do. She flies up to his room, telling herself there is nothing to worry about and then she knocks and steps in.

The room is empty and neat. Her brother is never this neat and he never lets others clean his room for him. His things are as well ordered as the books on the library shelf at a mansion. There is a thin wooden stand in the middle of the room. It is not there by accident. Kayce puts her hand to her heart and runs up to it. She picks up the note placed there with delicate fingers, heart throbbing. She feels the softness of the paper. For some reason that is what stands out to her. Then she notices the clean flowing hand it is written in—her brother's, but also very unlike her brother's. She has read the first line already, but she has been too much in a hurry to think it through. She reads it again, then the rest of the note.

"Oh, Trevor!" she cries. She raises her face and all the eternal questions are asked in that gaze. Tears begin to run down her cheeks.

"No! No!" She tears the note in half, weeping now. "You can't escape from me Trevor! You can't do this to me. Trevor! Trevor!"

She races out of the room. She has one question for those she meets. "Is he with his councilors? Thank you." She runs on.

She burst through a door. Aged noblemen and wise officials are gathered

together around a table and at their head is a one-legged man with scars on his face.

Kayce burst in on them like a hummingbird among decaying stone edifices. “John,” she cried, “why didn’t you tell me?!”

The king rises as if stricken by an arrow. His brow is taut and his face pale. One can see he can scarcely keep himself standing. Kayce runs to him and he meets her with open arms.

“Why?” she asks. “Why? Why?”

He rubs her gently and a little awkwardly. “Hush. Hush,” he says. Perhaps he hardly knows what he does. His voice is not quite steady. “How could I tell thee? Wouldst thou have let him go?”

She does not know how to answer this. How can anyone know the answers to such questions? They are beyond human understanding. “Is he gone...forever?”

“Yes. That is what he told me.”

“Then...”—let us not try to say what is on her face or in her heart—“I must say goodbye to him.”

The silence in the room stretches on for a certain time. Slowly, John pulls a step back from Kayce and looks her in the eyes. They speak that way in silence. Slowly, John nods.

The time machine sits much as it always has save for a bit of ivy growing up the sides of it. It seems strange to Trevor how comfortable and homely the machine looks—like an old friend waiting by a street corner.

“Art ready, sir?”

Trevor takes a deep breath and lets it out. “Yes, well, this is what it all comes down to, so why not face it, after all?”

He picks up his few belongings and follows the others, only none too hastily. His companions in this journey are already inside when he stops at the entrance and turns to listen. “Just a moment, Wilkin. I hear something.”

“We should not delay long,” says his companion waiting at the doorway.

“Yes, but...well, you only get to go back in time once and you only get one goodbye when you leave. That’s how I read the two time machines. One for here and one for back. One for here and...”

Trevor's companion understands. With a bow of respect, he leaves Trevor alone and goes farther into the inner time machine that will be their passage to the future.

Trevor puts his things down and faces the peaceful woods. His hands are in his pockets now, for he is wearing his old outfit of black cargo trousers and a t-shirt. He sees many details in the woods. One can gaze at a forest for hours, but they cannot gaze at it long enough that they will remember those details forever. Soon, they will fade from the memory like everything else in life.

There are more noises in the distance. Trevor hears them distinctly and he tries to smile, but it takes a tremendous effort to do so. He wets his lips and waits, pressing his eyes closed.

Here comes what he desires and yet what he wishes he could escape. Two mounted riders ride up and he opens his eyes. One of them he marks as a woman. His hands are too sweaty for his pockets so he pulls them out and wipes them on his thighs.

They dismount and one of them runs toward him while the other comes slowly.

"Well, you never really did listen to my orders," he manages as he embraces Kayce. "How hard did you ride to catch up with me?" She has nothing to say. The other rider has taken his time, but he finally comes up. He stands in silence.

Finally, Trevor disengages. "Come now, it's not so bad."

Now, more than ever, Kayce is unable to say anything. Her companion makes a slight cough. Trevor turns to him and pats him on the shoulder. "Rule England well. I wish I could see you do it, but what does it matter? You'll do well enough without me, of course."

"Trevor..." Kayce manages.

He turns back to her. "I just haven't been able to rest in London," he says. "You were born for this era, Kayce, but I wasn't. I thought I could learn to love it here, but my heart has always been for the future. They need me, I think. Or, no, they don't need me, but I need to help them. I'm not explaining this well. It's bad back where we come from, Kayce. It doesn't need a revolution, but it needs something. I feel like I'm just one of those cheesy characters fighting yet another villain to save yet another world from destruction. Do you know if stories ever

change?"

No answer.

He touches her hand and gives a hint of a smile. "I'll make sure to save Jerrold too. This is my chance to make things right."

Now he has to embrace her again and Oldcastle too. There are no words said because, of course, saying them at all would be saying too little. Then Trevor turns as though through deep water and he gropes his way into the time machine. He shuts the door and then he sways and must take a moment to rest against the wall. He finishes the rest and then he lifts his head. He walks up to the inner machine and opens the door where ten men are waiting for him. They have a foolish mission to do some good in a dark world and as fools they hope to succeed.

Trevor takes his place among the rest.

One of them puts a hand on his arm and asks him, "Art ready, sir?"

That, of course, is the question that has no answer, so instead Trevor asks his own question: "Do I need to be?"

Trevor does not yet understand the secrets of life and he is like one groping in the deepest darkness. Yet he understands much. Yes, much that even those who know life's secrets are quick to forget. They are hard and heavy truths, but they are hard and heavy because they are made of gold.

What will happen to Trevor? Likely, he will keep on striving and keep on yearning. He will sooner or later face the shades of death. Perhaps he will end in misery because he dared to fix his eyes on the great horizon. Perhaps he will groan and labor and yet never be satisfied, but let us hope not. There is a great mystery in life, and it is this: when a fool has his eyes fixed on the great horizon, sometimes a man will come along beside him and guide him to the land he desires.

This is beyond understanding.

Of existence, let this be said: "He who sees the farthest will endure the greatest."

So turn again, life, for many are waiting. We long to see the culmination of what this all is for. Show us the secrets of this winding road, for we are soaring on

eagles and like shooting stars we are bright and brief. Turn again, life. Turn again.