

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 Allpowerfulness 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. Richard 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

capital. 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 kidnapers

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 lightning. 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.