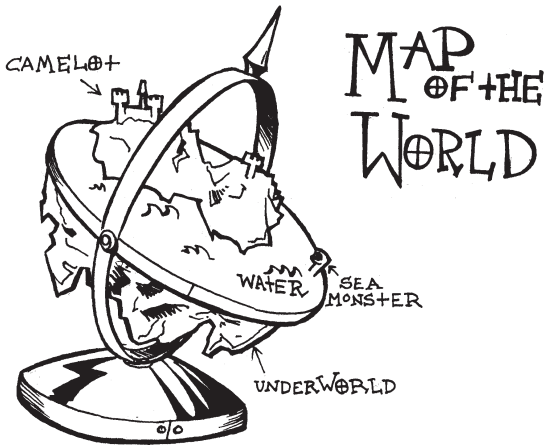


Nick
Gauntlet:
Private Knight

Grick **G**auntlet: Private Knight

by
Austin
McKinley



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NICK GAUNTLET: PRIVATE KNIGHT

By Austin McKinley

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*For Sherrie—
My favorite femme fatale*



Chapter 1

It was the 20th of August the day I rode through the gates of Acre for the last time as a knight. Eleven-ninety-one Anno Domini, another helping of chaos and paranoia. We'd been sending boys to that meat grinder in the Near East long as anyone could remember. War was damn near unwinnable, you ask me.

Acre, you may recall, was a port city in the dominions of Saladin in Palestine, and one of the bloodiest battles in the entire conflict. A crusader army under King Guy of Jerusalem had squatted outside the city walls in the blazing desert heat going on two years by then. I'd arrived with King Richard's army in a fleet of more than a hundred ships, and joined the siege with King Phillip of France slightly over two months prior. Didn't give a damn about the holy land, I just wanted to render my mandatory service and get back to my wedding before my feudal lord thought better of the arrangement.

Countless times we knocked holes in those dusty towers and blackened stone barriers, but Saladin always counterattacked. Even so, within a month of our arrival, the city was ready to surrender, and now our banner and Phillip's joined the Kingdom of Jerusalem's atop the battered ramparts. Those're the gates—gates I'd helped

breach—the guards hold open for me and my squire Marcas as I return from Saladin’s camp with news for the King. We dismount and Marcas takes charge of the horses.

You should have seen my armor back in those days, blood-smearred and bristling with weaponry and improvised gadgets. I’d acquired a copy of the Banu Musa Brothers’ Book of Ingenious Devices in Cyprus—don’t ask me how—and spent the rest of the sea voyage incorporating as many of their ideas as I could turn to practical use. I had a sponge in my visor to protect me from the fumes of burning cities, and these knives that would spring out of my... anyway, that’s how I got the nickname.

I’m battle-worn, dirty, with a crew cut and stubble, pretty much how I look now, except slightly less jaded. I pass dozens of chained Saracen prisoners, the town’s Muslim garrison we’d taken captive after the surrender, on my way to the great hall.

An aide announces me, “Sir Nicholas of Gloucester,” as I clank towards the dais where King Richard slouches on a makeshift throne. He’s tall, pale, etched with sun and illness—blue eyes, red beard and hair. Good looking guy, in a French sort of way.

He sits up.

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“Gauntlet! Were your negotiations successful?”

I remove a sealed letter from my glove, give it to Richard.

“I’m sorry Your Highness, Saladin has raised the necessary ransom monies and he’s willing to pay, but still refuses to surrender the nobles you demanded in exchange.”

“The Saracen dog.”

“You ask me,” I say, “he’s trying to bottle us here in the port. Knows we can’t advance with hostages in tow.”

“He’s delayed long enough,” Richard turns to me and says, “Kill the prisoners. Kill all of them, and prepare the men to move.”

“Your Highness, no!” It’s out before I know it.

“What did you say, Gauntlet?” Richard’s voice is cold.

“Sire, Saladin’s been a noble opponent, chivalrous in all his dealings with us. We can’t betray the terms of surrender.” In truth, I had grown to admire the man. I had come expecting animals, and found instead a courteous and civilized people, besides ferocious fighters.

“If he doesn’t value the men of this city,” growls Richard, “why should we? Teach him not to trifle with the armies of Christ.”

“But sire, the garrison numbers almost three thousand. I can’t... I *won’t* kill all of them.”

“This is treason, Gauntlet. Give me your sword.”

I back away, horrified. Sweat stands out on my face. This from a king I had fought with, supped with, defended when ill. But that’s how it was—crusade changed a man. What we saw there was not like any European warfare we’d ever experienced. That’s the only apology I can make for Richard.

“Your sword, Gloucester!” Richard repeats.

I spring a catch on my scabbard and my sword leaps into my hand—another tidbit from the Book of Ingenious Devices. I’ll admit, I don’t hand my sword over easily, but after a moment’s hesitation, I give it to my king.

“Sir Nicholas of Gloucester,” he says, “I hereby revoke your title, and all the rights, lands, and privileges thereto. You are no longer knight of this crusade. Guards,” a gesture from Richard, the guards grab me. “If he cares so much for the heathen garrison he can share their fate. Bring me a knight who will follow my orders.”

He breaks my sword over his knee. I can still hear the brittle ping might as well’ve been my life snapped in two.

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~

The guards lead me to the courtyard in chains. My squire Marcas follows at a distance. They open a heavy iron door and try to push me through with the rest of the Muslim garrison. When their backs are turned, Marcas rushes up and clobbers one with a cast iron pan from our field kit. He drops like a sack of turnips.

“Marcas?” I say, startled.

“I’m with you, my Lord!” says he.

I brace my foot against the stone frame of the ironworks and shove. The guards stagger back. My hands still in chains, I trip a switch and knives they failed to confiscate spring from my heavy armored gloves and boots. I whirl and kick at my captors.

Marcas and I overpower the guards and run for the city gate. Some 300 of the Saracen prisoners get loose, too, which helps to cover our escape.

We belt out of the city. Calls from the towers and arrows fly at our heels, strike men to either side of us. We dodge them, keep running up the dusty slope of a dry scrubby hill overlooking Acre. We pause in the cover of a pile of tumbledown stones to stare in horror at the city.

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All told, more than 2,700 men were decapitated over the next two days, but Marcas and I aren't among them. From our vantage point, we can hear the screams of the condemned prisoners.

I couldn't go back to my feudal lord, couldn't marry his daughter now I was a disgraced knight. I lost everything that day; maybe not as much as the garrison at Acre, but still, quite a lot.

"What's the plan, Nick?" Marcas asks me.

"There's no plan here," says I, "only madness."

We melt into the wilderness, and eventually make our way back to England.

~

It's 1208 now. Richard is dead and John's in charge, not that it's an improvement. Here at the Lady of the Lake tavern, Cadmia the barmaid serves us our nightly ales. It's a roadhouse for peasants, the mud and timber walls reverberate with noise and my nostrils reverberate with body odor, but it's pleasant enough.

In the years since our return Marcas has applied himself, become a successful blacksmith, and I... well, these days my main opponent is my liver. I sit on my stool with my

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grizzled leather fedora and makeshift necktie tucked into my mail and tunic, and stare at a well-oiled steel broadsword which hangs above the bar—I think it belonged to Cadmia’s father—and remember the day it all turned to shit.

“That’s how it was,” I say. “How it’s always been.”

“Take it easy, Nick,” says Cadmia, “I don’t want any trouble.”

“Trouble?” I tip my hat. “An usurper king and a bankrupt country... you already got trouble, Tutty, don’t look my way.”

It was Marcos’s nickname for her—a blacksmith’s joke, something to do with the sublimation of Zinc. I don’t really understand it. Marcos liked to give people nicknames. He gave me mine.

It’s usually about this time Warin or someone like him, a big side of local farm boy beef backed by two equally huge townie friends, leans onto the bar by my elbow.

“Might watch what ale-house you loose your tongue in, lowlife,” he says. “My father fought with our Duke in the crusades.”

“Then your father was a fool,” says I, and knock back the last of my ale. Marcos sees where this is headed, says,

“Well, I have an early shoeing.” He stands up, leaves his ale untouched.

“No Marcas, wait,” I say.

Marcas holds me at arm’s length.

“I can’t keep doing this, Nick,” he says. “I have a business to run. You don’t want to help, that’s fine, but...”

“Smithy isn’t gonna black itself,” I give a sodden nod and complete the thought.

“That’s right,” he says. “Come with me, got a new project I want to show you.” I don’t listen. I should listen, should go with him, but I don’t.

“Think I’ll stay,” says I. “These serfs lack education.”

“Suit yourself,” says Marcas. He eyes Warin, “Better make it plate.”

“It’s been a few years, son,” I round on Warin, “so you may not know, but before the King’s Crusade there was the Wendish Crusade, and before that the Siege of Jerusalem. Even then it was more about politics than heretics.”

“I’d have done my duty to the king if I’d been of age,” says the beef.

“Give it a year, you’ll get your chance. They’ll keep going

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long as they can find fools to follow ‘em.”

Warin growls.

Cadmia says, “Oh, Nick.”

“A good night to you all,” says Marcas and beats it, leaving me to the tender mercies of the townies.

“Marcas wait—” I start, but Warin grabs my shoulder,

“I’ll teach you to insult my father you—”

I whip my collapsible pistol-gripped crossbow from my shoulder holster, arrow tip to Warin’s nose.

“Finish that pejorative,” I tell him.

“Nick, I said no bows!” Cadmia all but screams. I ignore her, too.

“Go on,” I say to Warin. “I’m Nick Gauntlet, son. Who are you?”

Warin makes a threatening lunge. I flinch, pull the trigger. The bolt shoots off sideways as the crossbow flies apart.

Warin laughs as I glare at the pistol grip in annoyance.

“Should take better care of your livery, squire,” he says, and punches me in the face.



Warin and his friends toss me into the street, and throw the pieces of my crossbow after me. Horses stand tied in the muck. Cadmia lingers in the door frame, where a weathered sign reads ‘Lady of the Lake,’ and holds my leather trench coat. I stagger to my feet, ready for more.

“Let it go, tough guy,” she says. “Or I’ll tell Sheriff Realgar you’ve been fighting.”

“But Tutty,” says I, “it was the right thing to do. We gotta stand up for what’s right.”

“Glad to see you’re not bitter,” says Cadmia, “that’d be pathetic.”

She helps me on with my coat, straightens my tie.

“What are you doing to yourself, Nick?” she says. “Everybody knows your story, why you’re not a knight anymore, but it was seventeen years ago. You don’t have to take it out on them night after night.”

“The world’s a disloyal master, Tutty.” I say. Too much ale tends to make me philosophical. “It’ll refuse you what you deserve, and punish you even if you do the right thing.”

“Go home,” says Cadmia. “Sleep it off. That’s what you’re

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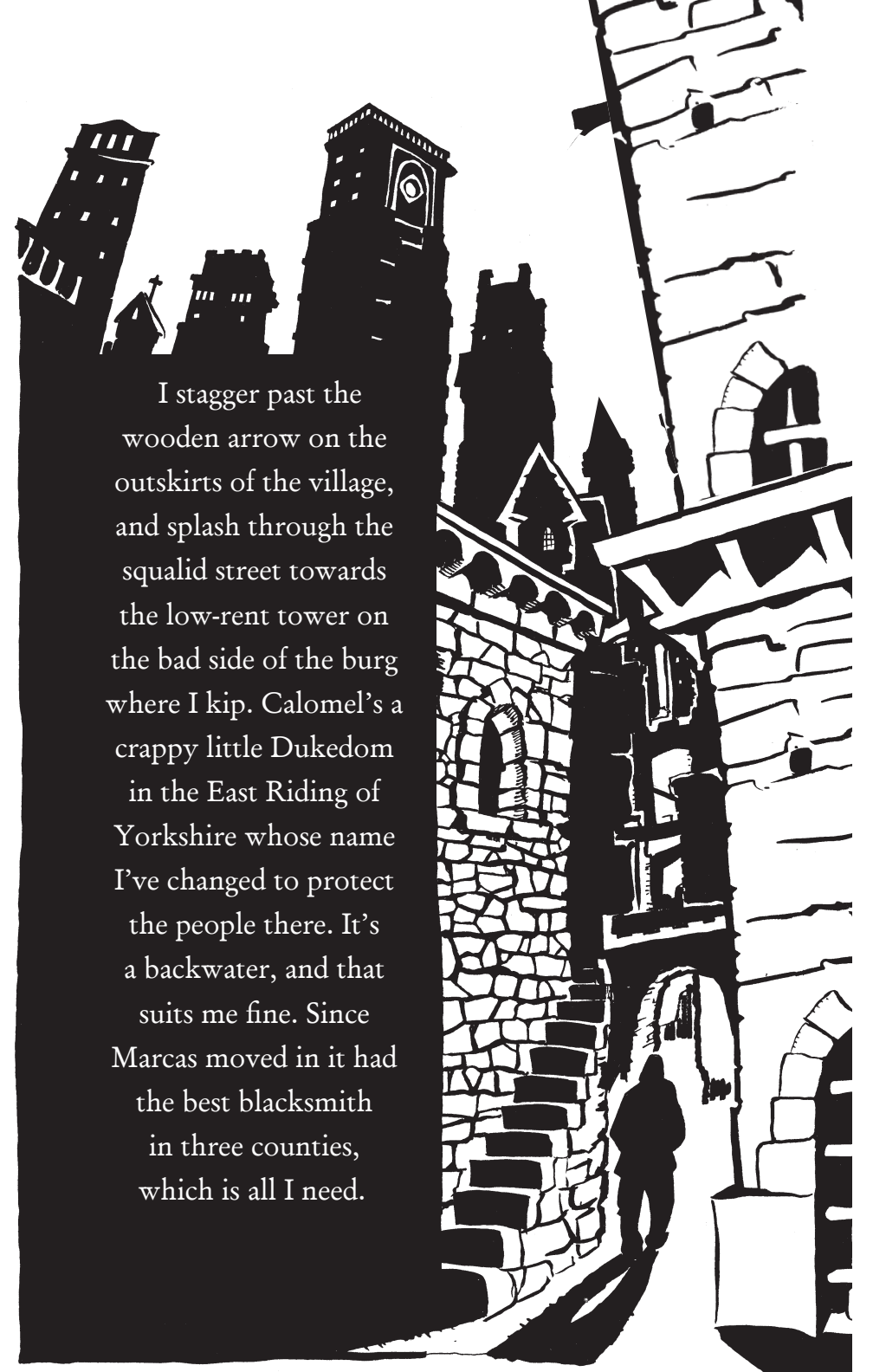
best at.”

“How about one for the road?” I ask.

She gives me a sad look, slams the door. I glare at the horses who eye me, stoical. I used to have a horse—fine one. I wonder whatever happened to him. Probably got eaten a little later in King Richard’s campaign if his luck went anything like mine.

“What’re you lookin’ at?” says I.

~



I stagger past the wooden arrow on the outskirts of the village, and splash through the squalid street towards the low-rent tower on the bad side of the burg where I kip. Calomel's a crappy little Dukedom in the East Riding of Yorkshire whose name I've changed to protect the people there. It's a backwater, and that suits me fine. Since Marcus moved in it had the best blacksmith in three counties, which is all I need.

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At the top of the crumbling spiral stair, I unlock the door to my one-room flop. Built into the door, a stained glass window—one of the fancy leaded kind Marcas likes to make—frames a brass placard, reads, “NICK GAUNTLET: PRIVATE KNIGHT.” Another of Marcas’s little jokes.

My place betrays me, I guess. In the tower room, I pass a mounted disc— map of the world up to the point where there be dragons on one side, and a relief of the underworld on the other. Bound tomes, and gadgets from the Book of Ingenious Devices I’ve constructed with Marcas’s help line the walls. A casual inventor and scholar, a man of steel and letters whose hard times have lasted too long to be coincidence, that’s me.

I sit behind my wooden writing desk and pile the pieces of my broken crossbow atop it. I open a drawer and tip the remains of a bottle to my lips, but it’s empty. I briefly consider passing out on the haypile that serves as my mattress, and the respite of unconsciousness, but I’m too keyed up, sore, and swiftly sobering as a result of the beating I took. There’s only one thing to do when I feel this way.

I gather of the bits of my bow, pound back down the tower steps into the street, and head for the smithy.

~

Marcas's blacksmith shop is a two story structure, living quarters above the forge and workshop, lined with the leaded glass windows Marcas likes to make.

"Marcas!" I bellow at the upper window. "Damn thing fell apart again. Are you sure the chu-ke nu is better than the polybolos as a basis for a collapsible bow?"

We'd talked about this. The polybolos, a kind of chain-driven Greek repeater had been my suggestion, but Marcas preferred a Chinese variety with lever action and a composite-recurved bow for more power. Less moving parts, less to go wrong in theory, but once the thing was sprung it was a bitch to put back together. My weaponry was a continual project, one of the few things Marcas and I still had in common. As civilians we aren't allowed to carry swords, but that doesn't mean we like to go unarmed.

"Marcas!" I call again.

"Quiet in the street!" someone shouts from a neighboring building.

"Shut it, you," says I. "I need a smithy, not a smart-ass!"

As I look for the source, a cloaked figure bolts from the workshop, knocks me aside.

"Whoa, there!" I say, and look up just in time to see an

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explosion blow out Marcas's fancy glass. Flames and smoke pour out of the stone building. I kick my way in, find Marcas blackened and near death amid the flaming debris.

"Marcas!" I shout, and gather him up. He has massive acid burns, his face is falling apart. He begins to convulse.

"Marcas! Jesus."

His eyes drift around and find me.

"The head..." he says faintly, blood gurgling in his lungs. "It was the head..."

He dies, and I hold his body in my arms as the smithy burns.

"Aw Marcas, damn it," I say, and in one of those crisis confusions, those times where everything feels so unreal you begin to doubt your own eyes, I see it: a concealed door, half open behind the forge, that to my knowledge had never existed before.

Chapter 2

Torches glare in the smoke as a bucket line of townsfolk put out the smoldering ruin of the smithy. I stand beyond the concealed door, in what is unquestionably a laboratory, with Sheriff Realgar, the Duke's lieutenant. Realgar covers his face with his arm against the stench, obscuring his small salt and pepper goatee as his men kick over braziers, jars, chemical containers.

"You never saw this room before?" Realgar asks me.

"Probably never will once your bulls are done with the china," says I.

"And the person you say you ran into?"

"Slight, wiry," I tell him. "Smelled funny. Probably French."

"Maybe he was lucky," says Realgar. He looks around and coughs. "Looks to me like Marcas was one o' them amateur alchemists. Lead into gold sorta thing."

"Amateur?" says I.

"They stumble on unstable compounds, I hear." In answer to my look, he elaborates, "My boss is one, you know."

"You make it an accident?"

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“Whatta you want me to do, Nick?” Realgar says. “It’s a small town. I put it out there’s a small Frenchman blowing up blacksmiths, I got bigger problems. So yeah, an accident. For now.”

“I never knew Marcas to be mixed up in all that,” I tell Realgar, “and I worked with him.”

Realgar coughs again.

“It’s darker than a Moor’s ass tonight. No moon. Have to come back in the morning after the smoke clears.”

But he doesn’t.

~

We bury Marcas the next day, in the claustrophobic weed-grown cemetery of the parish church, only it’s not much of a funeral because of the interdict.

Bishop Saltpeter, a white haired crone in a peaked miter lurks among a knot of white-robed monks apart from the rest of us mourners graveside. He watches the pallbearers lower the casket but makes no move to speak.

King John refused the Pope’s man for Archbishop of Canterbury, see, and the Pope put the whole country on notice. Means no weddings, no baptisms, no communion, no confession and no funerals. It’s up to us to put our

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friends and loved ones in the ground. Church's closed for business.

Among the crowd are Cadmia and Warin, Sheriff Realgar, and standing apart, two women. One's an aristocrat in fine frock, maybe mid-thirties. The other holds a withered rose. She's a decade younger, probably the maidservant.

I'm in a kind of haze brought on by grief and frequent nips from my pewter hip flask. Cadmia pats my shoulder, takes the flask away. The crowd stands around the grave, unsure how to proceed.

"Idn't right," I say to Cadmia. "Somebody oughta say something. Somebody oughta *do* something."

I look around, but no one moves.

"Fine," says I, weave to a nearby monument, and hoist myself up.

"It's not fair," I tell them. "Marcas was a good man. Clever man. Best blacksmith I ever knew. A regular Tubal Cain. Did things with iron you'd give your ball peen for. He made me this—" I pull out the broken crossbow, and stare at it. "S' not working right now, but that's not the point. What was I saying? Oh, yeah." I put the crossbow back in my coat. The crowd grumbles.

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“He deserves more than this,” I say. “He deserves a real eulogy, and I can’t give him that. But I can give him justice—and I will—because Marcas was murdered!”

“No!” says a woman in the crowd.

“Yes, he was,” says I. “I’m going to find out by whom. I’ve got experience in these things. I’ll find who’s responsible, swear to God.”

I make the sign of the cross, spit on the ground, and glare at them all, especially Bishop Saltpeter.

~

The rest of that day, I canvas the town. I ask at every door if anyone saw or knew anything about what happened to Marcas. I get the usual responses to a man like me: hostility, resistance, ignorance and ridicule.

I hand the peasants little parchment rolls as if the poor sots can read, and say,

“Find me at this address if you change your mind.”

Mostly, they shut the door in my face. Some open it back up, take the parchment, throw it on the ground and shut the door again. In short, it’s the kind of day after which a man needs a drink. I have a lot of those.

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At sunset, on my way home, I notice two cloaked figures dogging my steps. Could be about any number of things, none of them good. My last run-in with a cloaked figure didn't work out well at all, so I'm sure not going to let these two get the drop on me. I trudge up the stairs, try to act casual, go through my door. I crank the gear on my wooden window louvers and look out to see the two figures enter the tower's base.

I push a button on my table, and a spring-loaded contraption strikes flint against steel to light a self-trimming oil lamp. I hang my coat and hat on a stand between the lamp and the door so's to cast a Nick Gauntlet-shaped silhouette on the door's leaded glass window, then stand against the wall out of sight.

A knock on the door.

"What?" I shout.

"The sign on the door says 'private knight,'" comes the reply. A woman's voice.

"Yeah, as in 'go away.'"

"I thought you were some kind of man for hire. I can pay."

I open the door and see the two ladies from earlier that

day, their hoods thrown back now, but cagey all the same.

“You were at the funeral,” says I.

“So were you,” says the tall one. The dame.

“Made a bit of a scene, fair to say,” I rub bleary, bloodshot eyes.

“I’m Lady Antimony of Calomel,” the tall one introduces herself.

“The Duke’s wife? Either I’m coming up in the world or you’re going down,” I tell her.

“You said you have experience,” says Antimony.

“Something you wanna tell me?” says I.

“My maid does, don’t you Galena?” Antimony drags Galena front and center. The girl looks from me to Antimony, cowed.

“It’s okay,” I tell her in spite of myself. I don’t like to see a woman terrified.

“I was in confession, sir,” she says. “I overheard Bishop Saltpeter talking to one of his men. He told them, sir—” she looks to Antimony for reassurance.

“Go on,” Antimony says.

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“We have to stop the alchemist,’ he said.”

“Then what happened?” I prompt. She tugs at her skirt.

“I followed him, sir, far as the smithy. Then I ran to tell my lady.”

“So?” I ask.

“So a church agent was the last known person to see Marcas the blacksmith alive,” Antimony says, haughty. “Don’t you find that interesting?”

“Guess you should come in,” says I.

The women follow me in. I move the hat-stand, flop into a wooden chair to face Antimony and Galena.



“Did you invent all these?” Antimony examines the devices on my shelves.

“Marcas helped,” I tell her.

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“Curious,” she spins a small metal part on one. I put my feet on the rough-hewn table and roll a cigarette.

“I’m a curious guy,” I say, “but why are you telling me this?”

“Because, like you,” Antimony clears her throat, “I believe it was not an accident. It may even have been a church hit. And if you’re looking into it, I can make it worth your while to keep me informed.”

I lean back in my chair, finally in familiar territory. This is what I’m good at.

“What’s your interest?” I ask her.

“Never mind that,” she says. “Will you do it?” Very cagey.

“The Duke keeps you in cosmetics, doesn’t he?” I say by way of changing the subject. “Paints, dyes, that sort of thing?”

Antimony says, “So?”

“Make ‘em himself?” I lean forward.

“Everyone knows what my husband is,” Antimony almost snaps. “That’s not the point.”

“Just like to have everything up front,” says I. “Well, if the Duke’s really an alchemist, my fee shouldn’t be a problem.”

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I get three ducats or six chickens a day, plus expenses. I prefer the ducats.”

“Bit steep, aren’t you?” Antimony raises an eyebrow.

“The code says I have to serve ladies with chastity,” I tell her, “not charity.”

“What code is that? Surely not the knight’s—”

“Old habits,” I cut her off.

“My lord has all the gold, or says he does,” Antimony looks at Galena. “But I have something else that might interest you, if my sources are correct.”

Galena takes a flagon from her blouse, sets it on the desk. I uncork it, sniff.

“*Aqua vitae*,” Antimony tells me.

“Water of life?” I ask.

“It’s a good year,” says Galena.

“You think so?” I put back the cork, set it aside and stare at them. “I’ll find the killer,” I go on, “bring him to justice. You wanna keep me in brandy wine for doing it, that’s your look-out.”

“Is that a vow, Knight?” Antimony wants to know.

“It’s a deal, anyway,” says I. “You wanna be careful with vows.”

“Tell me about it,” Antimony nods.

“Now if you ladies will excuse me,” I stood up, “I’ve got a date with a pile of straw.” I nod at the hay in the corner. The women get up, head for the door.

“At least we left something to keep you warm,” Antimony says.

“It’s cold comfort, Lady, let’s not mince words.”

“As you wish,” says Antimony.

I move gingerly around my table, grab the bottle.

“Oh, one other thing,” I eject before they reach the door. The two ladies pause and turn.

“How did you go to confession,” I ask Galena, “what with the interdict?”

She blinks.

“It was September twenty-ninth,” she says. In answer to my look, she goes on, “The feast of St. Michael, for the settling of accounts. The bishop still has to hear confession on the holy days of obligation.”

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“Oh,” says I, “Course. Guess it pays to know your church calendar.”

The women leave. I sit on the pile of straw in the corner and uncork the bottle. Marcas said it was the head, but the head of what? The town? The guard? The local parish, or one of its members? I take a long pull.

It’s hard to believe, Marcas survived the siege of Acre, but now he’s dead. Roasted like a Michaelmas goose. Must’ve owed one hell of a debt. But to whom?

~

I’m in the smithy at the remains of the workbench trying to repair my broken crossbow when Sheriff Realgar clambers into the ruin and finds me. The burned timbers are brittle and glisten like caramelized sugar.

“Neighbors told me you were prowling around in here,” he says.

“There oughta be a law,” I retort.

“Nick, this isn’t gonna go hard, is it?” Realgar asks.

“Hard as it needs to,” says I. “He was my friend, Realgar. My partner. Besides, I thought you were going to come back yesterday.” He just glares, and after a minute says, “I trust you didn’t move too much.”

I hold up a piece of the crossbow and say, “Look for yourself, I’ll just be a minute.”

Realgar sighs, glances around—a golden gleam in the early morning sun catches his eye.

“Huh,” he says, bends close to the smoke-blackened wall, and inspects the tiny clockwork cogs stuck in it.

“Gears,” he says. “Half buried in the wall from the force of the blast, I’d say.” Realgar takes out his belt knife, digs at it.

“Know what that means?” I say. I don’t look up.

“Could’ve been on the workbench when—”

“No, it wasn’t an unstable compound. It was a device. How about those scraps of paper, any kind of writing you recognize?”

Realgar notices the ashy bits of parchment I indicate. He picks some up. They’re covered in strange, archaic script.

“Some are alchemical symbols, but the rest... does it matter?”

“The man could barely read. Didn’t need to, job like his.”

“Who’d want to kill an alchemist?” Realgar shakes his head.

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“Well,” say I, “the usual motivators are gold, power and l’amour. Alchemists supposedly possess the secret to all three, so that narrows the list of suspects to pretty much everyone in town.”

“And you’ve been asking around,” says Realgar.

I concentrate on my crossbow.

“Marcas was well-liked,” I tell him, “but he was never suspected of alchemy. Not smart enough.”

“Been meaning to talk to you about that. He may not have been smart, but you are. I’m trying to run an investigation here, and this isn’t helping.”

He tosses a cigarette-sized roll of paper on the table.

“Practically raining parchment,” I observe.

“This one’s got your name on it,” says Realgar. “Says to look you up. People are uneasy. The Duke has me cracking down until the villain is caught. Search the barns, empty the streets, that sort of thing. They can’t read this, but they know it means trouble. That makes it my problem.”

“People aren’t stupid,” says I. “Wind blows their door down, they know which way it came in. Who’d kill an alchemist? My money’s on another alchemist.”

“God your mouth, Nick,” Realgar shakes his head again. “The Duke has me beating every bush and bushel. He’s looking for a scapegoat. I don’t need to find any more of those,” he jabs a finger at my parchment.

I hold the partly re-assembled crossbow together as I adjust the tension. Realgar goes on,

“Maybe you should help me instead of lone wolfing it all the time.”

The crossbow flies apart with a loud snap, traps my fingers.

“Damn it!” I kick the table and howl in rage. It doesn’t make me feel better. I shove the remaining pieces of the crossbow aside, and pick up a singed short blade from a rack of similar implements scattered into piles on the earth floor.

“You’re a civilian now, Nick,” Realgar warns me with a look. “You know I can’t let you bear an arm.” Knives and crossbows don’t count as arms, in a classical sense. Swords do; only a knight can carry one of those. Commoners aren’t allowed.

“It’s not a sword,” says I. “It’s a Baselard, also known as a Swiss dagger.” I demonstrate: “It’s got a narrow tang, no cross guard, and a blade under fourteen inches. It’s legal.”

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“Barely,” says Realgar. I wedge the blade in my shoulder holster.

“We’re not going to quibble about length, are we?”

The Sheriff and I share a lopsided smile.

“I don’t think it was the Duke,” Realgar holds up the parchment scraps. “Doesn’t fit. Come talk to him, you’ll see.”

Chapter 3

Realgar and I approach the gates of the Duke's castle. It's a common kind of keep, especially for the north—timber construction painted to resemble stone. The guards cross their halberds.

“The Duke order a new dog?” The first guard, stocky chap name of Borin, had no room to talk. He looks at me and sniffs.

“Likes to experiment on ‘em, you know,” adds Aleric, his enlongated counterpart.

“Easy boys,” says Realgar. “Nick’s with me.”

The guards back off, let us pass, but I can't resist and lean in close to Borin.

“Used to serve a castle,” I tell him, “bigger’n this one. My specialty was hanging pikes like you from the ramparts.”

“Come on, Nick,” Realgar pulls me away.

“Heel, boy,” Borin calls after me, and I struggle against Realgar's grip.

“By their ankles!” I shout.

Aleric actually barks, the savage.

Realgar and I make our way across the courtyard and into the great hall, all stone columns and velvet drapes, where Duke Clissold of Calomel himself—a doddering old man in long, heavy robes—supervises the preparations for a banquet. A pack of Mastiffs snooze scattered about the hall in furry wrinkled lumps.

“The high table must be set with care,” he brandishes a cane at the servants, “to frame the subtleties between courses. The lower part of the hall can be four to a mess, but ensure there is enough venison and frumenty for the whole household.”

The servants scurry to meet his demands.

“Your Lordship,” says Realgar, “this is Nick Gauntlet, the man I told you about.”

“Mmm, yes,” he acknowledges. “To whom do you owe fealty?” he asks me without looking away from the table.

“Like to feel it out as I go,” says I.

“I heard you broke your oath,” says Calomel, “deserted the holy crusade, now you wash up here.”

“Hard not to do more harm than good in Palestine,” I tell him. “Ask any crusader.”

Calomel inspects some linen a servant’s brought, dismisses

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him. Apparently he doesn't like the color.

"I went on crusade you know," he says. "When I was younger. My brothers and I knew our duty."

"Then you know it's not for granted a knight'll be a good person," I retort. "There's no test, King just tamps a sword on his shoulder. Lot of times he's just a thug in an expensive suit of armor."

"The knight," asks Calomel, "or the king?"

"I was a conscientious objector," I say. "You got an objection to that?"

"I seek purification and truth by distillation, synthesis, and transmutation," says Calomel. "I don't let emotions and base matters cloud my observations." Then he turns to a servant, says "My dish is to be heaped up with delicacies, so I may give to all at high table."

"Maybe you can give us something, then," I say, and gesture to Realgar. "You recognize this gear?"

Realgar hands me the scraps of paper we found in the smithy, the ones with the cryptic writing. The Duke slips on a pair of homemade spectacles and inspects them.

"Where did you find these?" He looks up at me.

“Secret chamber at the smithy,” I say. “You read ‘em?”

“No, I...” Calomel stutters. “They’re not alchemical equations, if that’s what you mean. They look like notes, scrawled in haste you see. But I don’t know the forms.”

“What about the clockwork?” I hand him the miniature gears.

The Duke sits in a throne-like chair at the head of the table, and inspects it.

“Brass,” he says, “an alloy of copper and zinc.” He looks closer. “Some stress cracking, probably from exposure to ammonia,” he says, and hands it back. “Fine work.”

“Wasn’t anything like it in the smithy,” I tell him, “says to me he made it to order. But what client in this town needs a fine-tooled brass gear?”

“What are you implying?” asks Calomel.

“That with all your knowledge and methods,” I say, “you can cast more light on this mystery than you have.”

“I’m a busy man, sir, very busy,” blusters Calomel. “I have nobles from three townships arriving to feast in—”

“A man’s death, your Lordship,” I interrupt, “demands more than superficial observation. So distill me some

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truth.”

The Duke climbs out of his chair.

“You’re a persistent malady, Master Gauntlet,” he says.

“So they tell me,” I agree.

“I’ll introduce you to my assistant,” Calomel tells me. “She can perform some tests, perhaps tell you a bit more.”

“Fine,” I say, and gesture ‘after you.’ Calomel leads us to a heavy tapestry.

“Don’t expect too much,” he says. “Alchemy is a delicate craft. Pursuit of the infinite will always be part science, part religion.”

“I’m not a man of faith,” I fold the scraps of parchment and tuck them in my coat pocket, “but I try to keep an open mind.”

Calomel parts the tapestry to reveal a circular stone staircase, gestures me through.

“Behind every veil,” he says, “is a reality we choose most often to ignore. Peek behind the veil, you may find more than your mind is capable of.”

“I’ll take that chance,” I say, and step through.

We descend the stone staircase into a cluttered dungeon—a subterranean world full of tubs, baths, cellars and vats, tanks and furnaces, vessels and stores, alembics, cucurbits and retorts, spiral condensers and a giant iron cauldron. The room’s almost as big as the great hall, and extends under the courtyard all the way to the outer battlements. It’s another laboratory, another den of subterfuge. A place for people yearning to be more than they are. Through the haze of steam I can make out Galena—Antimony’s maidservant—minding the Duke’s bubbling experiments.

“My assistant, Galena,” Calomel introduces her. “Raised in a convent before she came to live with me. Not the ablest of pupils, but she’s coming along.”

Galena gives me a warning look not to let on I already know her, and I decide to play along for now.

“Nice to meet you,” I say. I lay my glove on the table, the gears we found at the smithy glitter in its palm.

“Galena,” Calomel picks one up, hands it to her. “How do we determine the composition of brass?”

“Dissolve in a solution of *aqua fortis* and examine the resulting color, my Lord,” says she.

“Very good,” he gestures to the gear. “Proceed.”

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I watch her work as Calomel moves off to speak with Realgar, no doubt to express displeasure at my presence. Galena puts the tiny gear in a vial and measures a portion of acid into it.

“Don’t breathe the fumes,” she tells me. The acid hisses and turns a light blue. “Alchemy,” says Galena, “is about more than mixing chemicals. It’s part philosophy, part analogy. Its processes are circumscribed in metaphor, recording not just how to mix exploding powder, but to achieve the betterment of self.”

“You don’t strike me as an unable pupil,” says I.

She gives me a wan smile.

“Every element has its place in the order,” she says, “and I’m a common one. But I play my part.”

I realize I’m a bit out of my usual depth here, and I stash a pocket-sized copy of the Jabirian Corpus in my coat for later study.

Galena lifts the vial with metal tongs, takes it to the fire to examine its color, and almost drops it in. Calomel must be spryer than he looks, because suddenly he’s past me, snatches the vial, and strikes Galena with his cane all in one swift motion.

“Not like that, foolish girl!” He snarls.

“I’m sorry, my Lord!” Galena covers her head.

Calomel holds the vial up to the firelight.

“Hmm, fascinating,” he says, and glares at Galena. “What do you see?”

“A high percentage of zinc and base metals,” she says. “It’s an unusual alloy, but not unheard of.”

“And not easily arrived at,” adds Calomel. “It requires co-melting of a kind known only in the East.”

“Or by those who’ve traveled there,” I lean on the table, and eye him close. “Perhaps in the crusades. Lotta alchemy came from the East, didn’t it, Duke?”

“This alloy was also known in ancient Greece,” Galena pipes up, “for the construction of spheres.”

“But why would Marcas hide an orrery or an astrolabe?” I ask. “They’re no secret.”

“Is it possible he was working on something more exotic?” asks Realgar.

Calomel shares a look with Galena as he studies the clockwork.

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“A Brazen Head. Or an attempt at one, at least.”

“Brazen who?” I ask.

“Head,” says Galena as Calomel pages through his manuscripts and hermetic illustrations. “It’s a sacred alchemical goal, one of them. A prophetic device.”

“Based on the designs of Archimedes,” Calomel shows us a drawing of a brass clockwork skull. “It can compute the answer to any conundrum you set.”

“Use one of those now, couldn’t we?” says I.

“What do you mean?” asks Calomel.

“Maybe you were threatened by Marcas achieving what you couldn’t,” I suggest. “Maybe you killed him for it.”

“Nick, please—” Realgar moans.

“Alchemy is a cumulative art,” Calomel grunts as he stuffs his drawings away. “We’re feared by peasants and persecuted by the church. It would be folly for us to prey on each other.”

“Besides,” says Galena, “if a Brazen Head were possible, my lord would have made one.”

“Indeed,” huffs Calomel. “Now, that’s really all the time I have today. I trust you can see yourselves out, Sheriff?”

We can, and as I climb the circular stair, I deliberately leave my glove among the Duke's experiments.

~

Dismissed, Realgar and I head back down the hall.

"Proper respect isn't something you're capable of, is it?" Realgar asks me.

"Don't know," says I, "never tried."

According to my stolen copy of Jabir—the Arabic father of Alchemy—Calomel's a compound of mercury you can use for everything from a skin lightener to a laxative. Makes sense, I can't wait to be rid of this town. Just have to see Marcas settled, I figure, and I'll shake its crust off my boots.

"Good day, Knight," a woman's voice calls from somewhere above me. Realgar and I turn to see Lady Antimony descend a grand staircase and beckon me over.

"This I don't need," Realgar sighs in long suffering disgust. "Stay out of trouble, Nick. I'm late for inspection of the guard," he says, and stalks off. Antimony leans against a pillar, revealing her leg, and a flagon held at waist level, beneath her robe.

"See anything you want?" she asks me.

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“That my per diem?” I ask, and jump when she shouts,

“Galena!”

Lady Antimony ushers me into her boudoir, a room bedecked with dark wood, candles, copper mirrors and portraits of herself. She stands before an especially large one, takes a sip from the flagon, and lets me smell it.

“It’s good,” she teases.

“I’ll be the judge of that,” I grab it from her, take a short pull, and wheeze. Antimony snatches it back.

“Not all at once,” she says.

Galena rushes into the room, and is momentarily taken aback to see the two of us there. A flash of something—jealousy?—crosses her face.

“Prepare my hot box,” Antimony commands.

“Excuse me?” I ask. Did I hear her right?

“The fire is already stoked, my Lady,” Galena tells her through gritted teeth.

“Um...” I scratch my stubble.

“A place where we can talk in private.”

She takes off her robe, and clad only in a skimpy shift,

climbs into a dark wooden cabinet which opens off her room. It has two benches arrayed around a pile of rocks in a brazier on the floor. The heat coming off them gives Antimony a run for her ducats. I make to join her, but she holds up a hand.

“If you want to follow me into the dragon’s lair, Knight,” says Antimony, “you’ll have to remove your tunic.” My hesitation earns an eyebrow, delicately arched. “You have to serve a lady,” Antimony presses on, “that’s what your chivalric code says, isn’t it?”

I pull off my tunic, willing to see where this leads, but pretty sure I’ll regret it.

“You know the word ‘chivalry’s’ based on the French for ‘horse,’” I tell her. “Only one part of a horse you generally call a person.”

Antimony admires my physique. Duke must not make much time for her.

“You think you could love me, Knight?” She pulls at my belt. I’ll admit that one takes me by surprise. I duck into the heat chamber. Antimony shuts the door behind me, and leans against it.

“Wouldn’t dream of loving a woman I couldn’t marry,” I say, quoting the code but not entirely truthful.

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“Marriage is no excuse for not loving,” Antimony tells me. “No one should be deprived of love. Don’t you want to rescue me?”

She pours a bit of *aqua vitae* on the rocks, and they steam.

“I need another drink,” says I. She teases me with the flagon. I take the bottle from her glistening talon and drink.

“Clissold,” she says, “my husband, invented this. It’s heated by the furnaces below. I believe he thought heat could purify him, or transmute him into a dragon, or some such nonsense.”

“He got the hot part right,” says I, “thing makes me dizzy.” I take another, longer pull.

“I just like the way it feels,” Antimony takes the bottle back, drinks too. It’s beginning to work. I’m burning up, inside and out. “How are you coming with my proposal?” Antimony says in a lowered voice. “Uncovered anything useful?”

I eye her legs. The shift’s a bit bulky, but it’s not a deal-breaker.

“Still working out the kinks,” I say. “I think your husband did it.”

“Bit of a stretch,” she extends her limbs, enjoys the heat.

“Long shot’s better than none,” I take another drink and sweat. She watches me.

“You should be ashamed,” says Antimony, “giving my husband a hard time.”

“I’m not the only one,” I tell her. “Duke’s a figurehead. Everybody abuses him for their own purposes.”

“Is that so?” she says. Something in her look makes me crazy. My pocket Jabir says Antimony hardens lead, and I believe it. It also causes headache, dizziness, and depression. In a large enough dose, it causes violent vomiting and will kill you in a few days. Without thinking, I kiss her. She returns it at first, then breaks it off.

“What about the church, Sir Knight?” she asks.

“They’re not here right now,” says I.

“I mean the information my maid supplied,” Antimony puts a hand on my chest. “Have you found out what it means?”

“One thing at a time,” says I.

“What happened to chastity?”

“Huh?”

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“Your code.”

“Forget the code.”

We kiss some more, she breaks it off again.

“This is foolhardy, Knight,” she tells me. “I’m no object to quest after.”

“Every search ends somewhere,” I whisper in her ear. “I’d be a fool to give up when conquest’s within my grasp.” I kiss her again, deeper. I’m hungry. It’s been a long, long time. She breaks it off with finality.

“I’ll call the guards,” she warns me. “Then we’ll see who conquers whom,” and she pours the rest of the bottle on the rocks. “Quit fooling around. Not another drop until you bring the bishop to justice.”

“Lady,” I tell her, “you are toxic.”

“Poison is at times the price of beauty,” she pushes me away with an inscrutable smile. I stagger out of the sauna in a cloud of steam, and gather up my clothes. I slip them back on, wetter than a dog in a pond and feeling twice as foul.

“Have it your way,” I say. “Guess you usually do.”

“Give my regards to the Bishop,” says she.



POISON IS
THE PRICE OF
BEAUTY.

HAVE IT
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Chapter 4

I thread the wooded path towards the parish church, a rustic chapel in the Norman style—sloped towers with witch-hat tops. It isn't the first time I've been to church on account of a lady, and it never ends well. But the church is involved, or the lady and her maid are going out of their way to make me think it is. Either way's worth a look.

A man in black armor stops me at the church door.

"Where d'you think you're going?" his loutish voice resonates from within the black great helm, an accent so thick it sounds put on.

"I'm on to see the bishop," I say.

"They got an interdict going," says he. "Church's closed."

"I'm not here on religious business," I tell him, "though some righteous indignation may be involved."

"Don't matter," he crosses armored arms thick as cannonballs. "Bishop Saltpeter won't see anyone. 'Specially you."

"And you are?"

"Sir Gallium Bismuth," he says. "You've heard of me."

“The Black Knight of Wismuth?” I try not to laugh, not hard anyway. He’s not really a knight, o’ course. I observe his crossbow and the way his black armor begins to tarnish around the edges. Just another mercenary like me—hired muscle. Can’t see his face with that big black tankard on his head, but I don’t like the look of him all the same.

“Didn’t they get you for dodging scutage?”

“Whatage?”

“Tax evasion.” See what I mean? Thick as a stone. Bismuth points his crossbow at my heart.

“A scurrilous lie, which I will gladly prove in trial by combat.”

“Pretty words for a ploc with no sword,” says I.

“Don’t need a sword to best a bum like you.”

“Fine,” I tell him. “More’n one way to scale a tower.”

I shove my hands in my coat pockets and lope away.

~

Out of his sight, around the corner, I climb an ivy-covered buttress. I teeter along the rib vaulted timbers of the church roof, let myself in through a high window, and climb down the steep wall.

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Not really sure what I'll find inside, apart from the usual spoils of selling prayers. Despite what they'd have you believe, the clergy are just regular puds; Romans trying to hang on to the last of their relevance, replacing the loss of political power with spirituality. The question is, what does a bishop do with his time when there's no sermon to write?

I fall behind the altar with a crunch. When I get up, Bismuth stands behind me.

"Knew you'd circle round the t' back," he says. "Time for that trial. Gonna enjoy knocking your teeth out."

I stand gingerly, and we circle each other as I draw my short sword.

"You wanna surrender," I tell him, "now's the time."

We lunge at each other.

I go for the joints, the weak parts of his armor, but Bismuth knocks me off my feet and into the altar. He's strong as three oxen. Bismuth fires his crossbow. The bolt barely misses my face, sticks in the delicate decorative woodcarving at my back.



Austin McKinley

I tear the altar cloth away from the shaft and throw it over Bismuth's head as he tries to reload.

"Agh!" The grunt is hollow and muffled. I swing the short sword, but it clangs off Bismuth's armor.

Armor's handy that way, sure. Cuts down on the minor scrapes that like to get infected, but it isn't what makes a knight. Without it I have speed, savvy, and those sparkling lights when I get hit in the face. Come to think of it, the armor might be a key ingredient after all.

Bismuth lashes out with a foot, and I sprawl into the pews.

"Bad form!" He shouts after me. "You're rusty, Gauntlet. I heard you used to be good."

"We all have our crosses to bear."

I scramble up and swing again, but Bismuth steps aside and the short sword lodges in a pew back. Bismuth punches me in the face with an armored fist. I taste copper.

"Upshot is," I spit blood, "now I've broken in you'll have to take me to the bishop."

Bismuth advances, crossbow ready.

"Yeah, but I'll have to subdue you. That's the fun part."

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“Not if I subdue you first.” I stagger back and fall. Bismuth takes aim.

“Goodbye, Gauntlet.”

My foot lashes out before he can pull the trigger. I kick the crossbow out of Bismuth’s hands, roll backwards into a crouch, catch it, and fire. I can’t count the number of Saracens I fooled with that trick, but the bolt ricochets off. The look on my face must be worth more than the large gold cross Bismuth holds across his chest.

“T’ Lord’s my shield,” he says, and clubs me with the cross. I’m too dazed to defend myself, and he hits me again. I curl in a ball on the floor. Bismuth adjusts his grip and winds up for a powerful drive.

“The Bishop’ll hear your confession now,” Bismuth says, and swings away.

~

Bismuth’s kick wakes me up; that’s what the Greeks call symmetry.

“What the—” says I. “Oh, right.”

I’m cloistered, hanging by my arms from rope slung over a rafter in the Bishop’s study. I work my jaw, feel for loose teeth with my tongue. The Bishop watches me from across

the room, his miter set aside for the moment.

“Bishop Saltpeter,” I presume.

“Sorry for the rough handling, my son,” Saltpeter says. “We’re forced to employ undesirables in a time of interdict. People get ideas we’re a soft target.”

Bismuth approaches with a glowing red poker from the fireplace.

“You miss the mark,” I say, “but not by much. That’s not why I’m here.”

“Why did you break into the church?”

“I’ll ask the questions,” I tell him. They say you should always cut to a guard, every attack contains a defense. Also works with words. Saltpeter laughs.

“You’re not in nearly as much distress as I’d expect. Do you know something I don’t?”

“Probably, but mostly it’s just that *aqua vitae*’s a powerful anesthetic.”

“Hmm,” the Bishop strokes his chin. “Perhaps we should resume when you’ve sobered up a bit.”

“Why wait,” I shrug despite the restriction, “It’ll hurt enough eventually.”

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“Your disrespect of my office must be discouraged by the strongest possible methods,” he nods to Bismuth, who grins. To me he says, “You know what I want, so just say whatever you feel.”

Bismuth burns me with the poker. I’m not going to say the pain isn’t incandescently unbelievable, because it is. But also in the back of my mind is the sure knowledge that, bad as this conversation’s going, it’ll only go worse if I don’t regain control. So I scream, loud as the bishop and Bismuth want me to, then recover, out of breath, and laugh.

“Some days you flog the Bishop,” I chuckle, “Some days the Bishop flogs you.”

They don’t find the joke as funny as I do, but they’re surprised enough for me to continue my line of questions.

“I have it that even in an interdict,” I gasp, “you still hear confession on holy days.”

“Of course,” says Saltpeter. “I’ll make an exception and hear yours if you like.”

“So that’s what you were doing on Michaelmas?” I ask.

“It’s what I *will* do,” Saltpeter tells me. “I belong to the Cistercian order, my son,” he indicates his white robe.

“We celebrate Michaelmas according to the old calendar, which will not be until the eleventh of October.”

“That’s news,” I say. “So where were you two nights ago?”

“At the Beverly Minster,” says Saltpeter. “It was a meeting of church officials convened by the archbishop of York. I have witnesses. Surely you tire of this.”

He refers, of course, to the sanctuary town of Beverly, a monastery that borders Calomel. Those who flee the law find solace there if they can escape across a line of standing stones that form the border of its influence—influence no local lawman’ll challenge. Easy enough to verify.

Bismuth burns me again. I cough.

The poker goes back in the fire. Embers dance in Bismuth’s black armor. I’ve gotten to where I can savor the split second of numbness before the pain comes—my fleet blessings, too numerous to count. It’s probably too soon to think about Antimony dressing these scars. Come on, Gauntlet, I tell myself. You faced Saladin’s hordes, you can face this.

“So you weren’t here telling this pewter-head to stop the alchemist?” I jerk my head at Bismuth.

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“I’m not sorry to see an alchemist come to grief,” Saltpeter says. “It’s no secret I’ve tried to have the Duke excommunicated for years, but he’s always stopped short of outright heresy.”

“And you don’t consider killing him or his followers a solution to that problem?”

“Two wrongs don’t make a right, my son,” Saltpeter says. “Confess. I’ll take an eye next.”

Bismuth burns me again. It just makes me meaner.

“Equation don’t balance ‘till you know who did what when, and who knew about it,” says I.

“Excuse me?” Saltpeter’s manner changes—he holds up a hand to stop Bismuth, who looks disappointed.

“How many wrongs it takes to right it,” I tell him. “S’where his wife said you were.”

“The Duke’s wife is a lying whore,” Saltpeter leers, “I though that was abundantly clear. You wouldn’t believe what she was willing to offer in exchange for reduced penance.”

“Bet I would,” I say.

“You’re here about the blacksmith,” Saltpeter finally gets

it.

“I made a promise,” says I.

“And a knight is as good as his word,” Saltpeter nods, “Fire away.”

Bismuth shifts, restless, eager to get back to work.

“It’s okay, son,” Saltpeter says. I’m not sure which of us he means, but I take the initiative.

“Cistercians are ascetics,” I say by way of confirmation. “Seems someone like an alchemist—who pursues human perfection through learning and chemical means rather than prayer—would be a particular threat to you.”

“It must be convenient,” says Saltpeter, “not believing in anything.”

“Sure, I believe in something,” says I. “I have a code.” Saltpeter raises an eyebrow, so I recite, “Your master obey with bravery. The weak defend with valor. Your name protect with honor. A lady serve with chastity.”

“You live by those words?” he asks.

“Well, it’s a code,” I tell him. “Haven’t really deciphered it yet. Always had trouble with the ‘chastity’ part. Gather you have, too.”

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Saltpeter paces the room.

“We Cistercians are not conservative to the point of foolishness. We’ve instituted advances in water power, metallurgy... farming techniques unheard of a century ago.” Saltpeter takes the charred scraps of paper—he must have searched my pockets—from the table, continues in a more thoughtful tone, “We foster scholarship and learning wherever we found an abbey.”

“Good for you,” I say, “bet you’re still against anything you can’t control. Most folks are.”

“*God* is in control,” says Saltpeter, “it is the lot of man to obey his commands and those of his chosen servants.”

“Well if you’re so learned,” I nod at the parchment scraps, “perhaps you can tell me what those mean.”

He looks at the tattered fragments, then back to me. “These are Tironian notes.”

“Come again?” I ask.

“A kind of shorthand,” Saltpeter explains, as didactic as if he were back in the pulpit, “developed by Marcus Tullius Tiro, scribe of the poet Cicero in antiquity. We taught them in monasteries until a few years ago. Look,” he demonstrates, holds the scraps up to the firelight, “each

of the symbols stands for a word. There are thousands of them.”

“You can read those?” I ask.

“It’s fragmentary, of course,” he concedes, “but they seem to be part of a recipe, or a set of instructions. Probably dictated and taken down by a scribe. This looks quite dangerous.”

“Trust a clergyman to recognize a dangerous form of dictation,” says I.

“Clever,” Saltpeter waggles a finger at me, “Independent. A certain disrespect for temporal authority. I could use a man like you. You know we’ve been preaching crusade, but the people lack conviction.”

“I wonder why,” I can’t disguise my sarcasm, “Byzantium has been sacked. What else could the western church want?”

“There’s much yet to do. The heretical Albigensians of Occitania to begin with. As we speak a holy army marches against Languedoc.”

“Cause the people there don’t subscribe to your sacraments?” I knew about this. The Cathars had taken to a different understanding of the holy mysteries.

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“I’ve been to Béziers as a Papal Legate,” Saltpeter scowls back at me. “They’re barbarians. An archdeacon was killed just this year by their intrigue.”

“Shame,” I twist from my ropes.

“And mark my words,” Saltpeter continues, “before long another papal bull will call for the re-conquest of Jerusalem.”

“I was telling someone as much the other day,” says I.

“So consider before you reject my offer,” Saltpeter barrels on. “A successful crusade could go a long way to restoring your social status, Sir Nicholas of Gloucester.”

“If you know who I am,” I tell him, “then you know I was with King Richard’s army at Acre. You know what he did to the prisoners there, despite his terms with Saladin.”

“A promise to a heathen is no promise at all.”

“You weren’t there,” I lean close as I can despite the restraints. “We sacked Christian towns, too. I saw men of God knee-deep in Christian blood,” I say. “I saw monks slaughter children like animals, looking for swallowed jewels. ‘Kill them all,’ they told us, ‘the Lord will recognize his own.’ If that’s social status, I don’t want it. I tried to do service for king and country, but what if my king’s the

monster I was meant to fight?”

The Bishop takes a step back at this bit of outright sedition.

“I’ve done things in the service of the church I’m not proud of, son,” he says, a little quieter now, “but God will forgive me. These alchemists, however—the Duke, your friend Marcas—commit mortal arrogance before God and deserve damnation. As does the blacksmith’s killer. You cannot achieve perfection apart from God.”

“Or indulgence would be money wasted.” I’m disinclined to be charitable. Saltpeter crumples the parchment.

“You can abandon the church, my son, but the church will never abandon you.”

“Except in case of an interdict. Am I a prisoner here, or what?”

“No,” Saltpeter tosses the balls of parchment into the fire. “You clearly weren’t trying to steal anything. And you must know by now I am above suspicion. I suppose there’s no harm in letting you go.”

“But, your holiness—” Bismuth begins a protest.

“Cut him down,” commands Saltpeter.

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Bismuth cuts the ropes, and I drop to the cold stone floor. I find my footing and limp towards the door which Bismuth holds open. I look at Bishop Saltpeter, gave him my best bloody-toothed smile, and punch Bismuth in his black face mask.

Chapter 5

I trudge back through the slightly more secular confines of Calomel, go over the interview in my head. After I punched Bismuth, the bishop quoted me scripture. Be slow to anger, knock and the door will be opened. Truth'll set you free, sure. But whose truth?

Most knuckle-draggers are willfully blind in the face of truth, prefer to trust their own emotions. They'd rather fight it than accept the self-evident. That's the hardest part about my job, to admit the innocence of people I don't like, and declare the guilt of people I do.

I hate Saltpeter, no question. He's guilty of everything I expected: pride, war mongering, extortion, greed, and lust... everything except the murder of Marcas. I'm pretty sure about that.

I turn a corner, run right into one of Realgar's men.

"You have to come with us, Nick," the soldier tells me. I try to ignore him, go back the other way, but he isn't alone and the squad encircles me.

"Fair enough," I allow.

~

I stand by the window as Sheriff Realgar paces his office.

“What did I tell you, Nick?” He fumes.

“You’ve told me a lot of things,” I say, “it’s hard to keep track.”

He ignores this, continues,

“I just heard you broke into the parish church, and they had to chastise you.”

“Some days you flog the Bishop--” I begin.

“It isn’t funny, Nick,” says Realgar.

“The bishop’s muscle refused me a meeting. I had to insist.”

“I can’t have you going about things this way,” Realgar sighs in exasperation. “This isn’t a siege. You can’t just batter your way—”

“The guy’s dirty, Sheriff,” Realgar breaks off as I turn to face him, “we all know it. I just don’t think he’s involved. Not this time.”

“He’s not the only one,” says Realgar. “I’ve tolerated you in my burg because I know you’re an okay churl. You serve a purpose. But if you make things hard for me, if you back me against a battlement, I’ll have to serve this.”

He tosses a sheaf of parchment across the table. It’s a

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wanted poster with a skillful two-color illumination of my mug—the one Prince John circulated upon my return to the country.

“Good likeness,” I say, “Where’d you get it?”

“Bishop’s man gave it me.”

It figured. Bismuth worked fast as hellebore, and came on twice as strong. Guess he didn’t appreciate the little chewing I gave him, and was looking for a way to chew back. But he likely had the bishop’s blessing in this case.

“Old news, but still true. There’s no statute of limitations on injuries to a king’s ego, or his brother’s. Some people, it’s a crime whether you do what they want or not.”

“I’m not asking you to do anything, Nick,” Realgar says. “We’ll settle accounts for Marcas. Don’t make me come after you as well.”

“Not sure that’s a promise I can make,” I tell him, and we stare each other down. There’s no doubt in my mind he’s sincere, but that doesn’t mean I let the civil service settle my debts.

~

The alley behind the Sheriff’s office is dark and thick with English fog, and Lady Antimony’s waiting for me when I

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step out. It's like a tunnel, but she's hardly a light at its end. She stands framed with the castle clock behind her. Poetic.

"You don't want to be seen with me right now," I tell her. "Had my hand in one too many hornet's nests."

She doesn't flinch, just looks at me with those big black eyes like lodestones, strangely attractive to iron. She's a crude compass I'm sure'll steer me wrong. I stare at her a moment, then kiss her.

She pries her mouth from mine, holds me at arm's length to inspect my bruises.

"Your standard's come unraveled, Knight," she says. I hiss as she touches my face. Her fingers find the tender spots, perhaps a bit deliberately? I nurse the wound.

"There're two kinds of people in this world," I say. "Those who see a thread, want to pull it and damn what happens."

I kiss her again, she breaks it off.

"And the other kind?"

"Can't think of 'em. Everyone wants to pull the thread."

I press her against the alley wall.

"I'm sorry I sent you after Saltpeter," she continues between kisses. "I lied to you, Nick."

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“I didn’t exactly believe your story,” I tell her. “I believed your *aqua vitae*.”

“But I almost got you killed,” she bites her lip, “and you’re more valuable to me alive. I’ve never had a knight before.”

“I doubt that’s strictly true.”

I know Antimony’s just using me to put one over on the old man, just another intoxicant to distract me from the past. Am I really numb enough to fall for her? Do I really have no honor left?



I’m willing to find out, but as my hands travel the usual pilgrim route to worship at the holy shrine, I meet some

unexpected iron works and stop in confusion.

“You got a chastity belt?” I blink. She looks away in what—for her—almost registers as embarrassment.

“That’s why I don’t want to lose you, Nick,” she says, her voice firm but far away. “You’re the only man in town clever enough to deal with this particular obstacle,” She indicates the belt.

“Not sure I know how,” says I.

“Course you do,” a second voice calls from the far end of the alley. “You wouldn’t want to disservice a lady.” I’d know that snide, pewter tankard tone anywhere.

“That you, Bismuth?” I sing out. “Bishop’s altar boy looking for another way to get the scepter?”

I take a step in front Antimony, squint through the mist as I draw my short sword. Bismuth steps out of the fog with nine burly thugs in his wake.

“What we don’t confess won’t hurt us,” says Bismuth. “Got a message for you—back off the alchemist or you’ll end up like Marcas.”

So the killer *is* an alchemist, or wants me to think so. Antimony puts a hand on my shoulder.

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“You still excel at arms, don’t you, Knight?” she asks.

“My arms are fine,” I tell her, “rest of me’s a bit tarnished.”

“Good, I’ll leave you to it,” she says, “I have a banquet to attend.” She bolts like a frightened mare out the end of the alley. The thugs part ways to let her go, and turn on me. No beef with her I guess, or is it more than that?

“You’re working for the alchemist now?” I ask Bismuth. “Thought the Bishop wanted him stopped.”

“He does, but we,” Bismuth indicates his backup, “don’t mind taking pagan money to rough you up a bit. Bishop pays good, but not that good.”

“You haven’t met him then?” I ask. “The alchemist?”

“Why d’you ask?” says Bismuth.

“No reason,” says I, and nod to my short sword. “Shall we?”

I’d like to think the fight I put up’s a brave one, but I’m outnumbered ten to one. Sometimes when you get hit, it’s so unexpected, you have to laugh. Yep, that’s the essence of comedy. The hit you don’t see coming, and the loose teeth.

I dodge and evade long as I can, even give a few cuts by

way of not selling myself cheap, but eventually they catch me and pummel me within an inch of senseless. I can't breathe—the sky turns a strange purple-yellow and I pass out.

~

The hands on the castle clock are advanced a ways when I come to, wondering where I went wrong. The fog is thicker and darker than ever. I feel like garbage and smell like garbage, so I'm not surprised to discover I'm lying in garbage. I am surprised to see Antimony's maid Galena looking down at me, a basket over her arm. She helps me sit upright.

"What are you doing here?" I ask her.

"I was headed to the market before it closed," she says. "Ingredients for a special dessert at the banquet. Flambé's my specialty."

"That so?" I check my joints and straightaways. "French dish, right?" says I, and drag myself to protesting feet. I'm not sure how they managed to hurt my feet, but muster what shoe leather I have left, and accompany Galena to the town market.

"I'm glad you're not dead," she tells me as we head down the high street to a square backs up to the castle's inner

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battlement.

“I’m not sure that’s how you’d best describe me,” says I.

Galena finds a fruit stall, spends some moments selecting wild pears and red currants.

“We have stores of honeyed water and spirits at the castle,” she tells me, “but the secret to a good flambé is fresh fruit.”

I nod, abstractly, and hear church bells, though I’m pretty sure we aren’t on the quarter hour.

“You sure you should continue with the case?” she notes my discomfort. “If it’s going to take this kind of toll, I mean.” Her look of concern seems genuine enough.

“What toll?” I wince.

“More than the damage a few bottles of *aqua vitae* can do,” says Galena. “Perhaps you should let Marcas rest before you’re killed as well.”

I shake my head again; the pain is a penance.

“Marcas was the best ironmonger I ever knew, and the best friend.”

Galena nods, looks at the fruit.

“Philosophically, iron represents a need to temper primal

urges, and at the same time embrace the fire within.”

“You don’t say,” I grunt, my head about to throb its way off my shoulders.

My vision’s slightly blurred, but one thing’s clear: Bismuth’s given me a lead on the alchemist and seeing as I only know one in town, I figure I’d like to limp along and stick a foot in the castle door again. After all, I still have a dagger in the cloak room—left my glove there in case I needed just such a pretense. I tell Galena about it, give her my best ‘don’t mind the garbage’ grin, and say,

“What would I have to do to take a pretty maid in waiting to the banquet?”

Galena laughs, blushes, links her arm in mine. Poor kid. Heart’s in the right place, I think. I take her basket for her, walk her out of the market square, and back down the high street towards the town’s inner gate.

~

The guards, Aleric and Borin, stop us at the gate.

“You again?” says Borin.

“The Duke’s party is invite only,” adds Aleric.

“Your wife said I had a standing invitation,” I tell him, and

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make an obscene gesture. Aleric grabs me, but I manage not to lose my cigarette.

“What’s your problem,” Aleric spits, “couldn’t find a gutter to crawl back into?”

“Suppose you talk to these bronze knockers for me,” I say to Galena, “tell ‘em I left my glove in the Duke’s magic mushroom cellar.”

“It’s okay, Borin,” she says, “he’s with me.”

“I thought you was with someone else,” Borin frowns.

“Shut up and open the gate,” says Galena.

~

I stride back to the table in the dungeon, pick up my glove, waggle it at Galena.

“Here it is!” I say, and stuff it in my belt. “Always putting things where they don’t belong.”

She hands me a pail of steaming water from the hearth.

“In case you want to clean the garbage off,” she says.

I smile, and strip to the waist. Galena watches me as I scrub, and I get the distinct impression she’s getting ideas. I finish, turn to face her.

“There,” I say, “respectable enough for this lot—”

Sure enough, Galena lunges, traps me against the table, and kisses me hard. I jump, but don’t resist. She breaks the kiss.

“Um—” says I.

“You still want to take me to the banquet?” She asks, her voice small.

I put my hand on her head, smooth her hair.

“Of course,” I say.

“How about you take me *here* instead?”

The mouth on this girl. I told you how long it had been, right? I don’t care why. Maybe it’s the dungeon, or the fire, or the fact someone actually wants me for a change, but I forget any other irons I may have had in the furnace.

We tear each other’s clothes off, she winces at the fresh burn marks on my flesh, but I don’t let it stop her. We climb partway onto the table and knock bottles over, which steam and hiss.

“Don’t breathe the fumes,” she tells me.

“Right,” says I, and we roll onto the floor. The stones are warm where we make love by the bellows and the giant

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iron cauldron. “God, your perfume,” I tell her, inhale deeply despite myself. The smithy explodes again in my brain.

Later, we lie by the fire wrapped in an oilcloth I pulled from the coal store, and trade swigs from a fresh flagon of *aqua vitae*. Galena nuzzles me, and I think hard.

“Sorry if I seem forward, my Lord,” she says.

“You do,” says I, “but I won’t complain. And don’t ‘my Lord’ me. I’m no better than you.”

“I think you are, my Lord. And I wanted to make up for...” she indicates my wounds, “everything.”

“You didn’t burn me with a poker.”

“But it happened following up on the information I gave you.” Women certainly will find a way to make everything their fault.

“It’s nothing,” I tell her. “And thank you,” I catch her eye, “my Lady.”

She giggles. It’s good to make someone laugh, and not just *at* me for once. Then she gasps.

“My flambé!” she says, “I have to get to the kitchen.”

She jumps up, whips the oilcloth off me.

“Whoa!” says I, suddenly exposed to the chill.

“Sorry—oh! Sorry,” says she, but she dresses underneath the oilcloth, best she can.

“S’all right,” says I. Can’t say I mind the cold, I spent too much time in the desert. I lie back, look at the ceiling, take a drink. She leans down, kisses me.

“Stay here,” she says, “I’ll be right back,” and she practically flies up the stairs.

Chapter 6

I watch her enter the banquet hall from the staircase behind the tapestry, and buckle my tunic. Expectant faces of the Duke and his guests peer out of the dim candlelight from behind a mountain of delicacies—fancy, showy stuff. Lots of cinnamon, a sign of wealth. A dozen or so of the Duke’s mastiffs gnaw castoff bones on the floor. It smells good, only fuels another kind of hunger in my belly.

Galena steals towards the head table wearing only a druid’s robe. Servants escort her, carrying a huge tray with an extravagant dessert of sponge cake and meringue shaped like standing stones.

“*Cluinnam seóltan,*” chants Galena in Gaelic, “*àrsaidag, na àitich cionn!* Hear me wise ones, old ones, those who dwell above;” She twirls, the robe almost reveals her as she dances around the dessert tray. “Hear my call and hear my voice, hear my earnest prayer. Send to me blessings of joy, of happiness, and love.”

She throws her arms at the dessert and it erupts in flame! The audience applauds. Galena grins, breathes heavily. Antimony scowls.

“I’ll bet it’s tart,” says she. I’ve seen enough.

The servants set the tray before the Duke, and he’s just

about to dig in when I flounder through the curtains from the lab.

“I figured it out, yer honor,” I declaim. All eyes turn to me. The dogs bark. Galena gasps. I stumble into the head table. Gotta knock off the *aqua vitae*, that stuff gets ahead of a man. “I figured it,” I repeat, “and I’m gonna make my case.”

“What are you doing here?” blusters the Duke. “What’s the meaning of this?”

“Marcas’s death, Calomel,” I say, “A man’s murder.”

“Murder!” one of the guests exclaims with the appropriate outrage.

“Yeah,” I say, “murder, plain and simple, but the how and the why were a puzzle.”

“Is this true, Calomel?” asks another of the noblemen.

“I... there was a death—” stammers the Duke.

“But who’s to blame?” I continue. “I swore to uncover the truth. Truth is, it could have been anyone in town had a beef with the blacksmith, but I knew Marcas. He had scruples.”

I pace the room, and continue, “There was evidence to

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suggest Bishop Saltpeter, on the grounds of dispatching a dangerous heretic, but he's a Cistercian and on the night in question he was walled away with his order, counting his gold and obeying the interdict."

I pass by the head table. "It could've been Lady Antimony or her maid Galena who fed me the false story." Galena looks horrified. I continue, "Could've been Realgar, acting on the Duke's orders." Realgar fumes from his place at the table.

"Nick—" he warns, but I don't listen.

"Are we approaching a point?" asks the first nobleman who spoke. "You seem to think everyone's a suspect!"

"Truer to say I think everyone's suspect," says I, "but the real culprit is you, Duke Calomel, who are guilty of not having a clue." I advance on the head table. The guards shift uneasily. "Doddering old fool, convinced of his lady's purity because he had a chastity belt made. Another rooster in the henhouse, eh?"

I reach over the table, and knock on Antimony's pelvis, CLANG! The guards leap to pull me off, but I stumble out of their reach. I grin at Calomel's obvious surprise.

"Bad news is, the other man's the one who made the belt—good old Marcas the blacksmith, the supposed rival

alchemist. How likely is it you think he didn't keep a key for himself?" I ape a little hammering action.

"No!" says the second nobleman. Gratifying gasps and harrumphs.

"I know!" I tell them, "I never really thought Marcas was an alchemist, but I didn't know he was doing the Duke's lady either." More gasps and harrumphs. Antimony blushes redder than her gown. To Calomel I say, "You didn't know about that did you?"

The crowd grumbles.

"But why would she hire me?" I continue, and point to Realgar. "She obviously couldn't go to the Sheriff without admitting the blacksmith was her lover. So she cooked up this little story about the church to throw me off the trail. She came to me—Marcas's former partner—and came on strong. Strong enough to spin me into helping her out of her—how should I put it—bind?"

"A trust that was clearly misplaced," says Antimony. "Guards, put this dog in the street where it belongs."

The crowd mutters. The guards try to intercept me, but I draw my short sword and hold them at bay.

I catch Galena's eye. She's crushed, but I'd be a fool to

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give up when conquest's within my grasp. I have to see this through.

“What does it mean to be noble? It means considering what we don't want to hear. We're supposed to be civilized, better, a breed apart. More than just spoiled children privileged by accident of birth.”

“Which of us is behaving like a child?” says another. The others laugh in agreement.

“A nobleman should care about justice!” I shout them down. “He should take responsibility for what happens in the land under his protection. But this Dukedom is spinning outta control and its lord has his nose in a flask, breathing the fumes.”

“You're disgraced, sir,” says the first. “You're in no place to lecture us.”

Calomel throws the flambé to the floor. Galena looks from it to me, stricken. Calomel brandishes his cane.

“You have betrayed me, sir. You come into my house, wearing the clothes of a knight, but you are none. You take advantage of my wife and my servants. You spread all manner of lies. I knew about you, of course, what you'd done. I don't suppose I should've expected anything different.”

I glare at the nobles, who compete with each other now to shout me down.

“When I think I used to be one of you,” I mutter. “You have no idea what it’s like out there,” I advance on the table, past a mortified Galena. “The world is sick, run by vipers who sit in fancy houses and talk of honor, then empty their chamber pots on your head as you scrap for a coin in the street,”

The nobles are starting to turn on me, and I know why. I’ve attacked one of their own, and they’ll join blindly in lock step behind him. I’m addressing the wrong audience, and I’ve spoken too soon.

“I’m sick of the lot,” I say, and I throw the short sword down. The guards rush me. The dogs howl.

Aleric and Borin toss me out on the street, and throw the short sword after me. It sticks in the ground inches from my head.

“Back to your pond, filthy scum.” Borin crows.

I pick myself up, put my hat on.

“Better to swim through the filth than live with your head up your—”

“Beat it, villain!” shouts Aleric.

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I brush the mud off my coat, pick up my short sword and limp off.

~

When I drag into my tower later that night, I find my friend Cadmia—the barmaid from the Lady of the Lake—inside. This is getting complicated.

“Cadmia, what—” I start.

“It’s bad out there, Nick,” she says. “The Duke’s men are arresting people without cause. The tavern’s empty.”

I flop at the desk, rub my temples.

“What d’you want me to do about it?”

She picks up one of my inventions, a crude set of ground lenses in a tube I use to observe the stars—or the townspeople—from my tower.

“I don’t know... something.” She looks through it. “That’s what you always talk about, isn’t it?” She puts the tube down, sees the flagon of brandy.

“You want a drink?” she asks.

“Need to clear my clockwork,” I shake my head.

“Well, this is a red letter day,” she says. “What’s the

occasion?”

“I put my finger in it,” I tell her. “Mind’s at full gallop, can’t stop to water it just now.” Cadmia uncorks the flagon, tries to drink, finds it empty. “This thing about Marcas may have turned south,” I continue. “Way south.”

She sits at the table opposite me.

“My father was a knight,” she says, “I keep his sword in the bar. Growing up, he always... he made us feel safe.”

“You mean you feared him,” I suggest.

“I respected my father,” she corrected. “But now I’ve grown up, there’s no such thing as safe.”

I take her hand across the table. Don’t get the wrong idea, Cadmia’s a dear friend—she’s served me drinks since she was fifteen, and that was some years ago.

“We lost everything after Richard’s revolt,” she refers to the civil war when then Prince Richard allied with the French against his father Henry II. “My father backed King Henry, and Richard was not forgiving. Once he became king, he punished us. My father was never the same.”

Here we are, two lives destroyed by Richard’s vengefulness. Perhaps that’s why she lets me talk sharp about him in the bar. I come around the desk.

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“You shouldn’t have to live in fear,” I tell her. “But respect... respect’s good for a person. You don’t respect anything, you wind up like me.”

“An abusive drunk?” she smiles.

“I was gonna say charming and dangerous.”

I take her chin in my hand. I don’t know what I’m gonna do, but just then the door crashes open. Sheriff Realgar barges in on us, at the head of a column of his men.

“Realgar, no—” Cadmia starts, but Realgar says,

“Stay out of this, Tutty.”

“Close the door, will you?” I say to Realgar’s men. “Were you born in a barn?” On reflection, it’s not unlikely in a few cases.

“I told you this would happen, Nick,” says Realgar. “Didn’t I ask you to let me handle it?”

I stand up.

“We both know it’s a slippery pig,” I say. “And no offense, but I don’t think you can corner it on your own.”

“Well now I’m gonna have to,” says Realgar, “’cause he told me to bring you in. Wanting another guilty party, you’re the most suspicious.”



“And you know I’m gonna have to resist arrest,” I tell him, “matter of principle.” I look around the place, say, “Try not to break anything.”

The Sheriff’s men grab for me. I punch, bite and kick. One guard restrains a hysterical Cadmia. I pick up the set of lenses to smash a guy over the head, but can’t bring myself to do it. They took a lot of work.

“Damn,” I say, put the tube back and kick my opponent instead.

You have to learn to take your lumps, but I take an awful lot of ‘em. I take a surprising poke to the sternum, feel it bite through two layers of hide and into the bone. I express my displeasure in the clearest possible terms—now I think about it, I probably don’t use actual words.

So, it doesn’t exactly go my way. Or maybe it does, the way it always goes. Never seem to find myself in a fair fight, per se. Guess that’s just my calling.

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The Sheriff's men pummel me within an inch of my leather. One of the men throws my self-trimming oil lamp, which smashes and sets the tower ablaze.

"Ah, you didn't have to do *that*," I mumble through a bloody nose, but he's not in the listening mood.

The Sheriff's men drag me, coughing and beaten, out the base of the smoldering tower. A crowd has gathered there, and they grumble, angry.

"You're an unusual man, Nick," says Realgar. "Most people would identify a no-win situation, but you have to butt your head against it."

I look up at the tower, flames appear in the window. To the townspeople, Realgar says,

"Someone get water, put that out."

A stone hits him in the chest.

"Who threw that?" Realgar shouts. "I can run you all in if you like!" He searches the crowd, but knows there's too many to make good on the threat. He's an honest man, but even an honest man'll break if you stretch him too thin.

"Right," he says, "you don't want to help? It's your homes'll burn. I wash my hands of it."

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The Sheriff's men march me off. Realgar walks beside me as the men ward off threatening townsfolk.

"We've you to thank for the tension in the streets," he tells me. "Word of what you said at the castle traveled fast, and it's causing chaos."

"Glad to be of service," says I.

"Townspople're convinced Duke Calomel killed the blacksmith," Realgar continues. "They're threatening revolt. I have to oppress 'em just to maintain control."

"All that does is convince them he's a tyrant," I opine. "Duke owns the land, not the people. No reason they should let an impotent old man trample 'em."

"You're not doing him justice," says Realgar.

"We both know you can't do justice when the Duke's a suspect," I disagree. "Feudalism's out of balance. Personal responsibility's the only thing separates us from barbarism."

"What would you have me do?" Realgar asks. "I don't want to lock you up. Hell, it's naïve to think that's all the Duke'll do to you. So point me in the right direction. Prove me wrong!"

"Working on it," I say. "I told you, it's a slippery pig."

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“More trouble than you’re worth, Nick,” Realgar tells me. “And that ain’t much.”

He isn’t wrong.

Chapter 7

The iron bars of the jail slam shut, and I sit down amongst the sorry rabble of other townsfolk Realgar's run in on minor infractions. Then the guards shove Galena in through another door. She approaches my cell.

"Realgar said you wanted to see me," she crosses her arms. Not a good sign.

"Say they're going to execute me," I tell her.

"I heard," says she. "I hope you got what you came for. I hope it was worth it."

She puts my glove—which I'd managed to leave in the dungeon again—on the horizontal bar between us, and looks into my eyes.

"I wanted to apologize for misleading you," I say. "I took advantage. Always putting things where they don't belong."

"I understand," she says, "I share some of the blame."

"I thought maybe there was something you could tell me," I continue, "about what happened to Marcas." Galena looks conflicted. "Don't want to die with the case unsolved. Somebody should know what happened to him," I press,

“and I was the closest thing he had to family.”

“You didn’t know him,” Galena says, “not anymore.”

“You don’t have to tell me if it was your mistress,” says I, “just nod.”

“Like you said, we’re all guilty of something,” She grips the bars, “this thing is bigger than any of us.” She takes a piece of parchment from her robe and rolls a cigarette, holds it for me to lick. “It takes elements of all kinds,” she says. “We can’t help the bonds that attract us. We don’t choose the kind of element we are.”

“We always have a choice,” says I.

~

The guards frog-march me down a long hallway that opens into the bright castle courtyard. A crowd murmurs unpleasantness beyond, but is it for me or the Duke?

Lady Antimony steps from the shadows inside the archway.

“Guards, hold him a moment,” she says.

“Come for one last gloat?” I ask her. “I’ll keep my belt on, it’ll be like iron sharpening iron.”

She leans in close, her lips hover over me.

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“I was hurt at first, when you said what you did. But I understand now. It’s a result of serving with chastity, and we all lash out at the ones we—”

I grab her neck, push her against the wall. The guard’s blades hover at my throat.

“You lied to me from the beginning,” I seethe at her, “not that I didn’t know it. You wanted to make sure I didn’t upset your situation. Hiring me was just a pretense for keeping me too drunk to do anything about it. Maybe you figured I could pick your lock after, I don’t pretend to know everything.”

“You don’t understand,” Antimony adjusts her skirt. That chastity belt must itch like the devil. “For all my gusseted furnishings, I’m a prisoner in this palace. My parents married me off to Clissold. I was fifteen, he was fifty. Can you blame me for wanting to see a little bit of life beyond these walls before I wither?”

“That’s not what I blame you for,” I release her.

“It’s not too late for you and me,” she breathes. “I could still speak a word in his ear.”

“What about Galena?” I ask.

“Forget her, be with me,” says the Lady.

“Pass,” says I.

“Fine,” she steps back, “have it your way.”

~

The guards drag me out into to the center of the courtyard. The Duke stands from his seat on the balcony. Seated next to him, the Bishop and Gallium Bismuth look on.

“Silence!” roars Realgar, and the crowd goes quiet.

“Sir Nicholas of Gloucester,” Calomel says, “you stand accused of treason, of attempted murder on our person and that of our wife. Of the murder of Marcas the blacksmith and the spreading of vicious lies about said murder, and for the recent intemperate weather.”

Well, as long as I’m the scapegoat, at least he does a thorough job. Antimony slips onto the balcony and perches beside the Duke. In the crowd, Warin—the meathead from the tavern—leans over to Cadmia.

“Good to see the law finally catch up with that villain,” I imagine him saying.

“Sometimes the law and justice are two different things,” Cadmia says if she’s paid attention at all.

“And most grievously,” Calomel produces the wanted

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poster with my picture, “the desertion of holy crusade, for which I have just learned you are wanted in your home town. How do you plead?”

“Never if I can help it,” says I.

“Very well,” huffs Calomel. “Let it be recorded you have shown contempt for this court and its proceedings, and are therefore sentenced to die by quartering—your limbs to be—”

The crowd grumbles, protests the harsh sentence.

“Your limbs—” Calomel tries again.

“Brute!” yells someone in the crowd, and the rest grow unruly. Calomel stamps his cane.

“Please, my people. This man is a coward, a traitor, and thoroughly false. Like lead, he is corrupt, and the burnout of impurity must be completed before unification with the unlimited can begin.”

Now the crowd grumbles in confusion. Calomel seizes the lull in jeers to continue,

“Your limbs to be torn from your body by four strong horses, and hung on the gates of the town as a deterrent to wastrels who would follow in your—soon to be very wide—footsteps.” To the guards he says, “Carry on.”

The Sheriff's men tie my arms and legs to four iron bars. These they hitch to four stout Dales ponies, attended by black hooded horse masters.

"You think he'll go to pieces?" Aleric says to Borin for my benefit.

"I dunno," says Borin. "It's a stretch!"

The two louts laugh in self-satisfaction as the horses pull, and suspend me between them. I groan, and not just at the pun. One of the hooded horse masters checks all the chains to ensure their strength. Do I smell perfume?

The Duke raises his hand.

"Horse masters, ready your beasts!"

The horse masters raise their whips. The crowd grows restless, conflicted. Antimony jeers at me.

"Tear the animal apart!"

Hell hath no fury like a harpy in metal knickers.

The Duke gives the signal.

The horse-masters crack their whips, and the horses charge ahead. There's a strong tug in my legs and right arm, but it's not muscle and sinew that part company. Those three chains suddenly snap in two, a link on each weakened by

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some sort of corrosive! The leader of the fourth horse—the one who checked the chains—leaps onto its back and drags me behind. My left hand's still connected to the harness.

I struggle and twist as we bump along the cobblestones. Only my leather coat saves me from unreasonable bruising. I crane to see who the rider is. She looks back, and I recognize Galena in disguise!

“What?” I hear Calomel shout.

She rides towards the castle gate with me in tow.

“Stop him!” yells Bismuth. His voice sounds like he's trapped down a well. Some guards move to intercept, but Galena rides them down. She splashes liquid on the rope holding the portcullis. It hisses and breaks. The portcullis drops, just misses me, and cuts off any pursuit. We're out and into the town.

“Gauntlet!!” Calomel rages after us as the crowd erupts into cheers and applause!

“Yes! Yes!!” I hear Cadmia shouting. She throws her arms around Warin, who shrugs her off, annoyed.

Chaos on the Duke's balcony:

“They're getting away!” says Saltpeter to Realgar, “What are you going to do?”

“We were expecting this,” says Realgar to Calomel. “A plan is in place.”

“What?” says Antimony to no one in particular.

“Come with me, my Lord,” says Realgar and leads Calomel from the scene.

“It’s the maid, I’m sure of it,” Saltpeter turns to Bismuth. “Find them. Gauntlet you can kill, but bring the girl to me.”

Bismuth grunts.

Outside the castle gates, Galena stops the horse long enough for me to free my wrist and gather myself.

“Get on!” she urges. I jump on behind her, and we ride out of the city together.

~

We race through the forest trees. Thing about the English countryside—there’s enough hillocks, dales, boulders and oak trees to hide an army. It’s not like in the desert, where you can see fate a mile off. An enemy could be just behind the next ridge and I’d never know it. Finally, Galena slows the horse as it becomes obvious we’ve lost our pursuers.

“What was that stuff?” I ask Galena.

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“*Aqua regia*,” she tells me. “King’s water. Combination of *aqua fortis*, vitriol and salt. Not a universal solvent, but it’s close.”

“You put it on the chains?” I ask.

“Mmm.”

“Neat trick,” I say. “How’d you get to be a guard?”

“I put some on him, too. His foot,” she clarifies, in response to my look.

“Guess I owe you one,” says I. “What’s your plan now?”

“Get you to the Beverly Minster,” says Galena. She refers to the sanctuary town on Calomel’s border, where a criminal in fear of his life could escape. Whether as an accused murderer, or a political refugee, I suppose I qualify. “Once you’re past the sanctuary stones I’ll return,” she continued, “with luck, before I’m missed.”

“Stay off the main road,” I say. “It’s slower, but if we’re patient, we may yet slip the noose.”

She rides off the road, into the tangled forest outside of town, headed for the border. I tell her to canter halfway down the crest so no one below can spot our silhouette against the sky. The horse’s hooves cut into the uneven ground like a roan mountain goat, slip, but maintain their

connection. The saddle heaves and chafes my thighs. It's too long since I've been astride a mount, but I can't complain. It could have been much worse than saddle burn.

"We're getting close," she tells me.

"Closer than you think," I say, and slip a sponge from my coat pocket. I crush it over her mouth, and Galena passes out almost instantly.

~

I light a campfire in a nearby cave, and wait for her to come to. I'm not through with her yet. When she wakes and discovers herself bound, a look of fear crosses her face. I hate to see a woman terrified. I adjust the horse's saddle.

"What was that?" Galena asks me.

"Mixture of opium and hemlock," I say. "Brought a bit of alchemy back from the East myself."

"But we have to get to the sanctuary stones!" she says.

"I may cross those stones tonight," I tell her, "but I'm not sure you will." I cross the cave floor and squat beside her.

"I appreciate the rescue, so I'll tell it to you straight. His last words... 'it was the head.' You were trying to create a Brazen Head at the smithy with Marcos's help." Her eyes

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go wide.

“The two of you were lovers,” I continue, “but then Antimony got her hooks in him. You couldn’t kill her, so you altered the final instructions for the head to make it explode.”

Firelight dances on the cave wall, shadows play in the soot. I can see it as if it’s happening now. Galena leaves Marcas at the workbench, tears in her eyes. The Brazen Head’s a clockwork skull, with thermostats full of caustic chemicals. She puts her hood on, runs out the door and...

“The night you bumped into me, you were beating it out of there before he completed them,” I say. “That about right?” Galena doesn’t deny it. “You saw I wasn’t gonna let it go, and concocted this story to pin it on the church,” I press on. “Only natural.”

“How long have you suspected?” she asks, her voice small.

“I was getting there already, but the tryst in the laboratory was telling. I flatter myself I’m worth fighting over, but there was more to it than that. It was payback.”

“Should have known,” she says.

“Duke said you grew up in a convent,” I continue. “French one, probably. Explains your perfume, your cooking, and

how you knew Tironian notes, among other things. I could tell he recognized your handwriting.”

“Oh,” she says.

“You lied about the Michaelmas confession, and then there was the withered rose at the funeral.” I barely remember the scene I’d made on the gravestone, but I remember her holding the dead flower. Only it wasn’t just any dead flower. I show her the pocket reference book.

“Jabir says black rose’s a hermetic symbol for disaster, arguments, ended love, and death,” says I. “I only need to know one more thing. Why?”

“I couldn’t keep her away from him,” her voice breaks. “To ensure the secrecy of our work, he was always back and forth to the castle, another of his regular clients, and she couldn’t help but notice him. You know what she’s like.”

“Still,” says I, “a maidservant competing that hard with a noble lady. Takes guts.”

“You can’t love if you’re not jealous,” says Galena.

“You’re a philosopher,” says I, “but you can’t turn lead into gold.”

“That’s not entirely true, but the forces required are

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almost unimaginable,” she says. “When we figured out how, Marcas was going to buy my contract from the Duke. Maybe I still will someday. We’re all looking to be more than we are.”

“No matter what it takes?” I ask her.

“Duke Clissold won’t last forever,” she says. “Someone has to continue his work.”

“And you can’t do it without Antimony,” I nod, understanding. “You didn’t want to lose your position.”

“I live in a mansion full of beauty I can’t possess,” she says, her voice more hollow than I’d have thought possible. “I work with borrowed tools, borrowed ideas. She had clothes, money, men, much as she could want. Marcas was the only thing in my world that was special, that was mine—until she tempted him, polluted him right in front of me. She took him for her amusement, like she didn’t even care I existed.”

That explained the look when she saw the two of us in Antimony’s boudoir. She’d come upon Marcas and Antimony there, too, involved on the bed. I doubt they even noticed her. She leans back against the wall of the cave and cries.

“I’d be damned if I was going to share him with her,” she

continued. “Was I supposed to wait until she finished with him? Take him back and accept my master’s privilege?” She wipes her tears with the sleeve of her robe, bound wrists together, her face grim and set. “Marcas was my first love. Can you even imagine what that kind of betrayal is like? Nothing I can do to her will make up for what she took from me.”

“I knew a bird once,” I told her, “daughter of my feudal lord. Sort of girl you turn pale in her presence. I was set to marry her, we were betrothed and everything. But I was vexed with too much passion as they say. My lord went on Crusade. He asked for my service, and in a bid for glory and status I went along with it. Started out with a noble idea, but like so many things, it just turned into another opportunity for bloody-mindedness and horror.”

“And the bird?” asks Galena.

“Well, nothing voids a betrothal like deserting crusade. She flew when the deal went south. Life’s a broken promise, honey. I’m living proof.”

Galena looks up at me.

“I wanted to kill Antimony too, but I was selfish, afraid. What you did—standing up to your lord, being cast out—took real courage,” she says. “Courage I wish I’d had.”

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“Nobody’s perfect,” a pewter tankard booms from behind. Galena and I whip around to see the Black Knight and his crew arrayed across the mouth of the cave, crossbows ready. “Just ask my boss.” Bismuth advances towards us. “He was real interested in those notes you showed him. Said you knew how to make a Brazen Head, whatever that is. Sent me to get it, even if I have to cut it off.”

Chapter 8

I stand between the Bishop's men and Galena.

"Your skill at mixing metaphor is undiminished, Bismuth," I say.

"I don't have it!" Galena cries. "I blew it up. Just ask Nick."

"Afraid I can't take either of your words for it," leers Bismuth. "You're wanted outlaws. I'm gonna have to search you."

"Nick, your things!" Galena gestures towards her saddlebag. I rush for it as the men circle me. I reach in, find my short sword and collapsible crossbow. I spring the crossbow, and observe her repair job. I turn to Bismuth with a wide grin.

"Now, then."

Bismuth lunges, fires his crossbow. I whip my short sword up to block it. The bolt glances off, hits one of Bismuth's men. He screams. Bismuth and I meet in the middle and fight fist to fist, blade to bow.

The fight ranges out of the cave, into the forest. We circle the wooded glen outside the cave mouth. One of Bismuth's

men rushes me from behind. I point the crossbow over my shoulder, shoot him square in the chest.

“Why’re you doing this?” Bismuth asks. It’s a good question. He knocks my short sword out of my hand so hard it sticks into a tree. We fight crossbow-to-crossbow.

I realize in that moment how truly awful it is to be as morally rudderless as Bismuth. Galena and I are actually a lot alike. Betrayed, shattered by forces beyond our control, and acting out against the world.

“You remember the code,” I tell him. “The weak defend with valor, a lady serve with chastity.”

“What does that even mean?” asks Bismuth.

“Means it doesn’t matter which of us is right,” says I. “You have to maintain your principles.” I land a solid blow. “Or maybe I just don’t want you to have her.”

“What?” asks Galena, shocked.

“Don’t be an idiot, Nick,” says Bismuth. “You’re not defending an innocent. Hell, she’s not even a lady. She killed your friend, she paid me to beat you and leave you in an alley.”

“Sorry about that, by the way,” Galena says to me.

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“You wanted me dead,” I tell her, “you’d have blown me up.”

“Like she blew up the blacksmith?” says Bismuth.

Bismuth knocks me down. I lay there, dazed, as Bismuth reloads his crossbow.

“Nick!” cries Galena. I roll to avoid the shot.

One of Bismuth’s men grabs Galena, who’s still tied up, throws her over the saddle of her own horse and jumps on.

“Nick!” she shouts again.

“Galena, no—”

I roll to my feet and try to rush after them, but Bismuth blocks me and drives me into a tree with a crushing blow. The same tree my short sword is in.

“You’re not a knight anymore, Nick,” he tells me.

“What does it mean to be a knight?” I ask. “Is it the right to bear arms, the power to mete justice? Or is it a meaningless title to justify a killer?”

“Get over it,” he says. “Plenty of gold to go ‘round for her capture. Side with us.”

“I’d sooner join the Saracens,” says I.

I pull my short sword from the tree and fight as never before, my dance with Bismuth whirling and deadly. My first clue something’s not right is the fighting style. The French even fight like sissies—“feather-touch,” they call it—they flick steel with as little contact as possible to avoid a bind, and thrust. Same thing they do with their tongues, incidentally. I finally land a blow, knock Bismuth’s helmet off.

“*Merde!*” he says, and the accent is gone, replaced by one that originates much further south. Bismuth staggers back, falls, a look of shock on his clearly Frankish face.

“What was that?”

“I... um—” stammers Bismuth.

“What the hell did he just say?” one of his men asks.

“I think he said ‘*merde!*’” says another.

“You’re not even English,” I ask Bismuth, “are you?” I point my crossbow, “talk!”

“What?” sputters Bismuth, “Of course I am. Don’t be preposterous!”

“Preposterous?” says the second man.

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“What’s he talking about?” asks a third.

“He’s one of Phillip’s court!” says I. “How’d you get Wismuth, anyway? Trade for lands in Normandy?” A little louder, for the benefit of his men I say, “I’d never even have considered joining you if I’d known that.”

Bismuth’s men grumble.

“It was good enough for your King Richard,” cries Bismuth. “He was French, too!”

Protests from the men.

“Funny how that works, isn’t it?” says I. “A little shine sticks to a king and he can do no wrong. People love a winner. But what were you doing during the crusade? Stabbing Richard’s back as part of some French land grab?”

The men laugh.

“I’m not fighting for this fancy-frocked pretender,” says the second man. “I’m leaving.”

He does, the other men laugh and join him. Bismuth finds himself alone, and backs away from me.

“You’ll pay for this!” He turns and runs.

“Go put your tongue in something, you dirty bastard!” I shout after him. I chuckle, turn, and chase down the path

after Galena.

~

The Lady of the Lake's shoulder-to-shoulder with angry townspeople all talking at once. The crowd quiets as Cadmia stands on a bar stool.

"You saw what they tried to do today," she says. "What we, in our weakness, almost let them do. We're not worth a damn to the Duke except as figures in his alchemical equations."

"Yeah!" say the townspeople.

"I saw Nick and Marcos in here all the time, we all did. And I don't give a damn what they did on Crusade."

Shouts of agreement.

"He said to me once," Cadmia continues, "you can't count on counts to come to your defense. All you can count on's yourself, your wits, and your will."

Murmurs of assent.

"That's the man they tried to kill today. Not a failed knight, but a symbol of a failed system that tried to kill him 'cause he spoke out against it. Nick's a fighter, but he's not a murderer. The Duke tried to kill Nick to take our

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minds off his own guilt!”

Louder shouts of agreement.

“Are we going to stand for this?” she cries.

“No!” shouts a townspeople.

“Are we going to let them fleece us like a flock of sheep?” asks she.

Shouts of “No! No!” She takes her father’s broadsword down from above the bar.

“Or are we going to fight?”

“Yes!” shouts another.

“I say we fight!” Cadmia pumps the broadsword above her head. The townspeople cheer their assent.

“I say we fight back, just like—”

~

I stagger out of the woods and into a meadow, breathing hard, my crossbow and short sword held limp.

“Hold it!” says Realgar.

I stop, see Saltpeter, Realgar and Calomel with Bismuth’s henchman and Galena in chains. The Sheriff’s men

surround me and march me to where the others stand beneath a spreading oak tree by a carved granite standing stone. The sky's gray and malleable as a pewter mug, so close a man could crush it underfoot if he could find the right angle.

"Right where you said he'd be," says Calomel to Realgar, "bringing up the rear."

"May have overestimated me," says I. "But you're not alone. Never thought I'd see the three of you on the same side."

"Only thing crossing those sanctuary stones tonight will be your corpse if you cross me, Gauntlet," snarls Bishop Saltpeter. "Where is it?"

"She doesn't have it," says I.

"You set me up?" Galena asks.

"That was the plan," I tell her.

"I thought you owed me one," she protests.

"Until we take Marcas into account," I rebut.

"I helped you escape," she insists.

"Other three horses had orders not to pull unless you compromised the chains," says I. "You'd be guilty if you

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did, way I figured it.”

“That’s hardly fair!” Galena cries. “Marcas cheated on me with Antimony. They did it together!”

“Crime of passion, I understand,” says I. “But fair’s a marketplace on feast day, Galena. Lotta cheating there, too. Antimony deserves as much, but that won’t happen.”

“Don’t listen to him, child,” Saltpeter coos. “Just give me the Brazen Head and all will be forgiven.”

“She can’t,” I say. “It’s destroyed. Ascended, if you will. It resides in the spirit world, just like your credibility.”

“My good name,” Saltpeter says, “is not for a man like you to impugn.” To Galena he says, “Is this true?”

We all gape in surprise when a grating, metallic voice from her skirt says,

“Not completely.”

“What’s that?” asks Saltpeter.

Galena slips the palm-sized brass skull from a hidden pouch in her skirts, holds it up to us - gears whir and chemicals bubble.

“You had it mostly right,” she tells me, “but the one that killed Marcas was a copy. This is the original.” Galena

looks at me, tears in her eyes. “You can’t become part of another element without losing a part of yourself,” She says, and hurls it at the ground.

“No!” cries Saltpeter.

It goes off like a grenade, knocks us all from our feet. Galena drops her shackles, eaten through by acid, and runs. The Sheriff’s men chase her down. She almost evades them, but one tackles her.

“No... No! She was across the stones,” Saltpeter cries as they drag her back to the group. “She’s mine.”

“I didn’t see anything,” says Calomel.

“This isn’t right,” Saltpeter warns him. “I’ll inform the archbishop. She belongs to the church.” The Bishop’s man looks from him to the Duke’s men. He’s not getting involved.

“Make sure you search her right this time,” Realgar tells his men, and puts another pair of shackles on her hands, and on her feet. To Galena he says, “Don’t bother burning through these, I’ve got a dozen more. The Duke’s prison won’t be kind for a woman, but the town needs to know the truth.”

“What a waste,” Saltpeter shakes his miter, “A head of

prophecy.”

“She’ll make another one,” Calomel points his cane. “She’ll make it for me. But we still need a scapegoat, and we have a convicted murderer right here.”

All eyes turn to me.

“No!” says Galena.

“The saying is,” Calomel tells her, “in order to create, something of equal value must be lost.”

“My Lord,” says Realgar, “he did his part. He found the real murderer!”

“You’ll do your duty, Sheriff,” Calomel says, “or you’ll die where you stand.”

Realgar looks at his men. We both know they won’t back him against the Duke over a loser like me.

“It’s okay, Realgar,” I tell him. “What you gotta do.”

“I will,” Realgar nods to Saltpeter, “but this churchman has witnessed my protest.”

“Shut up and shackle him,” says Calomel.

Chapter 9

Realgar and the Duke ride up to the city gates with me and Galena on her horse in chains. They draw back in shock when they see the townspeople—led by Cadmia and Warin—guarding the gate with torches and pitchforks.

“Hold it right there, your Lordship,” says Warin. “We don’t like the way you run this town anymore, so you’re out.”

One of the guards shouts, “Stand aside for your Duke, peasant!”

“Don’t ‘peasant’ me son,” snaps Cadmia, “I know your mother!”

Inside the town, the citizens riot. They tear down the Duke’s banners and trample them in the mud. Fires have broken out. The Duke surveys the scene in horror. He looks at me, says,

“What have you done?”

“Seems to me you brought it on yourself,” says I.

A group of townspeople break from the bushes and surround us. The horses rear, and I fall off the back of Galena’s mount. The townspeople stand between me and

the Sheriff, pull the Sheriff's men down and subdue them.

I get to my feet. Realgar rides towards me, but Calomel heads him off.

"Leave him!" Calomel says. He rides up beside Galena's horse, drags her over to his. "Ride behind me," he commands. "Close the castle gates, organize the defense! I have work to attend!"

Galena and I share a look as Calomel turns horse and rides hard for the gate. The townspeople guarding it, unused to standing their ground, scatter in confusion but cheer to see the Duke's retreat.

"Go on, then!" shouts Warin.

I survey the crowd as a townsman helps unshackle me.

"What are you people doing?" I ask them. Cadmia steps to the front, holds the broadsword from the bar.

"You looked to be in trouble, Nick," she tells me.

"But this is war, Tutty. The other nobles can't ignore this. You'll all be killed."

"You're always saying a knight shouldn't fight a meaningless battle," Cadmia rounds on me, "but you fight all the time. Now these people are fighting for their

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homes, and they need a knight to lead them,” she thrusts the sword at me, “so lead them.” I look at her, she doesn’t flinch. “Shouldn’t have said it if you didn’t mean it,” says she.

“Come on, Cadmia,” says Warin. “We can’t waste time on this weak-livered worm.”

“I need to get something first,” I say. I take Galena’s horse, and pull myself up. “I’ll meet you at the castle,” I ride off into the town. Warin steps to Cadmia’s side.

“He’ll run,” he says, “just like the Crusades.”

Cadmia sets her jaw.

~

The Duke drags Galena down the stairs into the dungeon and hurls her at the work table. Realgar follows apace.

“My Duke,” he says, “the town—”

“Never mind the town!” barks Calomel. To Galena he says, “Get started, girl! I want you to recreate the experiment.”

“But I don’t have the things I need!” she protests.

“Just start the work,” Calomel tells her, “we’ll send Realgar for supplies when necessary.”

“I need a blacksmith,” says she.

“Husband, what’s going on?” Lady Antimony descends the stairs. “Have you seen what’s happening outside?”

“Silence, woman!” Calomel snaps. “A Brazen Head... this could be the pinnacle of my great work.”

Galena looks from one to the other, and starts mixing chemicals.

~

I enter the blackened remains of my tower, and hop painfully between the remaining stairs. I toss my few charred possessions around. Light glitters, reflected in the shards of the broken stained-glass window. I find a bundle wrapped in oilcloth.

~

Warin, Cadmia, and an army of townspeople gather at the castle gate.

“I’m through waiting,” says Warin. “If we’re going to oust the Duke once and for all, we’d better do it now before they solidify their defenses.”

“Just wait,” Cadmia looks down the street. “He’s coming.”

Not to disappoint her, I emerge from an alley, and ride

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up.

“Evening, folks,” says I. Cadmia smiles to see me.

“I knew it,” she says. Warin frowns.

“You still want me to—” I ask her, indicate the sword.

“No one better,” she says, and hands it up to me.

“Have to do what a lady asks,” I take the sword, observe it with reverence. I give it an experimental swing, and look at the townspeople.

“It’s a fine line between a knight and a criminal,” I tell them. “You live your life on the edge of a blade, you’re going to make mistakes.” I level the sword at them, “But a knight stands up for what he—or she—believes. For justice. When you defend the weak, and right what’s been wronged, then you’re knights. Every one of you.”

The crowd cheers. I have them wheel carts into place as a defense from arrows, and turn to face the ramparts.

“So what are we waiting for?” asks Warin.

“Patience,” says I. “More’n one way to storm a castle.”

~

In the Duke’s experimental dungeon, Galena slashes

chemicals together in a flask. The Duke sits to one side, lost in thought. Galena sets the flask down and picks up a candle. In his moment of distraction, Calomel notices what she's doing too late.

“Wait... no, girl! That's not the way. You'll—”

Galena uses the candle to light a hidden fuse. The spark winds around the table leg. Antimony screams. Duke Calomel dives out of the way as Realgar tries to stamp the fuse out, but the spark races across the floor and disappears behind the stone wall.

Galena leaps into the giant empty iron cauldron. Calomel, Antimony and Realgar rush to follow.

~

The townspeople and I jump as a massive explosion shakes the whole castle and blows a wide hole in the exterior wall. The townspeople gasp.

“What in God's name?” asks Cadmia as a purple aluminum-iodine cloud pours from the breach, and fire breaks out on the timber works. The drawbridge crashes down to reveal the compromised portcullis.

“You were expecting this?” Warin asks me. The Sheriff's men scream and stagger around with acid burns.

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“Something like. Flambé’s her specialty.”

I unwrap the package I took from my office: my old crusader helmet, with the sponge built into the faceplate. I take off my hat and prop the helmet on my head, faceplate up, and mount Galena’s roan.

“Don’t breathe the fumes,” I tell them, and spur my horse across the drawbridge. The townspeople follow me, swarm through the shattered portcullis into the castle courtyard. Guards rush to meet us and the townspeople engage in battle.

The steel feels good in my hand—I’d almost forgotten the clash, the ring, the gratifying resonance that travels down my spine and into my gut. It makes me hungry for more. I hack and pierce a path into the heart of the castle with the broadsword and my crossbow until I see a crater to my left where the lab used to be beneath the courtyard. The cracks travel all the way up the wall to the compromised gatehouse.

“Galena?” I call. I can make out figures below in the overturned cauldron, obstructed by rubble.

“Nick, help!” calls Antimony, “We’re trapped.”

“Workin’ on it,” says I. Aleric and Borin rush up to me, halberds ready. “Gotta settle these pikes first.”

I dismount, and holster my crossbow.

“One weapon each,” I tell them.

“Don’t do us any favors,” says Borin, “It’s not a duel.”

“Honor’s a funny thing,” I say. “Selfish, really. I give you every chance to level the field so there can be no argument of advantage. So in the end, it’s clear who’s the better.”

I level the blade, true edge to my opponents, and wait. They hesitate.

“I’m, uh—” Aleric indicates the door, “I’m gonna go.”

“Good man,” says I, as he slinks away. “And you?” I say to Borin.

Borin growls, and runs at me.

“Thought so,” says I.

In a single fluid move, I sidestep the blow, hook Borin’s neck with my cross-guard. I throw him to the ground and press him down with the sharp end, but stop just short of actual bloodletting.

“Made my point?” I ask, and Borin nods. “I believe you know where the gate is.”

I let him go, and Borin runs.

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Across the courtyard I see Warin, who pauses in his fight to nod approval. I look for a way down into the lab, and determine the only one's through the main building.

“Looks like I gotta make a house call,” I drop my faceplate and breathe bitter air through the sponge.

I kick in the door to the great hall. The dogs and purple smoke-blinded guards pour out of it and rush me. I parry, clobber and shoot my way through the crowd. They have one-handed arming swords and bucklers—small shields—which are a distinct advantage despite their deceptively small diameter. I, however, brought a heavy English broadsword to the fight—a true knight's weapon. Let's be honest, they might as well have faced a line of cavalry. I cut them down like so many stalks of wheat—well, if wheat fought back and got its licks in every couple of rounds.

I fight down the remains of the circular stone staircase. A left-handed helix favors my descent, frees my sword arm and hampers those of my opponents. I storm into the demolished dungeon, defeat the guards and shove through debris. The last knot of Sheriff's men surround the Duke, Antimony, Realgar and Galena and work to free them.

They're all a little singed and worse for wear as they climb from the cauldron, cough and choke on the thick air.

“Realgar!” I challenge. Warin and Cadmia come in, see the scene, and guard the door.

“You’re not with this rabble, are you Nick?” Realgar asks.

“Never abandon a noble cause,” I say to Calomel. “Sins come home, the goat goes free.”

“And back into the charnel house,” he sneers. “Guards!”

Realgar’s men rush to the attack, and I meet them with steel and arrow. I don’t want to talk myself up, but I will say this: there was at least one thing you needed to be a knight in King Richard’s crusade. I’m a terror with a real sword.

I tend to start from a position with the blade resting lightly on my shoulder—that way, when I snap the pommel down, my blade strikes without telegraphing the move. It’s a simple motion, like a cantilevered punch, my arm’s steel counterpoint.

One of the Duke’s soldiers comes at me, I drive his blade into the dirt and make him eat my pommel. He doesn’t appear to like the taste. Another waits. I lower my sword to the Iron Gate guard—my whole body low behind it, exposing my head. It looks vulnerable, but it limits my opponent’s options. When he takes the opening, I bind,

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wind and find my target with the short side of the blade.

I twist, turn, use the flat of the blade; the sword is a multi-purpose killing tool I use in every way I can imagine. I clear the room of opponents until the only one left to cross swords with is Realgar. I cut to the cross-section, look to cleave my opponent in two before he thinks to do the same. Fortunately for him, he's a quick thinker. Our blades slide against each other down to the crossbar.

"You're not going to defend the Duke, too?" I ask him.

"Honor demands it," says he.

"As you like," I allow.

Realgar and I fall to swords. I bind, and throw his arms wide. This is the art—any old stooge can swing a blade, it's what you do in the instant after contact that counts. Double half-cuts, parry and repose, you live or die not by your first move, but how your second, third, fourth and fifth respond to changing conditions. It's not your strength or your wits, but your adaptability that's in question.

We range throughout the wrecked lab, trampling glass. I knock Realgar against the table and a flask of acid spills on his arm. He groans in pain.

"Sorry," I say.

Realgar trips me and forces my head into the furnace.

“Always said your temper would land you in trouble,” he tells me. I kick him off, stand, and advance.

“Perhaps cooler heads will yet prevail.”

We pull, grapple, brawl and throw, two consummate war craftsmen using every surface of our weapons and limbs. Iron sparks fly off our blades, slight irregularities—remnants of the forge. I swing to Open Guard, send them arcing across the laboratory table. I wonder briefly if they’ll contact anything combustible.

“This really how you want it, Sheriff?” I ask him. “Fight to the finish?”

“Mano a mano,” says Realgar.

“Didn’t know you spoke Spanish,” says I.

“I travelled a bit,” he tells me.

The fight rages on, but both of us tire. Sword fighting is actually exhausting if you don’t keep up with it. In less than a minute my lungs are screaming, my arms are horse glue, and I’m looking for the least dishonorable way to cheat.

We step back, breathe, lunge again. I bludgeon into my

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opponent and trip him up. In a swift—and I must admit—clever move, I outmaneuver Realgar and drop him to his knees.

Once he's on the ground, my arms do the one thing they were going to do anyway—plunge downward, but I still have the strength to stop short of his neck.

“Do you yield?” I ask.

Realgar looks around at his defeated men.

“Suppose I should.”

“This petty Duke's not worth another good man's death,” I say. Realgar looks at Calomel, who cowers in the corner with Antimony and Galena.



“Or yours either, come to mention it,” he shoots back, but lowers his sword. I give him a hand up.

“Thank you, old friend,” says I. Antimony rushes to my side.

“My hero!” she says. “I always knew this day would come. Now you can take me

away from all this. We can be together—”

“Antimony!” cries the Duke, aghast.

“One side, Lady Calomel,” I throw her arm off. “You’re not the main attraction of every tournament.”

I look at Galena, Antimony looks from one of us to the other.

“Wait a minute,” she says, “you’re here for her? My maid the murderess?”

“You knew?” says I.

“Of course I knew,” says Antimony. “I wasn’t very well going to lose my help over the affair, no matter how sick what she did was.”

“Galena was a symptom, Lady,” I tell her. “You’re the plague.”

“So what happens to her?” Realgar asks of Galena.

In seeking justice, we’re all guilty. We’re all guilty of wanting to know the truth, of committing any wrong to reach the truth. Well, now I know it, I’m not so sure what I want.

I’m the only one who can serve justice for Marcas now. Only the wronged have the right to dispense justice, and

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the responsibility to act mercifully. I'm King Richard at the port of Acre. I can leverage my authority to make an example of those who defy me, but the just thing is to show mercy, unlike what they showed me. Mercy is noble.

"No body," I shrug, pretending a nonchalance I don't feel. "Not a scrap, just blood and clockwork. Damndest thing."

"Wasn't much left of Marcas either," says Realgar. "Is that justice?"

"Love's all she wanted," I tell him, "and she got treachery for her trouble. We've both killed men for less, no one knows if we don't. The system sure ain't just."

"The town deserves to know the truth," Realgar says again. I look from Cadmia and Warin to the Duke and Antimony.

"They already know it," says I.

"He was your friend," Realgar nods. "Only you can guess what he would have wanted. You sure?"

"No," I reply, "but I got enough ghosts on me. Don't need hers, too. Besides, she makes a mean crossbow."

Galena lunges for the table, grabs an unbroken flask.

"Sorry," she says, "but I'm through letting men control

my fate.”

“Galena, no—” I say, but she dashes it to the ground, and a cloud of purple smoke envelops her. Realgar and I cough. When it clears, she’s gone.

“Damn,” I say. “Guess I’ll have to look after the crossbow myself.”

~

I look out over the town from the castle ramparts. Smoke still rises, but the fires are out. The mist burns off and returns to the hillocks and depressions in the distance.

As I watch, a cloaked figure takes the back way out of town, pushes a wheelbarrow full of braziers and chemical jars. I catch a glimpse of her face—it’s Galena.

We always have a choice. Marcus made his, Galena made hers. This was mine. Once removed from this situation, I’m betting she’ll be a better person. Unlike King Richard, I don’t believe in undue punishment in these cases of ideological confusion and betrayal of the heart, so if I can forgive Galena—who in a moment of passion killed her philandering boyfriend to punish her backstabbing mistress—and let her start over, maybe I can forgive myself, too. Maybe you *can* transmute lead into gold.

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Few years later, mug by the name of Albertus Magnes preached the peaceful coexistence of science and religion. Claimed he discovered the philosopher's stone, and made a Brazen Head, among other things. Maybe he did. Maybe he had help.

Cadmia and Realgar join me on the wall-walk. We watch from the tower as the townspeople run the Duke and Antimony out the main gate, beat the old man with his own cane. It's cruel, but the world's an unfair place. I couldn't have caused a riot in a town that wasn't sick of oppression and ready to try self-rule.

"Glad you reconsidered your loyalty, Sheriff," I say.

"My loyalty's to the lord of the castle," Realgar tells me. "Right now, looks like that's you."

"Don't wanna be anybody's lord," says I. "Lords lead to inequity. We can serve the people of this town together."

"Living like a king, no doubt," says Realgar. I scrutinize the castle.

"Might take a tower for myself," I admit, "seeing my old place got redecorated and I don't like the color. But mainly I was thinkin'—" I look to Cadmia, "Problem with the Lady of the Lake is, it's a bit small. And a bit of a walk."

“Are you serious?” she asks me.

“Occasionally.” I turn to Realgar, “This place would make a good tavern, don’t you think?”

Cadmia throws her arms around me and kisses me. Realgar shakes his head and smiles. When Cadmia breaks the kiss, I offer her the sword.

“You should have this back,” I say. Cadmia shakes her head and pushes it back to me. I look to Realgar.

“Keep it,” says he. “Good to have a knight in town.”

I put my arm around Cadmia, and the two of us smile at Realgar in friendship.

Years that came, the townsfolk’s movement snowballed—eventually even rolled up the barons who forced King John to sign the Magna Carta. It included the right to trial by jury, unlike the kind I got. It’s a start, but a piece of paper never gives you justice. That only comes from a blade in the right hands.

As for me, sometimes being a knight isn’t about following your feudal lord. Good thing, too, ‘cause that’s pretty much how I’m forged. Sometimes it’s about doing what you know is true and honorable no matter the consequences. No one’s going to hand you Justice, she has to be won.

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And she's always a judgment call, which is why in all the statues, she carries a sword. Justice is a knight.

The End