

# *Fools In The Darkness – Part 1*

## Chapter 1

### The haunt of the mad scientist

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He didn’t answer, but looked behind him, then darted off through the alley, took a turn, and cut across a strip of overgrown lawn and past a sprawling junk yard. Only streaks of red on the horizon showed that the sun had been there that day. Blaring lights of the city kept the inhabitants alive and restless and tainted the

world with an entirely mechanical feel that felt like something between a narcotic vision and a nightmare where one is very small and helpless. Dogs howled in the distance and loud, depressing music floated on air. Trevor and Kayce ran on, still hand in hand. Then no longer hand in hand.

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

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

The vivacity in Kayce's eyes dimmed and she took a step back. If any person had passed at that moment, they might have thought it a moonlight rendezvous.

"Jerrold?" Kayce asked. She didn't move. She could have sprung right over her brother, the way she was all coiled up and tense.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Kayce blinked. "Him?"

"Just—he's a crime lord. You're hearing his robotic leg." He spat out a curse

and yanked her arm. "Well, don't stand there! Come on!" He started off at a run.

Kayce jumped as if electrocuted and fled after him.

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

There were no street lights—little moon.

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

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

She nodded. "They won't check it, will they?"

"No—but *I'm* not going there either."

Kayce puckered her lips coquettishly, sticking her hands on her hips. "Well, maybe you're okay with dying..."

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

"Richard says he fears that man more than the devil."

Kayce snickered. "So what? Like *he's* seen the devil."

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

*Clack. Clump. Clack. Clump.*

"Just remember: you're the one who decided to do this."

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

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

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

"Shush! He's almost —" Trevor saw it too and froze.

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

crooked smile....

In the center of the room, however, it was completely different. It was immaculate. Not a speck sullied the polished floor and it looked clean enough to belong to a palace. In the very center of this odd clearing stood a strange machine.

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

"I can't believe—"

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

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

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

"Trevor?"

Trevor pursed his lips and held his finger to them.

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

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

Someone had entered the room.

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

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

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

There was a loud thump right outside the machine.

He twisted open the door to the inner beast, muttering, "One more lock..."

Kayce stole in first and he followed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Birds chirped outside.

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

# Chapter 2

## A New World, A New King

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

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

"Um...Trevor?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Trevor shivered and convulsively bent over, hugging his shoulders.

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"No," Trevor said flatly.

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

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

"Trevor!" Kayce shouted.

All the horsemen stared.

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

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

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

The horsemen still hadn't changed their blank stares.

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

laugh.

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

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

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

Trevor conceded to mount.

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

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

There was an awkward silence.

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

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

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

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

artists each with their own designs for him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"God save us..."

"'Tis a monster."

"'Tis Lucifer."

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

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

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

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

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

"Fire!" the king screeched, leaping behind the cover of his chair. "Fire ye fools!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

around the hall again, his breath tremulous.

The hall, even yet, was silent.

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

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

## Chapter 3

### The madman's dominion

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

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

"Greetings, holy one."

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

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

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

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

balance.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The watcher stared at him without expression.

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

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

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

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

The watcher didn't answer.

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

The watcher had not moved this whole time.

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

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

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

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

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

keep himself steady.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Gracious Highness—"

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

Wyot smiled and rubbed his brow with his hand.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You may rise,” the alchemist said.

Wyot stood to his feet.

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

# Chapter 4

## Torn Between Two Worlds

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

him.

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

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

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

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

The father arched his right eyebrow.

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

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

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

Father turned to son and the two Oldcastles exchanged glances.

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Master Allen. Lad! Where art thou?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

John said nothing.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Kayce!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He shook his head.

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

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

Kayce choked on a laugh and then covered her mouth.

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

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

“Well...”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

“It cannot be!”

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

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

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

Trevor swallowed.

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

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

Kayce stopped laughing.

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

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

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

# Chapter 5

## An Unexpected Visit

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Trevor nodded and folded his arms, looking elsewhere.

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

"Of course."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Trevor stared.

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

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

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

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

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

He rose slowly and shook his head. He deliberately avoided looking into

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Chapter 6

### The March

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

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

The night shone a half moon overhead like an eyelid partially open, half-watching but unconcerned. Trees loomed about Trevor like marble pillars reaching into the heavens and it truly seemed that the world had become one piece of architecture, old as the age of the first ships when men set forth to pierce the hidden secrets of the primeval world that was their own. The trees were quiet, looming, and shadowy, but they were also straight, noble, and tall. Riding beneath them gave one both a feeling of insignificance and hope. Trevor drifted in a profound inner reflection, drifting from one idea to another, but never coming to



any conclusion. It was that sort of quietness that pervaded the night.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Trevor's lungs burned as he held his breath.

"Trevor, draw thy sword."

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

Then Trevor awoke.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She eyed him almost sympathetically for a moment, stroking her hair, and then sighed. A slight smile curled on her lips and she folded her legs cross-legged

then laid her hands on her lap. "Okay, I was being a bit queenish." She faced him for an empty second. "You're not a hunter after all and who knows if bear even tastes good. Besides,"—she rolled her tongue around the inside of her cheeks and made a bland expression— "I'm a vegan."

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

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

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

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

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

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

Trevor leapt to his feet.

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

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

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

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

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

Trevor caught his breath and tightened his jaw muscles.

Kayce's eye was on him. She tossed the strand of hair away like a piece of junk. "Look, you just about let him die. There was only one way he could know he was in danger, and that was if you told him. Well, you just plumb fled like a coward." Trevor was about to interject something, but she interrupted him, her eyes flashing. "Yeah, I know you had your own life to think about, but this here's

the age of knights and chivalry, and that's what I'm getting to. You just fought with the rest of us when those whoever-they-ares attacked us, but you had yourself to defend. What if you could just run away?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

The lad looked in his direction.

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

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

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

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

tongues.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Chapter 7

### The Madman and the Jester

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Instantly, the man released his shoulder. His face tightened as if the words were a poison in his blood and he crouched ready to pounce. "Watchers?" he hissed. The man rose to his feet and spat three times, each time more vehemently. "Watchers?" he repeated, then laughed in a mad cackle that rumbled through the long street and echoed back. The jester shrank away, crawling backward, but the man leaned down and peered at him. "Are ye of the criminal type, eh, my

lordship? ...Ah...mute as a dead crow. Fay! A pity. But, nay, thou'rt a jester now, ay?" He laughed his same cackle. "A jest! A jest! Our Lady, a jester that weeps!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Aye! Aye!" The madman nodded with a grin. "Thomas of underworld manor, an' please thy lordship." He wet his lips and watched the jester patiently with a hesitant smile. He suddenly got up as if he had remembered something, but then

crouched back down and held his chin glumly in his hand. His voice became somewhat musical, if a bit rough, "So, ye're being hunted by watchers, eh?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Gate?" the madman asked, a light dawning in his eyes. He pulled his staff closer to his chest and muttered meekly, "Ye are mad as I. Ye speak the things in your mind." He laughed a thin trail of laughter.



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

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

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

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

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

"Halt!" called the watcher.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Coming toward them was a priest in a cowl, limping with a staff. The priest had his face pointed at the ground and was sniffing like a hound. He sniffed right and left but only ever walked straight forward toward the watcher. The priest stopped only when he was seven feet away, then raised his head with a start. "Aha! What do I sniff? Adultery? Parricide? Wait!" He shook his staff at the watcher like a finger. His voice was low and menacing. "Thou wouldst show irreverence to thine elders, thou infernal fool! Cursed be thou!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Will I pass though?"

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

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

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

The jester sank his head further and made no response. At first, the madman

looked down at him with his upper lip pushed up, scratching his head, then he waved his staff overhead threateningly, yelling, "Go! Go! Go!" and the jester fled away with a cry.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Y-y-yes."

The madman staggered and hid his face, then looked again and gnashed his teeth with tears in his eyes. "Then thou hast damned them. Thou hast placed them under the rule of a devil and so made them unclean by thine own hand."

The man with the family paled.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

John shot to his feet. "What is this?"

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

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

John stared at him and whistled. "Thou'rt saying we must attack at once?"

The prisoner nodded.

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

## Chapter 8

### Dire Straits in the Streets

A few wide-eyed citizens of London hovered about the gates like scarecrows as the mounted knights passed through. The knights shouted and cheered while

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

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

“What is thy name, Jester?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“’Tis well.”

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

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

Trevor went through the motions several times of drawing his pistol to make sure he had it down. He looked over at the jester who was melancholy, but calm. “You gonna be safe in that thin jester’s suit, ole boy?” Trevor asked, his voice shaking and none too confident.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"No way," Trevor said, gritting his teeth and clenching his gun. "You'd get killed in a heartbeat."

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

Cheers arose and many of the knights thundered off at once, swords waving like plumes in a dandy's cap. John's face tightened like a coil of rope and he

looked behind him at the gathering hordes who were pressing to hurry onwards like prisoners to a dinner call.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Kayce! What are you thinking?!"

"I'm thinking we need to leave."

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

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

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



coat and leggings.

# Chapter 9

## Trevor Takes a Stroll

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Hullo, John."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Trevor nodded.

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

"Thanks," Trevor said, heading off toward the cottage. "Have fun running the army." The next moment he wondered why he used such sarcasm. He thought about looking round for a peek back at John, but didn't. Twenty paces out, he

stopped abruptly and changed his direction, deciding to see the jester before he visited Kayce. He walked in a nervous, fidgety sort of way and twisted his fingers together. He hung his head. Before the jester's tent, he stopped and stood somewhat like a man about to ask another man for his daughter's hand in marriage, only not nearly so dramatic. He asked himself what had caused him to come visit the jester and his mind replied, "I don't know. I just want to see him. Can't that be enough?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The jester nodded.

"Then why didn't you retreat?"

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

“Besides what?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

There seemed to be a beautiful pain in the jester’s eyes. “Well, thank thee, lad.”

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

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

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

He snuffed. “You’re chipper for a sick person.”

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

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

Kayce drawled out her answer evasively. “Yeah...” She picked her fingernails, looking at them with soft affection. She glanced up suddenly and hid everything but her head beneath the covers like a scared child. “I don’t have scars on my

face, do I?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You have a plan?"

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

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

"Wait!" Kayce shouted.

Trevor turned around.

Kayce had propped herself up and her eyes were flashing like all the shimmering reflections of a small pool condensed into one spot. "I wanted to tell you, Trevor Allen, that you are not a coward and I am sorry for saying so."

Trevor felt his throat swell and tried to say something. He took a step

backward and stumbled out the door. "Th-thanks." He turned and ran.

# Chapter 10

## Treachery

"There should be a sentry up ahead."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

There were some soldiers who slept under the stars, and Trevor, who brought up the rear of the party, carefully studied all their faces. When he thought he saw

the flicker of an eyelid, he would look back or when he imagined a hand moving, he would pause to make sure it was only the soldier's chest heaving. Only a faint rustle kept the camp from being completely silent. It was a combination of many tiny sounds, more like a wind than anything. It made Trevor feel like he was walking past a slumbering giant. He took care with his every step.

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

A cloud passed over the moon and then drifted away.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

John folded his arms and scowled. A minute later the guard returned with the Earl of Warwick who stumbled out then snapped straight and tall as if he were leaping to salute a monarch. He blinked several times and stared at his three visitors with a blank expression before suddenly exclaiming, "Fay! 'Tis dark out."

"Sir," began John.

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

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

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

"He has only some five hundred men."

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

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

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

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

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

"And who am I?" asked John.

The earl stared blankly.

"I am Sir John Oldcastle."

The earl paled.

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

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

The remaining guard dropped his halberd.



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Still maintaining his gaze with that quiet fixedness, John stepped toward the earl. He drew his sword with the next step, his lips twisting down as it rubbed with a smooth purr against its sheath. The earl hung his head, smiling a thin, almost

straight smile with his lips compressed. With a sudden violence, John banged his sword back into its sheath and the earl started. "Leave. Now," John whispered.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Art well?”

Trevor swallowed again.

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

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

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