

The Secret of Sherwood Forest

By : **TerraNova467**

Two classics are swirled together in a single tale. The legend of Robin Hood is combined with endless secrets to give a tale as never told before. Mystery, romance, tragedy and victory; just some of what shall be exposed.

I can take no credit for most of this, as it came from the gifted mind of another, but he left it undone. I can't write like him, but I shall do my best; my writing begins in chapter 64.



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Chapter 1: prologue

King Nicodemus was dead. Killed by the treachery of his adopted brother, Jenner, the Prince Regent. Jenner, a vain, selfish, overambitious lion, had planned his Sovereign's death to the last detail. The King had been overseeing the construction of a new section of the tower where the Crown Jewels are stored when they are not on view; both to remind the King of his obligation to his subjects, and to show the other animals the power of their King. At the precise moment that King Nicodemus had stepped into a predetermined area, called there by a "worker" who was actually one of Jenner's henchmen, several others used iron bars to topple a section of the wall that had been secretly weakened the night before. King Nicodemus, along with Sir Jonathan Brisbee, his most trusted advisor, was killed instantly.

Jenner, a firm believer in efficiency over compassion, immediately seized the throne and, in a record-fast ceremony, had himself crowned King. He then gave his subjects, still taken aback by the speed of events, a hard choice: "Serve the Glory of your new King with all your Heart!", meaning, of course, higher taxes and more labor in the fields to support the lifestyle to which Jenner and his friends had become accustomed, or have all of your property confiscated anyway and probably either end in one of His Majesty's debtors prisons or be exiled to the countryside. He also ordered his new Captain-of-the-Guard; a slovenly, ill-humored wolf named Sullivan; to hunt down and capture or, more preferably, kill the former Captain, a highly respected, much-loved fox named Justin.

Chapter 2: 1

"C'mon, m'lady. we have to leave NOW!" Justin said sternly, hoisting young Timothy Brisbee into his arms. A driving rain, along with white-hot lightning and the booming peals of accompanying thunder, would serve to cover their escape from Londontown only temporarily. Lady Marian Brisbee, widow of Sir Jonathan, tearfully nodded and finished tying her cape. A beautiful vixen, her manner both at court and among the common people was much admired and her smile was said to light up whatever room she entered. But now, mourning the death of her husband and dressed in some old, threadbare traveling clothes that Justin had brought with him to disguise their hasty escape, her beauty, while still much in evidence, was also much subdued.

Her children, a young rabbit family that she and Jonathan had adopted from the King's Orphanage only months before, were also dressed for the trip in a similar manner. Theresa and Martin, the oldest, were confused but realized the gravity of the situation and remained, for the most part, calm. Youngest daughter Cynthia, however, was on the verge of hysterics, first demanding to know where her father was and when he would be arriving home, then, when Justin finally broke the news to them as gently as he knew how, bursting into tears and running to hide under her bed. It took the better part of an hour to calm her down enough to get her ready to leave, but no one knew how long this would last. Timothy, the youngest of all the children, was also calm, almost strangely so. He had just recovered from a life-threateningly intense bout with pneumonia, a feat which had had the court-physician scratching his head. But something had happened to Timothy in that time. Where he had once been bubbly, playful and carefree; he was now more shy and withdrawn, sometimes waking, terrified and soaked in sweat, in the middle of the night screaming that monsters were after him.

After a last longing look to make sure that she had left nothing that would give Sullivan any clue as to their whereabouts, Lady Brisbee blew out the last candle and stepped out of the door of her manor, not bothering to lock it, and into the rain and an uncertain future. Justin was waiting under the light of a lantern which was hanging from a pole on a small handcart which held the few meager possessions that Justin had instructed them to bring as well as Timothy and Cynthia, both of whom shivered miserably as they huddled under a rain-soaked canvas tarp, with Martin and Theresa, who were lost in their own thoughts. At a nod from Justin, they began to trudge along the muddy streets.

No one spoke as Justin led them away from the City. The rain poured for several more hours but, gradually, began to taper off. Lady Brisbee could see that Timothy and Cynthia had crawled to the middle of the cart and fallen asleep in each others arms under their ersatz blanket. Martin; a bright lad who shared his father's courage and curiosity, sometimes to the point of recklessness; dutifully kept up the punishing pace that Justin had set, a range of emotions playing across his face, enhanced by the shadows from the dim light of the lantern no matter how hard he tried to hide them. Theresa, a usually fun-loving but practical-minded girl, was visibly tiring and had a death-grip on the cart as she grimly plodded along, tears of exhaustion streaming from her eyes. Brisbee had cried silently to herself most of the night, her tears washed by those of Nature as both mourned the untimely death of a loving husband and father. But, like the rain, her tears were spent and the task of supporting the family now rested, as uneasily as she hoped that the Crown of Britain rested on Jenner's head, on her shoulders.

Her thoughts were interrupted when Justin suddenly stopped and rested the cart on its supports so quickly that Theresa nearly collided with it. Cynthia awoke and timidly asked, "What happened? Why have we stopped?" Theresa, meanwhile, collapsed to her knees and crawled to lean against one of the cart's wheels.

Justin ducked out from behind the push-handle and said, "Rest here for a few minutes. I have to talk with your mother." With a slight nod he indicated the direction that they were to walk.

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A few minutes later, when they were out of earshot of the children, Justin stopped and pulled an object out of a pocket of his vest and held it up to the first rays of dawn that were beginning to peer over the horizon. Lady Brisbee recognized it immediately. It was a round, blood-red stone, about the size of Cynthia's fist, set into a plain gold backing attached to a thin gold chain. An inscription on the reverse read "You can Unlock any Door if You only have the Key." It had been given to Jonathan when he had been appointed Chancellor by King Nicodemus several years ago. "You know about the legends behind the history of this." Justin stated, his voice betraying a hint of concern and...something else...fear? Lady Brisbee nodded, taken aback by this. Justin regarded the Amulet in the ever-so-slowly increasing sunlight. "I've always known about them too," He said almost reverently, talking more to himself than Lady Brisbee. "but I never really believed them."

"And you do now?" Brisbee asked, worried that the events of the past several hours were taking their toll on Justin's rational thought processes.

A part of his resolve collapsed as he closed his eyes and sadly shook his head, a tear running down his face until it was soaked up by fur. "No." he murmured. Then he opened his eyes, which burned with an intensity that she had never seen before. "But Jenner does. And so do many of the other animals. That's why you and the children are in such danger. If Jenner should ever get his paws on this amulet he could use it to bend the Nation to his will." He took one of Lady Brisbee's paws and gently placed the amulet into it. "The only safe place in the Kingdom right now is the forests of Sherwood in my birthplace, Nottinghamshire." He pointed down the road in the direction that they had been walking. "I know that you and the children are tired, but you need to keep going as quickly as possible until you see a small branch-path on the right-hand side of the road next to a low stone wall. Take that path into the forest; it's narrow, dark and frightening, but that's the whole idea; and follow it until you see a house on the edge of a small clearing. Dr. Ages should be somewhere about, he never wanders very far from his laboratory. Don't be surprised if he already knows you. Tell him what has happened, although I suspect he may already have heard, and tell him that I will try to be back as soon as I'm able."

Lady Brisbee, not sure of what to make of his instructions, nodded hesitantly and asked. "But where are you going? If Jenner is looking for you, wouldn't it be safer to come to this Dr. Ages with us?"

Justin shook his head. "Safer for me, maybe, and then only in the short run. But if I present myself as a more convenient prey, then perhaps the hounds will ignore the more important scent. Besides, I have an important task to perform back in Londontown." He added, his voice dripping with dark fury. He then gently took her by the shoulders and gazed intently into her eyes. "You hold the future of Britain and the freedom of her subjects in your paws." He whispered. "Jonathan's love for you, I can see, was not misplaced and, if you keep your chin up, all will turn out well." He then turned and walked back to the hand-cart. By now, Timothy was also awake and the sun was sending its first sliver of full light over the horizon. Martin had found some straight branches and some lengths of rope and, with the tarp, rigged a tent that covered the bed of the cart, where Theresa was now asleep. Justin complimented the young Brisbee on his resourcefulness as he reached in and, carefully so as not to wake Theresa, removed his sword and scabbard, bow, quiver and arrows. Martin beamed proudly as he thanked the fox, who was already marching toward the City.

Chapter 3: 2

"I trust you bring me some positive news?" The figure at the window intoned without turning around.

Sullivan prayed inwardly, glad that he was already on bended knee. "I'm afraid not, Your Majesty. Both the Brisbee family and the Amulet were gone by the time we got there. Someone even forgot to lock the front door. We were able to just walk right in."

"Justin, I suppose." Said the figure morosely. "His way of rubbing my face in the fact that he's one step ahead of me." The figure then turned and walked toward a door that led to the courtyard overlook. Sullivan signaled the soldiers with him to remain where they were and followed.

When they reached the overlook, Sullivan cleared his throat and said in his most soldierly voice, "Your Majesty, permission to speak freely?" Jenner, chin resting on interlocked fingers as he leaned on the stone wall, gave a curt nod.

"Sir," Sullivan began, hoping that Jenner understood that he was trying to talk soldier-to-soldier rather than Officer to King. "You now have what we were all after. You now wear the Crown and sit on the Throne of Britain. What difference does it make whether or not you wear some worthless red stone around your neck when you have a whole nation under your feet?"

"Sullivan, do you know the legends behind that 'worthless red stone'; as you call it?" Jenner asked, his voice cold and distant.

"Of course, Sir," Sullivan replied. "Every child in the realm grows up with those stories. They've been passed down for longer than this Kingdom has existed."

"Yes, my friend, and do you know why that is so?" Jenner turned and stared hard into Sullivan's eyes, an almost demonic cast in his own. "Because those stories; those legends, ancient as they are; are true!" The new King began pacing agitatedly along the walkway. "All those battles won, all those armies defeated by heroes who had only one thing in common: they all wore that Amulet!" Seeing that his acolyte was unconvinced, he continued on a different tack. "Besides, whoever possesses that Amulet has the respect of all of Britain. I'm under no illusion that I've started my rule with clean paws. Rumors as to the circumstances of my dear adopted brother's death are already spreading through the city like wildfire. As with all rumors there will be that few who, after the fires of half-truth and lies are extinguished, will keep a few embers of fact burning, always ready to fan them into flames of scandal at the first opportunity." He pounded his fist on the stone railing. "This I cannot abide with! If, with or without the stone, the people refuse to obey my will as their legitimate Sovereign, then they will be punished!" Jenner then stepped to Sullivan's side and whispered conspiratorially, "If, however, the flames that I've described can be stopped before they can do any major damage, who knows? The one who most diligently stamps out the fires would certainly be deserving of certain, shall we say, benefits?"

Sullivan, a follower of Jenner since becoming one of his guards many years ago, had learned quite well that, while vain and power-hungry, Jenner had a certain perverse sense of loyalty, believing that not only could you, for the right price, buy both happiness and friends, but, for just a bit more, you could also keep them. He nodded his understanding.

"Excellent!" Jenner smiled, baring his fangs; a sign that Sullivan knew meant that failure on his part meant the most dire of consequences. "A most dangerous flame burns even as we speak. I suggest that you find it and put it out as soon as possible." Jenner then quickly turned his back on Sullivan, his black cape billowing

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behind him, and strode through the doorway, leaving Sullivan to figure out how he was going to deal with a wily fox named Justin.

Chapter 4: 3

In the next several hours after Justin had left the Brisbee family to continue their journey, Lady Marian; with the help of Martin or a now somewhat stronger Theresa; had struggled to pull the cart as far as she could throughout the day. Justin had made it look so easy. "But then," She thought to herself, "He is a well-trained and disciplined professional soldier suited to a life of physical exertion. I, on the other paw, am...was a noblewoman of the court of King Nicodemus. The only work that I was expected to do was to administer the royal household. Now I'm a hungry, penniless, tired widow with four children to support." She sighed to herself, deciding that fate, indeed, was a sometimes cruel, sometimes benevolent, force.

A sudden noise from the trees of the forest surrounding them broke into her thoughts. She could have sworn she had heard something, a voice maybe? But the children gave no indication of having heard anything. Martin was still at her side doing his level best to make his mother's labor easier to bear. Theresa, though still weak from exhaustion, was at the rear, pushing the cart. Timothy and Cynthia were walking ahead, tossing stones and small pebbles out of the way of where they thought the cart's wheels would roll.

There it was again! Much closer too! "Could it be Highwaymen?" She thought to herself. King Nicodemus had rid all but the most isolated areas of his realm of these robbers. But had word of his death traveled so fast among them that they now felt safe to resume their nefarious activities? And in broad daylight, no less! She dreaded the thought of having to deal with such cutthroats, even though Justin had let them pack only the most necessary items and making her leave her most valuable possessions at the manor. "Calm down," She chided herself. "Or you'll scare yourself silly!"

SNAP! This time even the children had heard it! Martin and Theresa looked up in surprise toward where they thought the sound had come from. Cynthia was already running headlong into the forest where Timothy was pointing. "No!" Lady Brisbee shouted instinctively. But the little rabbit was too far away to hear her call and too eager and curious to be aware of the potential danger.

"Martin, stay with the cart!" She ordered, ducking under the pushbar. "Theresa! Timothy! Did you see where she went?"

"I can still see her, mother!" Timothy shouted excitedly. Lady Brisbee plunged into the thick bramble that was the border of road and forest. She too could see her youngest daughter, who seemed to be on her haunches talking to someone. Thorns and barbs of various types tore into or stuck to her cape and the fur of her legs and tail, stinging as they were forced to release her from their futile grip. "Oh, to be a small child again; able to wriggle through all that and come out unscathed." She thought wistfully. She could now see that Cynthia was leaning over the edge of a large, deep pit. Seconds later, she arrived at the same spot and swept the small rabbit into her arms. "Oh, Cynthia, honey, please, please! Don't ever run into the forest like that again! You frightened Mommy so much!" She pleaded, almost in tears. The look of remorse that came to the young rabbit's face was genuine, but instantly changed to one of glee as she pointed into the hole. "Mommy, Mommy! There's someone in there! He says he's trapped!"

Lady Brisbee, her eyes more accustomed to the darkness, could indeed see a figure at the bottom of the void. "Hello?" she asked hesitantly. "Is everything all right?" A humor-filled voice floated up.

"Well, other than being forced to sleep in this mud-pit half the night. Yeah, I suppose everything's pretty dandy!" At that moment, Theresa arrived, holding the glowing lantern. The voice in the hole, they saw, belonged to a young rooster who, apparently true to his word, was covered comb to spurs with layers of mud.

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After helping the rooster, who introduced himself with a flourish as Jeremy O'Dale, out of the hole, he led them to a nearby creek to wash the mud off of his clothes.

"How did you end up in there?" Theresa asked as she wrung out his shirt.

"Well, it's an odd thing!" Jeremy, who had wrapped himself in a blanket that Lady Brisbee gave him, said. "I was in the town of Foth'ringshay playing for my supper at the inn." He indicated a lute that lay next to him. "I had collected several crown over what I needed to eat and was going to spend the night; my first in an actual warm bed in many a week, mind you; when all of a sudden the Sheriff of Nottingham and a bunch of his Deputies comes swaggering into the place and demands a meal that instant. Well, the innkeeper tells him that others are waiting to be served and he too'll just have to wait. The Sheriff, some twit of a bear whose men called him Brutus, just walks over to the poor bloke and lets him have it across the snout! Then he tells every one that he's looking for a lady fox and her kids, rabbits if you can believe that!" Jeremy then noticed the shocked looks on the faces looking down on him. "What!" he asked, confused. "What'd I..." Then his eyes bulged with realization. "You!" he shouted. "You're the ones he's looking for!" The rooster then began to laugh uproariously. Lady Brisbee and the children, now themselves confused, looked at each other, mouths agape, and shrugged, unsure what to make of this.

As the laughter subsided to a fit of uncontrolled giggling, Theresa regarded Jeremy skeptically and said, "Oh great! The local law is after our heads and we stopped to rescue this looney!"

"Theresa! Mind your manners, young lady!" Scolded Lady Brisbee, embarrassed by her daughters outburst.

"Yes, min' your manners!" Cynthia piped in.

"Oh, that's okay!" Jeremy said, a bemused cackle in his voice. "Anyway," He continued, "I walked over to this big bushel of fur and told him that he had no business hitting defenseless innkeepers and that he was so fat that even if he saw a lady fox with kids, he'd be lucky to be able to actually catch them. Well, as you might be able to guess, those few moments of pleasure had to be paid for with a few hours of pain. He and his Deputies dragged me here to this hole and threw me in. luckily they didn't damage my source of income."

Lady Brisbee smiled at Jeremy's good humor, but inside she was in turmoil. That the Kings Guard was after the Amulet was bad enough, but she could be reasonably sure that even Jenner would not dare try to harm her. But the Sheriffs of the various Shires, except in matters pertaining to the collection of the King's revenues, were pretty much a law unto themselves and while the majority were conscientious about their duties to their constituents, others saw the office as a way to enrich themselves because they were entitled to the excess revenues from seized land or properties. King Nicodemus had tried to reform this state of affairs, but the changes that were being planned had died with him.

"By the way," The rooster said off-handedly. "For whom did I have the honor of taking last nights bath?"

"I'm La..." She hesitated for a moment. All that this wandering musician knew for the moment was that she and the children were wanted by the local Sheriff for some unknown reason and seemed sympathetic to their plight. And while it might later become necessary to divulge why she was on the run, she decided that Jeremy O'Dale could not lie about that which he didn't know. "I'm Mrs. Brisbee." She stated calmly. When the children gave her a collective questioning look, she returned it with one that said, "Go with me on this one and I'll explain later."

After introducing her children, Mrs. Brisbee asked Jeremy where he was going next. "Not to Foth'ringshay, that's for sure!" He replied with a chuckle. "I could head South to Londontown or West to Darby, or even

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Coventry. I haven't been that way in several months."

This disappointed Mrs. Brisbee. "Before you go then, could you tell us how much longer it will be before we find a narrow path next to a low stone wall to the right side of the road?"

"You mean Ol' Doc Ages place?" Jeremy asked, perplexed.

"You know him?" Mrs. Brisbee asked, also surprised.

"He's let me sleep in his hayloft once or twice, so long as I promised not to sing for him." He chuckled again, emphasizing the "not".

"Would you be willing to take us at least that far?" she ventured, heartened by Jeremy's knowledge of the area.

"Sure!" He answered. "I don't have anything to otherwise occupy my time and even a night in a hayloft is a good step up from one in a mudhole."

Mrs. Brisbee thanked him and since his clothes; a collection of once classy, but now out-dated and rather unfashionable, formal wear; were now dry, she had the children repack the cart. As Martin was about to take his place at his mother's side behind the pushbar, Jeremy said, "Now there, young lad, you look a bit tired to these observant eyes. I'll help your mother with the cart while you get some rest, okay?" Martin looked first at Mrs. Brisbee then, longingly, at the cart. Mrs. Brisbee nodded her approval and thanked the rooster.

"No problem, Ma'am." He said as the rabbit climbed into the cart. With that, he nodded in the direction of Dr. Ages house and, picking up the cart's pushbar, started off.

Chapter 5: 4

The gravesites, side-by-side, were unmarked. No headstone. No monument. No marker. Nothing to indicate that there were bodies in coffins under the freshly turned soil. Jenner, in his twisted wisdom, had ordered King Nicodemus and Sir Jonathan Brisbee hastily buried in the most isolated "potter's field" in all Londontown. A field that had long ago been reserved for traitors, spies and other such threats to the Crown and its subjects.

Even through his tears, Justin could see the irony in Jenner's choice. To the new King, Nicodemus was, in fact, a traitor. A traitor to Jenner's perverse ideals of greed, vanity and power for its own sake. Therefore, he deserved, in his adopted sibling's eyes at least, to be interred with others of the ilk.

Justin thought back to the last time that he had cried. An orphan himself, he had just turned twelve, still no more than a kit. He had spent his first night away from home in the barracks of the Kings Guards where he and about two dozen other boys had been sent. He had not been the only one to cry himself to sleep; but since he was the smallest and youngest, he was the one who all of the other young animals mercilessly ragged on that first day. That night he had resolved never to cry again as long as he served his King. Through the years, he had not only served The King; and when the old ruler eventually died, his heir, King Nicodemus and his Prince Regent, Jenner; he'd served with such distinction that he was the first Captain-of-the-Guard to be picked from the Guard's own ranks, usually a Colonel from the Army was given the job, which for all its supposed pomp and glory was considered a step down in status, and the youngest to attain the post to boot! And all but one of the others who had been in his troop that first night and day had been either sent back to wherever they had come from or had transferred to postings in His Majesty's Army. But the one who had stayed was Sullivan.

Justin had known that Sullivan was trouble from the first week that their troop had begun training. The young wolf was lazy, mean-spirited, disrespectful and a bully to the others and, when he could get away with it, a thief. Unfortunately, he was also a competent soldier when he applied himself to the task; one had only to ask the many training partners with dislocated joints or broken bones whom he had sent to the infirmary at one time or another. Justin himself had suffered a few bruises at the business end of one of Sullivan's quarterstaves or practice swords, but his own natural lithness and an almost, some thought, preternatural ability to predict where the wolf would strike his next blow; although Justin would have pointed out that Sullivan, if observed for a long enough period of time, would telegraph his next blow as he became overconfident; had helped him to tie or best his colleague, even if the result was only a bruise to Sullivan's egorather than his hide. But Sullivan was also a natural sycophant, and it was only natural that he should have fallen under the influence of the Prince Regent.

Jenner, for all his skills as a master manipulator, sorely lacked any real battlefield leadership abilities. While his grasp of military knowledge bordered on the merely adequate and he could recite most of the lessons taught him by rote, although with little passion, his real skill, as he would show from the day of his investiture, was to make no end of trouble for his ever-forgiving adoptive brother. Jenner and Sullivan, therefore, were soon secretly hatching plots to rid themselves of the various perceived obstacles on their path to power. The first victim had been their most difficult; the King's Physician, Doctor Ages. Jenner had, with the help of various allies among the lesser so-called "nobles", started a rumor that an "agent provocateur" had been sent from one of the continental Empires to poison or somehow incapacitate His Majesty as a first step to the conquest of Britain. Somehow, in a manner that Justin had never been able to discover, Jenner or Sullivan or one of his allies had skillfully mixed a near-lethal dose of poison into the King's ale; planting just enough evidence along a trail that Justin, then a young Troop-Captain, was forced to follow when he was appointed to be the Chief Investigator; thus implicating Ages. With a heavy heart; because he, along with the King's Coroner, a wise young fox named Jonathan Brisbee, believed the good Doctor to be innocent of the charges; he had been forced to send Ages to exile in the countryside. But the three quickly hatched a plot of their own.

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They vowed to use every means at their disposal to counter Jenner's every effort, no matter how small, to take the Crown. Brisbee, ironically, was Titled for his part in the "successful" completion of the investigation and given the post of Chancellor, who spoke for His Majesty when the King was conducting business elsewhere. This also entitled Sir Jonathan to wear The Amulet, a stone so fabled for its powers; though no one in living memory had ever seen them applied; that all factual information, beyond the stories passed from generation to generation, had been lost aeons ago. Justin, much to his shock, was also promoted; over Sullivan, in fact; which was probably what prompted the wolf to resign his commission in the King's Guard and become Jenner's personal aide-de-camp. And so, for the past several years, these three colleagues had, in great secrecy, been both eyes and ears; watching and listening and trading tiny scraps of information between each other; to keep both the Crown and, far more importantly, The Amulet away from Jenner's grasp.

But all those years of effort had been in vain. He lay prostrate on the wet grass at the foot of the twin gravesites as sobs of grief wracked his body, years of suppressed emotions freeing themselves as they ran rampant through his mind. "Oh, Your Majesty!" he cried. "I was supposed to die under that wall, not you! You have a whole Kingdom that needs your guidance and wisdom! I would gladly give up my own life if it would bring back yours!" A gentle rain, blown in from the Sea by a fair early-Summer's breeze, began to fall. Justin got to his knees and hung his head in shame. "Jonathan," He sobbed. "You had a wife, children...a family! I don't even know my own last name! You and your family had a future together! All that I had was my post in the Guard." Now even this was denied him. The rain fell harder, soaking into his fur and mingling with his tears, causing him to shiver as a cold wind began to moan through the surrounding trees. A distant noise, like the slow roll of a side-drum at a funeral procession, told him that another storm was approaching. Justin heaved a sigh of defeat. He dimly remembered stories that his adoptive mother had told him about the brave and gallant Knights of ancient times who, before going into battle, would meditate or pray at the grave of a dead predecessor in hopes that the spirit of the one buried therein would offer advice or words of encouragement. "Your Majesty; Jonathan. Please forgive me. I'm so lost right now. I've depended on the wisdom of others for so much of my life that I have none of my own. For only the second time in my whole life I'm completely alone!" Only the wind and another distant drum-roll of thunder answered his plea.

After a moment he stood, drew his sword, and rendered his best salute. A moment later, after sheathing the blade, he drew two arrows from the quiver that lay nearby and; following an old, honored and nearly forgotten Guards tradition taught to him by his predecessor; in quick succession, he nocked and launched them, symbolically puncturing the sky and giving notice to the spirit-world that two more heros were coming to join their ranks.

Chapter 6: 5

The bare wisps of cloud glowed pale orange-pink with the last rays of the setting sun. The dark purple sky glistened with many constellations; broken, but also complimented by, the thin streak of crescent moon in the East. Mrs. Brisbee and her children stared in wonder at this display of Nature's nocturnal glory. "It's the most beautiful sight I've ever seen!" She exclaimed.

"My, my! You have been living in the city too long. This is the roof that covers my head just about every night!" Jeremysaid; then, after thinking for a moment, he added, "But it does have a tendency to leak every once in a while." He smiled, pleased by the cleverness of his observation. Mrs. Brisbee returned it with one of her own. Jeremy had been a wonderful companion on their journey. He had a seemingly endless supply of entertaining banter about all of his various adventures as a wandering minstrel. While he saw himself as a last true practitioner of the old Bardic traditions; and Mrs. Brisbee had to admit to herself that his voice, while relatively untrained, was more than up to the task that he had set for himself; his most glaring deficiency was a distinct lack of skill on his chosen instrument. It was not that he lacked enthusiasm, nor probably even talent. But other than a few of the simplest chords, he simply couldn't play the lute.

Mrs. Brisbee, however, was no stranger to the instrument. All young ladies of the court were made aware of the importance of music as a part of daily life. While the "household arts" were usually stressed as the way to excite the wiles of the male ego, a virginal, mandolin or; for the more daring among them; an archlute and a small repitoire of romantic ballads were, according to tradition, excellent aids in catching one's intended husband. Mrs. Brisbee, of course, had never put as much stock in those "traditions" as the other girls, but this did not mean that she hadn't enjoyed making music. While never really able to master the keyboard instruments, she had the annoying habit of pounding them into submission rather than produce anything even remotely resembling decent music, she had found her calling playing stringed instruments popular in the court as well as, and this had really caused some talk among the more snobbish of the ladies, the guitar, thought suited only to the tastes of gypsies, tramps and thieves. But after her marriage to Jonathan, recently available because of his Titlement by The King, and her own appointment as Administrator-of-Household, she had been forced to give up any musical pursuits.

But with the death of her beloved husband, and especially with four small children to support, even the nomadic life that Jeremy chose to live was beginning to look more than a little promising, particularly since they were now fugitives from whatever law that Jenner might use to persecute them.

"Pence for your thought, Ma'am?" Jeremy asked softly, a touch of concern in his usually jaunty voice.

Her slight scowl must have embarrassed him because he looked remorseful as he said, "You had that faraway look that my mom used to get when she told me bedtime stories about my father. He was a minstrel too. He even had the honor of performing for Nicodemus when he was still the Crown Prince."

Mrs. Brisbee's expression softened as she asked, "Do you ever visit your parents, with all of the travelling that you do?" Jeremy bowed his head and stared at the dewy grass, which reflected tiny sparkles of light from the moon and stars.

"My father died in the Plague just before my brood hatched. Mom died a couple of years ago. My brothers and sisters say that she died of old age." He paused for a moment, as if to collect his thoughts, then sighed and continued. "But I think she really died from the sadness caused by a broken heart." Mrs. Brisbee laid a sympathetic paw on his back and nodded her understanding. The rooster smiled his own, the characteristic playful glint visible again even in the near-total darkness of the meadow that surrounded them. Nearby, the children were catching fireflies and putting them in the lantern-glass, the fuel to keep it burning having run

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out long before.

"What do you say we get going, eh?" Jeremy asked in a comic dialect as he fairly skipped, as if a small child himself, toward the cart. "I hear tell th' Sheriff o' Nottin'ham's looking t' arrest a mama fox an' 'er kids for nabbin' th' King's fireflies!" The children giggled and laughed at the rooster's childish antics; but, soon enough, they were back on the road.

Mrs. Brisbee had no idea what time it was when she was awakened by Martin. Jeremy had insisted before they leave the meadow that she climb into the cart, cramped as it was, and get a few hours of desperately needed rest.

"Where are we? How long have I been asleep?" She asked, climbing down from the back of the conveyance.

"Oh, it's probably sometime after midnight." Jeremy answered casually.

She rubbed the sleep out of her eyes and looked in the direction that he indicated with an outstretched wing. Up ahead she could see a small house; dark, except for several candles burning in one lower-story window.

A few minutes later, she knocked at the heavy wooden door. "Dr. Ages!" She called out. "Dr. Ages, are you home?"

"Go Away!" A harsh, grating voice yelled.

She knocked on the door again. "Dr. Ages! Please, I have to talk to you!"

"Go Away!" The voice said again.

Mrs. Brisbee now pounded insistently on the thick wood. "Dr. Ages! Please! I must speak..." She was taken aback when the door suddenly flew open. "...with you." she murmured.

Before her stood an ancient badger. His fur was patchy and faded white, including the eyestripes that gave all members of his species their distinctive look, and even his eyes, which must once have been brown or even black, had faded to a rheumy bluish-gray. He wore a rough-textured heavy cassock, almost like a sackcloth, as if he were doing penance for some sin.

"Great Jupiter, Woman! What do you want?" He demanded.

"Oh, thank goodness you're home! I know that you don't know who I am..." She started to explain.

"Yes, I do. You're Jonathan's widow. I'm sorry about your husband's death. Now, if you'll excuse me..." He started to close the door.

"No! Please wait! Justin sent me!" She exclaimed frantically.

The old badger regarded her skeptically, and then opened the door the rest of the way and peered into the darkness. "Alright," He said, with more than a hint of reluctance in his tone. "But get that cart into the barn. And tell those kids not to touch anything. I'm working on something, uh...something very important!"

While Jeremy went to park the cart in the barn, Mrs. Brisbee settled her children in the attic of the house where they were put to sleep in makeshift beds.

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When she returned downstairs, Ages was drinking tea with Jeremy and listening to the events leading up to his meeting the Brisbee family. When Ages saw her, he waved her over to a large, overstuffed chair that had obviously been sat in far too many times. He motioned toward the tea, still intent on the rooster's story. She nodded, poured herself a cup and carefully tasted it. Surprisingly, it was absolutely delicious; it tasted like pepper and gingerroot with a hint of willowbark.

Ages, noticing the expression on her face, interrupted Jeremy, saying, "Like that, huh? It's my own special concoction. The willowbark's in there to take the ache out of these old bones."

After Jeremy finished his narrative of events of the past few days, Ages turned his attention to the beautiful fox seated before him. "Mrs. Brisbee," he began cordially, "First let me apologize for my behavior earlier tonight. I'm afraid I've been away from both civilization and the King's court for so long that my social graces have atrophied from disuse."

He lifted himself from his seat, with no small amount of difficulty, as the popping of various joints throughout his frame seemed to attest. Mrs. Brisbee was about to stand up to help him, but he motioned her to stay seated. "If I start asking for help every time my bones start creaking, they'll start gettin' lazy an' I'll have to get someone to look after me. I'm afraid I value my privacy too much to contemplate that ever happening." He shuffled over to the fireplace and placed a well-aged log into the glowing embers.

"I imagine that you must have many questions about the events that have disrupted your life and those of your children over the past two days. I promise that I will try to answer as many as possible tonight. But I must also warn you that there are some questions that you will ask that I will not, for my own reasons, be willing or able to answer." Ages ambled back to his chair and nestled back into its warm embrace.

Mrs. Brisbee hardly knew where to begin. Almost without thinking, she blurted out, "How did you know who I was? Justin told me before he left us that you might recognize me, but I must confess that I've never laid eyes on you in my life."

The old badger chuckled, as if he had all the worlds secrets. "Why, my Lady Marian, I was at your mothers side when she was giving birth to you! Infact, you were my very first medical assignment after my appointment as Royal Physician. That you don't remember me comes as no surprise to me because I became the King's Physician only three years later and you had barely left your teens when Jenner got me implicated in that poisoning scandal that indirectly led to your marriage to Jonathan!"

"You knew Jonathan?" She gasped, sitting bolt-upright as if hit between the shoulder blades with a sledgehammer.

Ages eyes darkened as he bitterly recalled the circumstances of how they crossed paths. "Jenner saw me as an obstacle to power because he knew that Nicodemus trusted me implicitly with his health and I returned the favor with unswerving loyalty. You'll remember that rumors abounded that one of the Continental Empires was trying to kill him in order to take control of the Crown. Jenner, with the help of certain allies in the lower aristocracy, then somehow gave Nicodemus a dose of poison, only enough to make him ill, and then cleverly laid the blame at my door. But the two officials appointed to the case were no fools. Jonathan suspected Jenner because none of the clues led outside of his circle of friends. The other official, a young Guardsman named Justin, did indeed first suspect me; but Jonathan kept asking the right questions and making Justin look beyond that which was in front of his eyes. In the end, we found that Jenner had manipulated the evidence against me in such a way that, no matter what we tried to present to the contrary, I would still be seen as a traitor to my King, and probably end up on the gallows. I decided to let myself be exiled here, where, with the help of your late husband and Justin, bless their souls, we did what we could to protect Nicodemus and keep the Crown and that Amulet..." He motioned to the stone that hung around her neck. "...away from Jenner."

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"But what happened?" Mrs. Brisbee asked, her voice a choked whisper as tears ran down her cheeks. "Why didn't he ever tell me any of this? Why?"

Ages sighed. "I think," He stated as he pulled his chair closer to hers. "That it would be best to answer your second question first. When we made our vows to protect King, Crown, Amulet, and by extension, Country; we also vowed secrecy so that, if any one of us should fall into Jenner's paws should he become too powerful to control, the other two would either attempt a rescue or, failing that, kill him so that he couldn't reveal the identities of the other two, who were to try to keep up the fight. What happened?" Ages shook his head sadly, seeming to age many decades in those few moments. "Justin found out that Jenner somehow got wind of Jonathan's part in our conspiracy of light. He didn't figure out until too late that Jenner sabotaged the tower wall to make it tumble down onto King Nicodemus and your husband.

After he saw it fall on them, Justin tried to dig them both out; but too many of Jenner's assistants were closing in and, besides, there was no way to have survived under all those tons of stone, mortar and wood. Justin did the only thing that he could think to do at that moment: he grabbed the Amulet which had fallen from Jonathan's neck..."

"And gave it to me." Mrs. Brisbee whispered.

"Yes. Justin trusts you. He's always believed that you and Jonathan were right for each other; even though, when you two first met, I believed differently." When he saw her questioning look, he continued. "You see, I have been keeping track of my patients for many, many years. The reports on you were always extremely ambiguous. You were a practical girl. You were an impulsive girl. You were charitable almost to a fault. You were utterly, ruthlessly efficient as an Administrator. Where Jonathan saw qualities that made you an ideal wife in his eyes; I saw someone who might, however unwittingly, undermine our efforts to keep King Nicodemus on the Throne. It was Justin who convinced me that you were a loving and trustworthy companion for him."

Mrs. Brisbee sat dazed by what she was hearing, a wave of fatigue washing over her. Jeremy, who had been listening in rapt attention, now spoke up. "Now I know why the Sheriffs have had their Deputies locking up all the alms-seekers and homeless these past few weeks! Jenner probably set this thing in motion weeks ago, right under King Nicodemus's nose!"

"I shouldn't be at all surprised." Ages stated. "The Sheriffs have a lot of latitude when it comes to enforcing the criminal and civil codes. Nicodemus wanted to try to rein them in. No doubt that Jenner would have jumped at the opportunity to offer them almost unlimited local power in return for their support. Clearing the streets of so-called "undesirable elements" would certainly signal to him that they are serious about giving that support." He looked at the rooster, his face set with concern. "I would suggest that you stay here with Mrs. Brisbee for the near future, my friend. I'm going to let you sleep in the house from now on. We'll have to get some beds from the abandoned inn a few miles down the road tomorrow. Tonight I'm afraid you'll have to make do on the couch in here; I'll see if I can find some more blankets somewhere."

To both of them he said, "I know that you've been through quite a bit these past few days, and I'm afraid that things are going to get far worse before they begin to get better. But if all of us work together for our mutual benefit we have a chance of making it through, hopefully relatively unscathed." He then glanced at what looked like a complicated sculpture that occupied most of a nearby table. "Great Jupiter!" He exclaimed, rising to his feet; more joints popping as he did so. "It's almost three-thirty!" He bade Mrs. Brisbee good night and hurried off to find Jeremy his promised blankets.

Mrs Brisbee made her way up to the attic and removed her cape and folded it, placing it at the foot of her improvised bed. The Amulet she hung from a protruding dowel that she had noticed earlier while putting the children to bed. She crawled under her covers and fell asleep as soon as her head hit the folded blanket that

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was her pillow. But hers was the uneasy sleep of hunted prey.

Chapter 7: 6

The morning Sun had only just cleared the horizon when Justin forced himself once again to stop and rest. He had been loping along at a good clip since just before dawn, after only a few hours of fitful sleep in an abandoned stone shed. He had been using old marching trails, cut centuries before when a proliferation of small armies rampaged through Britain before she was united under one King, now grown over from disuse. He could not see or be seen from the road, which this particular trail paralleled from a short distance away. Other than a bit of heavier than normal breathing Justin hadn't even broken a sweat, such was the excellence of his physical condition.

The only sounds from the forest that he had heard were the wind whispering through the trees and rustling leaves and his own footfalls, which weren't much louder. Stealth was not normally part of the training for a primarily ceremonial posting, but in recent years Justin had come to believe that any advantages that one could gain over one's adversaries were all too often the difference between survival and an early grave.

He wondered what the future, his future, held. He had considered taking Lady Brisbee and her children and moving them North to the Scottish Lands. But the animals in those parts were almost as wild as the land that they inhabited; and the land itself was so poor that Justin doubted that he and the Lady could sustain the needs of her family for very long. He had also considered taking them to Wales, the small Duchy that no British monarch had ever been able to force to join the Kingdom. He knew that its Duke bore no love for Jenner and that he and King Nicodemus seemed to bear no grudge against each other, but the Duke was a very wily old hare who no doubt would have let the children; who were, after all, rabbits; in, but would never have approved of a pair of unmarried foxes as parents. "No," He decided grimly, "I must help her to rebuild her shattered life here in Britain as much as I possibly can."

He was snapped out of his reverie by a commotion from the road. The crack of a whip, an item that had been banned from use in the Kingdom for centuries, sounded in the morning air. He had once seen one of these vile instruments of torture demonstrated on an old tree trunk that stood near the Guards parade ground and had been sickened by the very thought that one animal might once have used it to inflict pain on another. He carefully made his way to a small stand of brush to investigate the scene that was taking place on the road not far away.

A group of peasants, racoons by the look of them, was being forced to carry a huge sedan-chair. Normally, prisoners volunteered for such duty because it shaved time off of their sentence. But none of the animals under the load; a fat, baggy-eyed boar whom Justin recognized as a very successful merchant and one of Jenner's more unlikable allies; was wearing a prison uniform. And the merchant, whose name Justin could not remember, was unescorted. He could see no Deputy to guard the carriers, as was the prescribed practice.

"Dammit!" The merchant grunted. "I said get moving!" He let loose another blow, putting a bloody stripe across the back of one of his victims. The poor racoon cringed in agony but desperately bent to his near-impossible task without so much as a whimper.

Justin paled in horror at this sight. "Have Jenner's friends grown so arrogant and black-hearted that they now feel free to enslave peasants?" He asked himself.

The merchant landed yet another stroke on the poor racoon's back. "When I say move, I mean MOVE!" He squealed, almost as if delighted by the sound of the whipcrack and his own anger.

Justin could stand no more of this. He curled his lip and emitted a low growl; his feet fairly flying as he, quietly as a light summers breeze, made his way to a tall oak tree with a large overhanging branch that he'd

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spotted a short ways back. With the help of ivy vines growing up from the base of the huge trunk, he was up the tree and kneeling, like an avenging angel over an unrepentant sinner; over the spot in the road where the bent and bloodied racoons half-dragged, half-carried their enormous, cursing burden.

The boar never noticed Justin silently draw his sword out of its scabbard. He was too busy whipping the racoons and his sadistic frenzy to see or hear Justin swoop down with the sword over his head uttering a primal cry not heard since animals first walked on their hind legs.

The sword missed the merchant's head by no more than the thickness of a butterfly's wing; instead coming down full-force on the back of the seat of the chair and through the platform that supported it, rending the entire structure in two. Justin dropped expertly to the ground as it gave way. The merchant, caught totally unawares, landed awkwardly and painfully on his ample rump. The racoons were all thrown clear and uninjured to one side or another of the road. With speed born of years of practice in combat training drills; Justin, using the end of the hilt as a cudgel, drove it into the back of the boar's neck, stunning him into unconsciousness.

When he awoke, the merchant found that he'd been stripped to his silk underwear and tied tight, paw and hoof, face-to-face to a large and very sturdy looking oak tree. "What's the meaning of this!" he grunted, trying to see behind him but having no luck because of his thick neck and multiple chins. He could also still feel the lump that had formed as the result of the blow to his head. "Whoever you are, you'd better let me go! I'm a friend of the new King!" He tried his best to sound in command of the situation, but there was no way to keep a large measure of nervousness out of his voice. Suddenly, a fox stepped casually into his limited field of vision, paws behind his back, the expressionless vulpine eyes regarding him coldly. It took a few moments, but soon a glimmer of recognition crept into the boar's mind. "Y-You're the C-Captain-of-the-Guard!" He stammered. A hard smile came to Justin's face. "I was the Captain-of-the-Guard. Jenner has, shall we say, relieved me of my duties." He said sarcastically.

"Well, whatever you are or aren't, get over here and untie me and I'll see to it that you're amply rewarded!" The merchant exclaimed, the relief in his voice still tinged with nervousness. "And hurry it up! The bandits who robbed me may still be about!"

A nasty glare darkened Justin's face as he brought the whip into sight. "Bandits are the least of your worries at the moment." He stated flatly. The boar's eyes widened in panic. Justin walked over and knelt down, using the coiled whip to lift the boar's many-layered chin, to confront him nose-to-snout. "I never thought," Justin hissed angrily, "That I would see the day when one animal would feel that he could enslave another using something like this!" He indicated the whip that he held with narrowed, burning eyes. "But I guess that as long as Jenner wears the Crown, anything can happen." Justin then rose and began pacing around the merchant as a vulture circles a fresh kill. "I sent those poor racoons home. You know, of course, that all of them are going to have a permanent reminder of their mistreatment at your hands. Their children or parents or relatives are gonna wonder why their father or son or brother has those horrible scars on his back. And what are they gonna say? That some fat hog whipped 'em bloody because they couldn't lift him high enough or carry him fast enough?"

The merchant shifted uncomfortably, the vines used to tie him biting into his hocks and wrists. "P-Please," he begged. "I-I'll pay them for their trouble! I-I just lost control because I was in a hurry!" Large droplets of perspiration began to form on his pale, saggy flesh.

Justin stopped his pacing, reached down and grabbed the boar's snout, bringing them eye-to-eye and eliciting a frightened whine. "I already gave them all the money in your strong-box!" He said sharply. "As well as all those fine clothes! I even wanted to strip you to the skin, but no one wanted your undergarments! And as for losing control..." He whipped his paw to one side and back, smashing the boar's snout into the tree. A small

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trickle of blood began to flow from one nostril. "Oops!" Justin said, mock-gleefully. "Did I do that? I'm sorry! I just sorta 'lost control!'" He then grabbed the boar's snout again and growled, "Now you listen to me you pig! I'm not gonna kill you, even though Britain wouldn't miss your worthless hide, because I want you to deliver a message to Jenner! You tell that flea-bitten excuse for a throw-rug that I'm making it my mission in life to make his life and those of his friends as miserable as he's made mine for as long as he wears that Crown! Got it?" The merchant quickly nodded, tears of pain and relief streaming from his eyes.

Justin released his grip on the merchant's snout and counted five paces back from where the boar was tied to the tree. "Wh-What're you gonna do?" The boar asked through chattering teeth.

Justin unfurled the whip and gave it an experimental crack. "There's an old proverb that states: 'A moment of pleasure at the expense of others must eventually be paid for by many hours of pain at the expense of ones self.' You had your pleasure at the expense of those peasants. Now, I'm gonna take it out of YOUR hide! One stroke per peasant!"

With that, ignoring the merchant's tearful pleas for mercy, Justin let loose with the first stroke, putting every ounce of his strength behind it. The huge, thick oak shook to its roots as the boar squealed in pain, leaves shaking loose from branches and scattering in the light wind.

Seven more times Justin landed the whip across the boar's back, each time answered by a squeal of agony; which, Justin thought, sounded suspiciously like the squeals of pleasure that he had given while he was whipping the raccoons; and resulting in a bloody stripe down his back.

After the last lash, Justin tossed the whip aside. "Remember," He said calmly and deliberately, "Jenner gives up the Crown or else I turn his life into pure and total misery!" He then executed a perfect about-face and disappeared into the forest; leaving the boar bawling like a child.

Chapter 8: 7

The sun was high when Mrs. Brisbee awoke. She realized this with a start and, putting on the Amulet and her cape, ran downstairs to see to the children. In the small but well-stocked kitchen, Dr. Ages was preparing a pot of what smelled like corn-and-bean porridge. Catching sight of her, he smiled brightly and said, "Good Morning, M'Lady! Lunch in twenty minutes!" Brisbee smiled and returned the greeting, reluctantly reminding him that since she had apparently been stripped of her rank and title within the court, as well as being a wanted fugitive, she preferred "Mrs." because "Lady" might draw unwanted attention. Ages thought about this a moment. "Very good point, Mrs. Brisbee! You certainly know how to think on your feet!" He said with admiration.

Brisbee bade him goodbye and went to the main room. Jeremy was sprawled across one of the padded chairs absently strumming his lute. "Oh, hey, Mrs. B.!" He said, looking up. "If you're looking for your brood, they're out playing in the meadow."

Mrs. Brisbee thanked him and was about to go out the door but hesitated. "Jeremy," she said, "How would you like me to help you, um, improve on your playing skills; not that there's anything wrong with them now! Don't get me wrong!"

The rooster let out a characteristic cackle. "Don't worry about offending my sensibilities, Mrs. B. I know that I'm not the virtuoso that I pretend to be." He placed the instrument aside and stood, proffering a gentlemanly bow. "I'd be honored to take music lessons from her Ladyship!" He said, in a somewhat exaggerated version of the manner of the royal court.

Mrs. Brisbee giggled and returned his bow, saying, "Why, M'Lord! 'twill be my greatest of pleasures! I am but your humble servant!" They looked into each other's eyes, enjoying the moment, then burst out in childish laughter.

Leaving Jeremy to his playing, Mrs. Brisbee stepped out of the house. Before her lay a vast tree-lined meadow. It was breathtaking in its beauty, with colorful wildflowers dotting the landscape. A stones-throw away, a small garden, surrounded by a low stone wall, complimented the picturesque scene. The children were playing not far away; Martin and Theresa engaged in a game of tag from the look of it, while Cynthia was playing with a cloth doll that she had somehow acquired. Timothy, his head propped against the garden wall, was staring at the far edge of the field as if lost in thought. She walked slowly toward where Martin and Theresa frolicked in the tall grass. Martin, who was chasing his older sister, was the first to notice his mother's approach. "Hi, mom!" He called out. Theresa stopped only long enough to wave, and then said, "C'mon, Slowpoke, you're still 'it' and you haven't caught me yet!" With that, Martin resumed his pursuit of his older sibling.

She continued to where Cynthia sat, the young rabbit holding the doll; which had been sewn hurriedly from what looked like Turkish-bath-towel cloth which might once have been white but was now a faded, dingey gray; out toward her mother. "Look, mommy!" She exclaimed proudly. "That nice Doctor Ages made it for me this morning!" The doll stared blankly from mismatched button eyes; a crude nose and lopsided, somewhat forlorn, smile embroidered into the cloth completed the face.

"That's wonderful, honey! I hope you remembered to thank him for it!" She said gently.

Cynthia scrunched her face in thought, then smiled. "Oh, yes! I remembered!" The little rabbit then returned to playing with her new toy; not thinking, as it was with most children her age, beyond the moment.

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She walked over to the wall where Timothy lay. He appeared to be dozing in the gentle heat of the warm mid-day sun. She was about to leave him to his sleep when he opened one eye and said, "Oh, hi mom." Brisbee sat beside him, back to the wall, and drew her knees to her chin.

"Enjoying the sunshine?" She asked.

Timothy closed the eye again. "Thinkin'." He said in a calm, neutral tone.

"About?" She asked gently, not wishing to prod him unnecessarily.

Timothy opened both of his wide brown eyes and sat up, assuming a posture identical to that of his mother. "A dream." He stated matter-of-factly, his eyes taking on a haunted cast.

Mrs. Brisbee noticed the change in her son, becoming somewhat alarmed. Ever since his recent bout with pneumonia he'd been sleeping badly. "Everyone has dreams, sweetheart, good and bad." She said, reassuringly.

"No!" He said, grabbing his mother's wrist in such a vise-like grip that it began to hurt her. He was now looking past her, as if he could see something that she could not. "You don't understand! For the past several weeks I've been having nightmares about Dad getting killed. And when he died a few days ago I knew, somehow, what had happened even before Captain Justin came and told us." He shivered in the warm air and continued, loosening his grip on his mother's hand. "This morning I was awakened before the others by another dream." He swallowed hard. "I dreamt of a fire. I don't really know what it was that was on fire, but it was so real that I could smell the smoke and feel the heat of the flames around me." He was back to the present in an instant, calm again. "I don't know what it means." he said to her unasked question, releasing her wrist and letting his own paw fall to the ground at his side. "I just thought that I had to tell someone."

Just then, Jeremy sauntered up to where they were sitting. "Hey, you two, didn't you hear me?" He asked jovially, "Lunch is served!"

Mrs. Brisbee nodded and said, "We'll be there in a few moments, Jeremy. Please go ahead without us."

The rooster smiled and shrugged and said, "No problem. I can understand wanting some quality time together." He turned and headed back toward the house.

As soon as he was gone, Mrs. Brisbee put a comforting arm around her youngest son's shoulder. "I'm not really sure what to do, Timothy." She said, deciding that honesty was better than false bravado. "If you like, I'll let you stay up a little later than the other kids tonight so that we can talk to Dr. Ages about it. He might be willing to help you, if he's able."

The young rabbit smiled and nestled his head against his mother's shoulder. "Thank's mom." He whispered.

After a few minutes of enjoying the sights and sounds of the field, Mrs. Brisbee said, "How 'bout we go in and get some lunch? The Doctor was making a wonderful smelling corn-and-bean porridge." Moments later, she and her adopted son were walking hand-in-hand toward the house, both with wide, happy smiles on their faces.

Chapter 9: 8

"He said WHAT?"

Jenner's voice echoed through the throne room like a peal of angry thunder. The merchant, wearing a white robe to cover the bandages on his wounds, knelt before his King and nervously repeated, verbatim, what Justin had told him to tell the lion who sat before him. "P-Please, your Majesty, I-I beg your mercy! Those are his words, not mine!" He stammered.

"Enough of your wimpering, idiot!" Jenner cried, exasperated at the blabbering fool in front of him. "I should take that whip to you myself! My ability to rule is on shaky enough ground as we speak! But to have my subjects revolt against me because a simple-minded pig wasn't willing to spend a few Talents to hire a few carriers from the local Sheriff?" Jenner gave the merchant a hard look. "Eustace," He said in a genuinely sad voice. "You have made me, your King, look the fool. Under my reign you could have profited handsomely from your connections to my court." The anger returned to his voice. "But I can't forgive this kind of sheer stupidity!" Jenner pointed a beringed finger at the boar. "I hereby sentence you to exile from my Kingdom! I also hereby confiscate all properties from you except for sufficient means to take whatever transportation is needed to carry out my sentence. Furthermore, this sentence is to be carried out within seven days, after which you will be executed on sight if you should ever set foot in my Kingdom during my reign." Eustace paled visibly, his lower lip trembling. "Count yourself fortunate that I am a merciful ruler, Eustace Scrubb!" Jenner said sternly. "You, at least, will live to see another day; even if it is in a foreign land."

At Sullivan's nod, four of the King's Guards advanced; two of them picking the unfortunate merchant up by his underarms with barely an effort, and the other two drawing their swords, showing the boar that they meant to carry out the King's order, and falling in behind the first two; and dragged him, pleading for Jenner to reconsider his judgment, away.

As soon as the fearful squealing had faded, Jenner motioned Sullivan to approach. Sullivan dismissed his Troop from the Throneroom and, as soon as the heavy iron-reinforced door was closed, joined his King.

"I'm always at your service, Your Majesty." He stated flatly. Jenner nodded and regarded his Captain-of-the-Guard.

"Tell me, my friend," he said languidly. "Do you feel that I did the right thing?"

Sullivan's eyes hardened as he said, "The pig was, as you said, an idiot. He really deserves to die for his crime, especially for using that whip!"

Jenner sighed. "Yes, yes, I know. But I didn't ask you if I did the correct thing; I asked you if I did the right thing."

Sullivan arched an eyebrow, unsure where Jenner's line of questioning was supposed to be leading. Jenner caught the motion. "You see, my friend, if I appear to be too harsh with those who helped me to ascend to this Throne, I will surely lose their badly needed support before I can build a strong enough power base to let my rule sustain itself. If, on the other paw, I'm too lenient; my supporters will take that as a sign of weakness and I'll soon be relegated to no more than a figurehead, in which case, I might just as well be nothing more than the 'flea-bitten excuse for a throw-rug' that your bothersome predecessor described me as."

Sullivan nodded his understanding. He'd never had the patience or stomach for power politics that his King did, preferring instead the physical domination of a foe on the battlefield. But that did not mean that he didn't

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appreciate Jenner's talent for anticipating a problem and thinking out a solution, even if that solution proved lethal to Jenner's adversary. "Don't worry, your Majesty, I'll find him." He said confidently.

Jenner's face darkened. "I'm sure you will. But I want a reward posted. A thousand crowns for his head, in a platter, at my feet!"

"Will that be all, your Majesty?" Sullivan asked.

"It's a start." Jenner sneered.

Chapter 10: 9

"I'm really not sure what to tell you, my boy." Dr. Ages said, leaning against the fireplace mantle.

Timothy had just told his mother, Ages and Jeremy about his nightmares over the past several weeks. His narratives had been very detailed and all three were amazed at how much he seemed to remember.

Ages began to nervously pace the room. "We've known for centuries," He began, as if lecturing to a group of medical academy students, "That certain rabbits, usually males, somehow acquire an ability to see into the future. It usually seems to run in families, although here have been exceptions, but since we have no way of tracing your family history I suppose that's a moot point. Usually this power, if you will, begins to manifest itself when the possessor reaches mating age; although I do remember one case in my early days where a six-year-old rabbit fell from a window in his home. He was not seriously injured, just a bump on the head that left him unconscious for a few minutes and required several stitches. A few days later, his mother told me that he dreamt that a ring lay buried in their garden and that, when they dug it up, they found that it belonged to a local Noblewoman who had lost it several years before when it fell from her finger during a coach ride. The rabbit was amply rewarded and began using his 'gift', as he called it, to find lost objects for a modest fee. Eventually, though, his gift began to fade and he had to live like a regular rabbit. I submitted a case study to my Medical Guild and forgot about it until now."

"Then it's possible that these nightmares won't last?" Mrs. Brisbee asked.

Ages shrugged. "I don't honestly know. Some cases seem to fade over time; others have been known to last until the death of the recipient."

Jeremy, who had been listening attentively, exclaimed, "The Gift of the Bards! That's what it is! Remember, many of the ancient singers were rabbits with the gift of prophecy!"

Ages thoughtfully rubbed the stubbly fur on his chin. "I never looked at it quite like that before, but it's too intriguing a theory to dismiss out of hand."

Mrs. Brisbee, a hint of frustration in her voice, said, "C'mon, you two, this is a little boy, my son, we're talking about! Not some medical experiment or museum artifact! My main concern is for his well-being!"

Timothy, who had been listening in silence, yawned and crawled across the couch to where his mother sat. He wriggled his head under her arm and lay his head on her lap and promptly fell asleep.

Jeremy snickered softly and said, in a professorial manner, "I do believe our learned colleague has rendered his considered opinion of our debate." Ages smiled and sighed. "My father always said that 'There's nothing like the simple wisdom of a child to make the most educated of us look like total fools.' I realize now exactly what he meant."

Mrs. Brisbee smiled and, as she gently picked up her youngest son, playfully chided them, whispering, "It's nice to know that even you two egotists can be taught a little humility." She then whispered her goodnights to them and crept silently up the stairs to the attic to put her son and herself to bed.

Chapter 11: 10

In the next several weeks, life settled into something approaching a routine. Mrs. Brisbee made herself responsible for the care and feeding of the household, much as she had done for the Royal Court; as much to keep her mind off of the death of Jonathan, as well as her worries about Justin's safety. But her sleep was often fitful and nerve-wracked and she had begun to take on a hollow-eyed look. Jeremy, in his own quirky manner, took care of the children; teaching them about both the joys and sorrows of peasant life. He taught them how to work in the garden; weeding, hoeing and gathering their food; and told them stories about his childhood and the great knights and bards who wandered ancient Britain; doing great deeds and rescuing fair damsels from the clutches of greedy dragons and singing romantic ballads of their heroism.

Dr. Ages, who went into the nearest villages almost every day, would bring back news of the rumors that were quickly spreading throughout the countryside. Each night after the children had been put to bed he, Jeremy and Mrs. Brisbee would sit in the living room in front of the dying embers of the fire and, over tea, try to determine what part of those rumors might have contained any actual fact.

Life during this time was not all hard work. During their free moments, Brisbee; using an old guitar that Dr. Ages bought at one of the village markets; taught Jeremy some of the finer points of musicianship. He was an enthusiastic student as well as a quick study, often mastering in hours techniques that had taken her days to learn.

One day Dr. Ages returned from his walk, much earlier than was his normal habit, with a beatific smile on his face. "I've got bad news and I've got excellent news!" He exclaimed as he led them to his usual chair in the livingroom. He sat down heavily in his seat. An anticipative hush descended on everyone. "First the bad news," he said with a childish glee. From out of a pocket of his robes he produced a large, folded piece of parchment. Ages unfolded it and cleared his throat. "By order of His Majesty, King Jenner," He began. "A reward of one thousand crowns is offered for the capture, dead or alive, of Justin, former Captain of the King's Guard."

The others in the room were shocked at both this news and the way that Ages made light of it. "That's terrible!" Mrs. Brisbee exclaimed.

"Not really." Said a familiar voice. "Especially since I happen to be the one who came to break the excellent news." All eyes turned toward the open front door and the tall fox silhouetted in the bright sunlight.

"Justin!" Mrs. Brisbee exclaimed as she ran and lovingly embraced him. "Oh, Justin! I thought you might be dead!" She cried, tears of joy running down her cheeks.

Justin smiled and wiped one away. "It'll take more than a thousand crowns and some order from that pretender to King Nicodemus's Throne to kill me." He reassured her.

By now the others in the room had gathered their wits and were crowding around him bombarding him with questions about where he had been and what he'd been doing during the time he'd been gone.

He raised his paws in surrender and exclaimed, "Whoa! Whoa! Please everybody, one at a time!"

"Yes," Interjected Ages, "How 'bout we go out back to discuss this. All of you can go ahead while I make some tea; he already told me most of it on our way here.

When they were all gathered outside, Mrs. Brisbee introduced Jeremy and told Justin the circumstances under which they met.

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"I'm certainly glad that you decided to stay with her, even if her present predicament was indirectly responsible for your run-in with the Sheriff!" Justin told the rooster.

Jeremy smiled broadly and replied, "No problem! I'm used to spending my nights outside, although not usually thrown in with a free bath!" They all laughed at his clever turn of phrase.

"So where have you been?" Theresa asked. "Mom's been worried sick about you since you've been gone!"

Justin smiled at the rabbit's forthrightness. "I've been doing a bit of trouble-making!" He stage-whispered conspiratorially. He told them about his encounter with the merchant and his various other efforts to both sabotage Jenner's rule of the kingdom and try to prevent the more serious abuses of power by those friends of the new King who, figuring that they were now above the rule of law, tried to take advantage of animals poorer and less powerful than themselves. "But believe me, my Lady," He said, a sadness shading his eyes. "Not a day went by when I wasn't just as concerned about the safety of you and your children as you were for mine.

"Have you been able to hear any news from Londontown? What's going on in the court?" Mrs. Brisbee asked.

Justin shook his head. "Jenner's got the City closed up tight." He replied, "It's been under a dusk-to-dawn curfew since just after we made our escape. Jenner's posted a permanent guard on all the major roads leading into and out of the City. As for King Nicodemus's court, all of his appointments have been stripped of their titles and had their lands confiscated and either been placed under house-arrest or are in prison awaiting trial for whatever charge Jenner can think to bring against them. He's also stripped the Ladies-of-the-Court of their titles and left them to whatever fate awaits them on the outside."

"But who will administer the affairs of the court? Someone has to keep the palace running!" Brisbee asked, worried about her friends; many of whom she'd grown up with.

Justin shrugged helplessly. "Jenner seems to think that he can do the job himself. He's also fired about a third of the household staff and cut the pay of the rest. He's also issued a proclamation to the City that he expects all the alms-seekers and homeless animals to work in the fields, regardless of illness or family. He's threatened imprisonment for those who don't comply, no matter what their circumstance."

"That's Jenner. Efficiency to the point of cruelty." Observed Dr. Ages, who emerged from the house with a tray of fresh tea, as well as fruit juice for the children.

"It gets worse." Justin continued. "He's raising the taxes of everyone except his wealthy friends and the Sheriffs. He's also 'requested' that the Sheriffs put the alms-seekers and homeless to work in the fields of their Shires as he's done in the City."

"Well, at least that'll get those deadbeats out of the jails and into some more useful pursuits." Jeremy said, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

"What about us?" Timothy asked. A hush descended upon the group.

After a long, thoughtful silence; Ages cleared his throat. "I believe that our best course for the moment," He began. "Would be to lay as low as possible. As long as we draw no attention to ourselves, we should be safe where we are. Justin can stay the night, but I'm going to have to find other quarters for you elsewhere in the morning in case someone discovers your whereabouts."

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"Don't worry about me." Justin said, "I'm going back to the City tonight anyway. I have a meeting with some, uh, friends who aren't thrilled with the direction that Jenner is taking this country."

"Must you leave so soon?" Mrs. Brisbee asked. Although she never would have admitted it to anyone but herself, and even then only with the greatest reluctance, she felt a certain attraction to her late husband's friend. It was far stronger than just the adversities that they had suffered in the past several weeks, but she would have been hard-pressed to actually call it Love; at least in the romantic sense as she understood it.

"Fraid so." He replied, giving no indication of having heard the emotion behind Mrs. Brisbee's question. "These are animals who love their freedoms as much as we do and need as much help and hope as I can possibly give them." He noticed the downcast look of her eyes. "Don't worry," He said gently. "I'll come back just as soon as I can."

Mrs. Brisbee nodded, but felt a wave of sadness wash over her. With Jonathan gone, only the children gave her life any real meaning. Her work around Ages' house, while it kept her somewhat occupied, certainly could not fill the huge void that still remained in her heart. She began to realize that Justin, who was probably feeling the same emptiness as she, had decided to fill it with hatred for Jenner and a desire to seek revenge against him. This thought saddened her all the more. For she knew that, in his true heart, Justin, even though he was a soldier, was a gentle, caring soul. "So much like Jonathan." She thought to herself.

"What about Jonathan?" Justin asked, a perplexed look on his face.

"Hm, what?" Mrs. Brisbee asked, as if awakening from a deep sleep.

"I was just telling everyone that I'll probably be back in about a week or so when you said something about your husband." His expression was now one of concern. "Are you sure you're alright?"

"Mommy's been having trouble sleeping lately." Cynthia said with a certain sadness in her voice. "She misses Daddy and wants him to come home. I miss Daddy a lot too."

Justin picked up Cynthia, who had toddled over to him, and placed her on his knee. "Well, Cynthia, Dr. Ages and I were good friends with your father and we miss him very much as well. Many people are having trouble sleeping because your father can't come home. But he's gone to a place where he can serve his King for the rest of time, something that he loved to do almost as much as he loved being your Daddy, and I'm sure that he misses you just as much as you miss him." This seemed to satisfy the little rabbit, who slid down from Justin's knee and ran to her mother and exclaimed, "Mommy, d'ja hear that? Daddy an' King Nicodemus are bes' friends f'rever now!"

"Yes, Honey, that's wonderful." She tried to sound enthusiastic, but her heart was breaking from the loneliness that she felt. She was beginning to understand why Justin had filled his inner void with hate and vengeance against Jenner. To leave such a void unfilled was just so painful that, whether one wanted it to or not, the emptiness would eventually fill with something, anything, just so long as it was filled. Even if what filled it was as dark and destructive as what had caused the original emptiness in the first place.

After a while, Mrs. Brisbee lost interest in the conversation. She excused herself and went to the attic. There she broke down and gave way to the tears that she thought that she had cried away that first storm-tossed night.

Chapter 12: 11

Jenner regarded the piece of boiled carrot on his fork with disdain. This was not solely because it tasted bad. He never really liked vegetables. To his palate they were bland, unappetizing things no matter what was added to them to try to make them tolerable. No, Jenner craved meat. He knew that this was wrong. One animal had not eaten another since... But even today, as in the days of his misspent youth, he fantasized about killing something, a small rabbit or a day-old chick, and devouring its living flesh. He wondered what it would taste like to chew a properly broiled rabbit's heart...

Suddenly, the door to his private dining room burst open. "Your Majesty! I bring news! I think you should hear this!" It was Sullivan.

Jenner glared at him coldly. "This better be worth it." He growled; his left eye twitching, a nervous tic that he had developed in the past few weeks.

"Your Majesty, Justin was seen just hours ago in Leicestershire. One of the Sheriff's Deputies saw him walking with an old white badger..."

Jenner threw down the fork and stood and slammed his paws down on the tabletop, leaning forward as if ready to climb over it to throttle Sullivan. "BADGER?" He screamed.

"Y-Yes, your Majesty. Wh-White as new-fallen snow according to the Deputy; didn't even have eyestripes!" Sullivan stammered, unnerved by Jenner's loss of control.

"AGES! DAMN HIS MISERABLE HIDE! I should have killed that mange-ridden quack the day that he left the City! I could have made it look like a highway robbery attempt gone bad, but noooo! The others said 'Don't bother with him, Jenner.' or 'He's harmless now, Jenner.' and, idiot that I was, I actually LISTENED to them!" He picked up the fork and plunged it deep into the polished wood tabletop. "I KNEW that he was the mind behind Jonathan Brisbee and Justin's efforts to stand between me and the Crown!" Jenner's eyes began to develop the demonic cast that they had shown a few weeks earlier on the overlook. "Take your Troop and force-march them to his house! If you start right now, you can be there sometime after midnight. I want him cap...No! I want him, Justin and the Brisbees DEAD! I want his house burned to the ground! I don't want one stone standing on another! We can always dig the Amulet out of whatever's left!"

"But the Brisbee children!" Sullivan exclaimed nervously. He knew that he was a less-than-ideal soldier, but he certainly was not a child-killing monster.

"I DON'T GIVE A DAMN ABOUT THE BRISBEE CHILDREN! You either bring me back their corpses or I'll find someone who will! Remember, you're just as far up to your neck in this whole sordid affair as I am; so if I go down, my friend, SO DO YOU! Now get out!"

Sullivan bowed and made a hasty exit, glad to get away from this mad beast. He didn't relish what Jenner was becoming, but he realized that, for better or worse, he had hitched his wagon to Jenner's brightly burning star. The problem was that such stars tended to violently self-destruct, often obliterating other planetary bodies in their orbit. And, he realized to his dismay, his proximity of orbit was perilously close to Jenner. Sooner or later, he decided, he would have to realign his position in relation to the new King. But, then again, moving the heavens above might be a simple task compared to this. "After all," He thought gloomily, "The heavens above can't slice my throat open."

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Jenner, meanwhile, gleefully contemplated his impending victory over those who had made his life so miserable these past several years. Perhaps he would, metaphorically at least, taste broiled rabbit-heart after all.

Chapter 13: 12

The jumble of imagery was so disorienting. Bits and pieces of her life popped in and out of focus like the viewing wall of some demented Camera Obscura. Here and there she would catch a glimpse of Jonathan. But when she tried to call out to him, she couldn't seem to catch her breath. Justin appeared every so often as well, but there was something different about him, something that she couldn't quite put her finger on. Gradually, she began to hear music; an old dance tune, a Waltz, that she remembered hearing at one of the Royal Balls that she attended when she was still a Lady-of-the-Court. Her surroundings also began to resolve themselves into focus. She was in the Main Hall of the castle, surrounded by hundreds of other animals. She looked down and saw that, instead of her beautiful wedding gown, she was wearing just an old, tattered travelling cape and her new husband's Amulet; but for some reason, nobody else seemed to notice this. She also realized that her dancing partner was.... was... He was a fox, that much she could tell. But he was like no other fox she had ever seen. He seemed to share features of both her new husband and one of the Troop-Captains in King Nicodemus's Guard. She wanted to ask him who he was, but the words wouldn't come out of her mouth. He put a finger to his mouth to shush her. He had the saddest, most beautiful eyes she'd ever seen and this, for some reason, made her want to cry. But suddenly, her surroundings began to crack and fall apart like a slowly breaking mirror. She also realized with a strange disinterest that her dancing partner was quickly assuming a more lion-like form, his eyes transforming from empathic sadness to blazing hatred. "...ommy, wake up!" She heard a voice calling from far away. But now her dance partner had completed his transformation into the King's adopted brother; the Prince Regent, Jenner. "Mom! Please! Wake up NOW!" The voice, like that of a young child, insisted. But the Prince Regent now had his paws clamped firmly around her throat and was squeezing harder and harder. She could feel various muscles, ligaments and blood vessels in her neck pop or rupture as he kept squeezing; but for some reason, she had no desire to fight his efforts to violently end her existence. "Mommy! Wake UP!" Prince Jenner's eyes blazed with an insane fury as he screamed, "NO! I'LL KILL YOU ALL!"

Mrs. Brisbee awoke with a start, bathed in sweat and gasping for air. Timothy was next to her bed, urgently shaking her shoulder. She tried to ask her son what was wrong, but something was choking her. She then tried to raise herself from her bed, but felt something thin around her neck holding her down to the mattress. She brought her paw to her neck and realized that she had worn the Amulet to bed instead of hanging it on its usual wooden peg on the wall next to her bed. She felt down the length of the slender chain and found that it had caught on a small nail embedded in the frame of the bed that Jeremy and Dr. Ages had brought from an abandoned inn the day after they had come seeking his help.

She twisted the chain off of the nail and sat up. "What's the matter, Honey, what're you doing out of bed?" She asked, fully awake now.

Timothy grabbed one of her paws and almost dragged her to a large window that looked out onto the meadow. "Over there! Just beyond the treeline!" He whispered excitedly.

Along the treeline at the far edge of the meadow, a group of flickering lights could be seen blinking in and out of sight among the trees just inside the forest. At first, Mrs. Brisbee's mind told her that it was simply fireflies. But she instantly realized that instead of the cool yellow-green that the nocturnal insects used to attract their mates, these lights glowed the red-yellow-blue of hot flame. She turned to her son and said, "Wake your brother and sisters and Jeremy and tell them to gather all our things as quickly as possible and take them and the hand cart to the clearing near the old root cellar! Hurry!" She grabbed her cape from the foot of her bed and started down the stairs. She stopped when she heard a pounding at the front door.

"Lady Marian! Jeremy! Dr. Ages! Wake up! You've got to get out of there!" It was Justin's voice.

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Mrs. Brisbee ran the rest of the way to the door and flung it open. "Justin?" She exclaimed, "I thought you were going back to the City!"

"Change of plans!" he said as he swerved around her and headed for the back stairway that led directly to Dr. Ages bedroom. "C'mon! Wake up you old goat!" He bellowed at the top of his lungs. "Jenner's found us and his boys aren't comin' to deliver party invitations!"

Ages' door flew open and he waddled out. "How in thunder did that happen? Who could have told him?" He demanded, grabbing a pile of papers and books off of his desk. Justin grabbed them back out of his hands and tossed them back on the desk. Ages was agast. "But I need those for my studies!" He shouted indignantly.

Justin grabbed Ages by the scruff of his collar and said in his most commanding voice, "There are animals out there trying to KILL us! We have to leave NOW!" He made a snap decision. "You can bring two books with you, but that's all!" Ages, realizing that Justin would brook no argument, went to his bookshelf and removed a pair of ancient, identical volumes. He let himself be taken by the paw by Mrs. Brisbee like a child being reluctantly led to his first day of school. "Get him to the basement." Justin ordered. "I'll get the children."

"No need!" Shouted Jeremy as he ran in the house from the still open front door. "They're right where we planned!"

"Good!" Said Justin as he herded Ages and Brisbee down the basement stairs. "Jeremy! How close are they?"

Jeremy ran to a rear-facing window. What he saw turned his stomach. "They're almost here!" All of a sudden, one of the fires broke quickly away from the others and described a long arc until it disappeared from view; the sound of a breaking window coming from somewhere above. "Heads up, you guys! Fire in the Hole!" He shouted. He was about to turn around and head for the basement door, when an arrow slammed through the window just inches from his head and buried itself in the opposite wall.

Justin, meanwhile, had led Brisbee and Ages to the foundation wall that faced closest to the road. He felt quickly along a certain area until he found a group of stones that had no mortar between them. He then grabbed one of the stones at the bottom of the group and gave a hard tug. All the stones fell to his feet, revealing a large wood panel with a horizontal bar set above it. Justin grabbed the bar with both paws and swung himself up then forward, kicking the thin wood to splinters. He then pointed into the darkness and said, "Just keep going until you come to another panel like this one and kick it hard, it's hinged to open downward, then just go straight to the opposite wall and climb the ladder; then take a step to your right and you'll feel solid ground. The door of the root cellar will be right in front of you." Mrs. Brisbee swallowed, nodded and climbed into the tunnel, Dr. Ages close at her heels.

"Jeremy, how fast're they coming?" Justin yelled.

"Medium!" Jeremy answered, then thought better of it as he saw the torchlights relentless approach. "Uh, make that fast; VERY fast!" Just then a line of small flames made the arc from the main group to the house. "INCOMING!" He screamed as he heard them hit various parts of the structure.

Justin ran to the bottom of the stairs. "Okay, Jeremy, we're outta here!"

"Best suggestion I've heard all night!" The rooster said as he sprinted for the basement door. But when he got to the threshold, he lost his footing and tumbled down the stairway; landing in a flurry of fur and feathers on the startled fox.

"Are you alright?" Justin asked him as he began to disentangle himself from the dazed bird.

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"No problem." Jeremy groaned. "I meant to do that."

Justin smiled as he hauled Jeremy to his feet and started dragging him to the escape tunnel. "Birdbrain." He said.

"Hey! I resemble that remark!" Jeremy replied in mock-irritation as they reached the tunnel and began to crawl inside.

They made their way as quickly as possible along the smooth floored interior. The walls and vaulted ceiling were only just high enough for them to crawl under. By now, both of them could smell the acrid smoke of the inferno behind them.

Justin, who was in the front, could see a faint light ahead. "Lady Marian? Dr. Ages?" He called out, increasing his crawl speed.

"Here! Justin! Come quickly!" Brisbee's voice echoed down the tunnel.

In moments they reached the source of her voice. She was holding one of Dr. Ages' paws and, through tears of her own, whispering soothing words into his ear. Directly above, part of the ceiling had collapsed on him, trapping him from the waist down; a particularly large stone lay on his left leg, which was cocked at a peculiar angle. Martin and Theresa, who had somehow found the tunnel, were clearing as much debris away as they could by the light of a small lantern.

"This isn't the worst of it!" Martin exclaimed as he threw another handful of dirt to the rear. "Timothy's missing! Cynthia says he ran back to the house and never returned!"

Justin started to turn around, but Jeremy held him back. "Whoa, Whoa! Where d'ya think you're goin' soldier-boy? I'll get the kid, you take care of the 'rock of Ages'!"

"You sure?" Justin asked, desperation in his voice.

Jeremy smiled, winked and said, "Trust me." He then turned himself around and started back for the house.

"Good luck!" Justin called out after him.

"Not on my best day!" Jeremy replied.

Justin turned his attention to the predicament at hand. He first tried to roll the stone off of Ages' leg, but it was so large and heavy that it wouldn't budge in the tiny space of the tunnel. Then he tried to slide it off, but this only elicited an agonized scream from the old badger. "Martin, I need your help." he said. Martin stopped his digging. Justin pointed toward the rootcellar end of the tunnel. "Go get my sword from the cart as fast as you possibly can." Without a word, Martin was scrambling down the tunnel. By now, the tunnel was starting to fill with fumes and thick gray smoke, wisps of which cast shadows on the stone wall in front of the lantern, and both Theresa and her mother were starting to cough and wheeze as their lungs filled with it. "Keep as close to the floor as you can," he told them calmly, "There's enough air down there to breath and I'm going to need all of you to help me. Martin was now within earshot dragging the sword behind him, the metallic scrape of the blade ringing through the tunnel. The rabbit quickly handed the implement to Justin, who selected a smaller rock and expertly placed the blade to use as a lever. "Now, when I lift the stone, I want you to drag Ages out from under it and just keep going."

"But what about you?" Mrs. Brisbee asked.

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"Never mind me." He told her. "I've got to go and help a friend. Are you ready?"

Mrs. Brisbee nodded.

Justin threw himself against the hilt of his sword. At first the rock wouldn't budge, but then he felt an almost imperceptible movement. He let his muscles go slack for a few moments and ducked under the thick veil of smoke that filled the tunnel. "Okay, one more time!" He said, his eyes watering. "Ready? Now!" Again, he shoved down on the hilt. This time, the rock lifted. Justin could hear the Brisbees dragging Ages clear of the rock and away from him. He then released his weight from the sword and let it clatter to the floor, exhausted from his efforts.

In the house, Timothy lay under Cynthia's bed; surrounded by the conflagration. He had come back at the last moment when he realized that his sister had dropped her new doll beside her bed in the rush to leave. He'd found himself trapped in the attic when the first flaming arrows crashed through the second-floor windows, igniting all of the rooms underneath. Now, clutching the little cloth rabbit to his chest, he was frightened. Even more frightened than when he thought that he would die of that sickness that had made it so hard for him to breathe all those months ago last Winter. But this fire not only made it hard to breathe, it was also so hot! Even his fever during the sickness hadn't made him feel this bad! All of a sudden, he thought he heard something over the roar and crackle of the flames. He listened harder. "TIMOTHY!" Yes, he heard it that time! "UP HERE! I'M UP HERE! IN THE ATTIC!"

"KEEP YELLING!" The voice ordered.

Timothy screamed as loud as he could, even as the heat and smoke seared his throat and lungs. From under the bed he saw the door to the room burst inward, shattering into a thousand sparking, flaming splinters. "JEREMY! I'M OVER HERE!" He yelled with what felt like his last breath. Jeremy dived over the jagged, glowing embers that were once the frame of the door and rolled himself along the floor to Cynthia's bed. He groped above him and, when he felt what he was after, gave a mighty tug and Cynthia's mattress tumbled to the floor, smoking slightly but still intact. He then stripped the blanket and sheets off and began to wrap the young rabbit in them. "This ride's gonna get a bit rough." he said calmly. "Just relax and let me do the work." Jeremy rolled himself onto his back and then rolled Timothy's face down onto his own chest. He then grabbed a corner of the mattress, which was so hot that it had already begun to smoke, and slid it on top of himself and Timothy. Then; using his heel-spurs, back and wings; he began inch-worming his way to the door.

When he reached the door, he turned himself to face it and kicked what was left of the burning frame out of the way, ignoring the pain as the burning wood seared the soles of his feet. He then resumed his slow, upward-facing crawl into the short hallway. He had cleared the room by only a few feet when he heard an enormous roar and, chancing a quick peek, saw the entire room collapse in upon itself. He gulped back the bitter tasting bile that tried to well up into his throat and made his way to the top of the stairs.

He then shifted Timothy to one side of his body and, using the free wing, slid the mattress over his head, feeling it bounce down the stairs. As quickly as he could, ignoring the heat and pain, he stood up and ran down the stairs and through the second and first floors; the smoke and fumes blinding and choking him. Just when he felt that he would collapse from pain and exhaustion, a pair of arms grabbed the bundle from his, grabbed his collar, and half-guided, half-dragged him down some stairs, through a smoky room, and shoved him into a hole in what must have been the wall.

He began to crawl blindly along the tunnel, although he couldn't tell whether he was blind because of the smoke, a lack of light or his eyes had been burned out of their sockets. He was also being racked by fits of coughing and dry-heaves as his lungs tried to expel the noxious fumes but could only seem to get more.

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He soon bumped into a large rock and, under one wing, felt the hilt of a sword, which he grabbed, and continued his crawl through the tunnel. He could also feel a wet, sticky substance tracing a thin line down one edge.

After what seemed like hours, the tunnel floor suddenly disappeared and Jeremy tumbled to another, slightly softer, surface. Seconds later, something furry fell on him.

"We gotta stop meeting like this!" He gasped, his lungs greedily taking in the relatively clean air.

"Ladder!" Justin gasped. "Get...up...ladder!"

Jeremy crawled to where he thought the ladder should be and grabbed at where he thought the lowest rung was located. He found it, took a deep breath, and, using every bit of what little strength he had left, began pulling himself up rung-by-rung, keeping a death-grip on the sword.

He knew he'd reached the top when he ran out of rungs and his head hit a firm surface. He felt around with his foot for the floor and when he found it, stepped to the right (they had all been told about the escape tunnel during lunch on their first day with Ages) and collapsed into the waiting arms of Martin and Theresa; who dragged him to the handcart and sat him against a wheel.

Moments later Justin, still carrying the bundle that contained Timothy, was brought over and sat down next to him. Mrs. Brisbee tenderly unwrapped the blackened, ash-covered pieces of cloth to reveal the tiny cargo inside. At first, he looked as if he was in a deep, peaceful slumber. But then he let out a small cough and, opening one eye, asked in a weak voice, "Did we make it yet?"

Jeremy smiled through his pain and exhaustion. "Yeah, kid." He croaked hoarsely. "We made it."

Mrs. Brisbee then gathered Timothy in her arms and tearfully asked, "Oh, Timothy, you foolish boy! Whatever possessed you to go back to the house?"

He pushed aside the covering and produced the doll. "Cynthia dropped this. I knew that she'd be sad if it'd been left behind." He said feebly.

Justin and Jeremy's jaws dropped and they stared at each other in shock for several seconds. Then they began to roar with uncontrolled laughter, hacking and wheezing intermittently. After they had run out of breath, Justin looked at Jeremy with an arched eyebrow. Jeremy looked at the peculiar expression. "What!" He demanded, panting for breath.

"Y'know," Said the fox; who was covered head-to-toe with soot and had several patches of fur burned off, showing blistered skin and was also trying to catch his breath. "You oughtta...get out...of the...Bard business...you make...a pretty...decent...Hero type!"

Jeremy shook his head firmly. "What?...An' give up...showbiz?...An' besides...you...so-called...'Hero types'...got no...dental plan!"

Justin tried to laugh again, but his sides hurt so much that he could barely chuckle.

After they had rested and caught their breaths, they pulled themselves to their feet and Justin examined Jeremy's injuries. Unlike the few relatively small burns that Justin had sustained, Jeremy was in much worse shape. Aside from the burns on his feet, he had large areas of scorched feathers and blistered skin on his comb, neck, back and wings and his tail pin-feathers had been burned off almost to the skin. What was left of

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the once-elegant costume hung in tatters from his burned and battered body. This alarmed Justin, who took a blanket from the handcart; carefully so as not to wake the unconscious Dr. Ages; and ordered Martin and Theresa, over the rooster's protestations, to carefully strip him down and remove as much debris from his skin as possible. He then told Mrs. Brisbee to wrap Jeremy in as many blankets as could be spared from the cart and place him next to Ages.

He then began to see to The Doctor's injured leg. He could immediately see that it had been broken just below the knee and hastily wrapped in a now blood-soaked sheet. As quickly and delicately as possible, he removed the improvised bandage and discarded it. He then examined the open wound by the dim light of the overhead lantern. "How bad is it?" Mrs. Brisbee asked, the stress and worry in her voice quite palpable. "Well; I'm no doctor, you realize; but he doesn't seem to have damaged any major blood vessels, otherwise he'd still be bleeding, and he doesn't have a compound fracture, no bone sticking out of the wound, and I can't see any major swelling..."

"Set it." came a voice that sounded as if it had come from the grave.

"Ages, you're awake!" Justin exclaimed.

"Set the bone." He groaned. "Otherwise it'll never heal properly."

"It's gonna hurt." Justin warned.

"It hurts now!" Said the badger through gritted teeth.

Justin felt gingerly under the leg and found the break. He then had Mrs. Brisbee quickly lift Ages upper leg slightly and rotated the small stump of bone upward as he pulled the lower portion toward him. The two halves slid easily onto each other and fit perfectly.

Ages released the breath that he'd taken and moaned softly.

Martin and Theresa now returned with Jeremy, who was plucked almost bare. Justin told Martin to find the necessary materials to fashion a splint and help his sister fashion a cast. He then helped Mrs. Brisbee wrap Jeremy, who was already starting to go into shock and shivering even though the night was warm, in several blankets and laid him in the cart next to Dr. Ages. He then had Brisbee thread a needle and expertly sewed the wound on Ages leg shut. "It'll leave quite a scar." He told the badger.

Ages harrumphed and said, "I have plenty of those, my boy! One more's not gonna bother me.

After a cast was placed on Ages leg and both he and Jeremy were made as comfortable as circumstance would permit, Justin went to the edge of the wood and scouted out what was left of the house.

Not much, it turned out. In the first glimmerings of dawn, he could see that the house had burned to its foundation. Several King's Guards were picking around the edges of the still-smoldering ruin and, in the distance, his sharp eyes could see a familiar figure speaking to several other Guards.

"So, Sullivan," He snarled aloud, "You've graduated from mere conspiracy and assassination to arson and attempted child killing. Just remember this you worm-ridden bastard! I'll kill you if I have to rise from the grave to do so!" He then turned and ran back to the rest of the group. He took his place next to Mrs. Brisbee behind the pushbar of the cart and said quietly, "Let's move." They picked up the cart and started a sad, slow walk; followed by Theresa, who carried a freshly wrapped Timothy, and Martin, who led a quiet, subdued Cynthia; toward whatever future awaited them.

Chapter 14: 13

"Escaped? How could they have escaped?" Jenner growled through gritted teeth.

Sullivan had given up on trying to please his King and simply recited the facts of the matter. "We found a tunnel that led into the surrounding forest. About a quarter of the way in, we found a collapsed section and a blood-trail leading to the exit. Near the exit we also found a pile of discarded clothes and feathers, both pretty charred, as well as a blood-soaked sheet."

Jenner pondered this information, agitatedly rubbing his dark beard. "We've hurt them." He whispered.

"Your Majesty?" Sullivan asked.

"I said 'We've hurt them'." Jenner stated. "Even if they did manage to escape they can't possibly lick their wounds, so to speak, quickly enough to disrupt my plans for the near future." He then chortled with glee. "Have the reward for Justin's capture raised to five thousand crowns. And put a price of one thousand crowns each on the heads of the Brisbee family and Dr. Ages; alive or dead, it doesn't make any difference."

Sullivan nodded and left the throneroom after Jenner dismissed him with a wave of his paw.

"Now who's got who by the throat?" Jenner asked aloud to the silent stone walls of the castle.

The walls remained silent as his laughter echoed and faded away.

Chapter 15: 14

The Sheriff of Nottingham was more than a little peeved by this turn of events. Brutus considered himself to be, in his not-so-humble opinion, one of the best quarterstaff fighters in the entire Kingdom of Britain. In fact, he had shelf after shelf of awards of all types to prove it. But here he was, facing off against a young gray fox with the improbable name of Will Scarlet, literally getting his tail kicked!

"Aha!" The youth shouted as his foot landed on the bear's ample hind parts. The kick had no real force behind it and, in any event, Brutus towered over his opponent to such an extent that the bear probably wouldn't even have felt it if it had.

Brutus quickly swept his 'staff downward in an attempt to catch his adversary behind the knees and knock him on his back. The fox effortlessly executed a standing backflip, landing on his feet in almost the same place where he'd stood just a moment before, and then paw-sprung backward out of the range of Brutus's 'staff.

"Alright, hold it, hold it!" Brutus ordered, leaning on the 'staff. The fox stood still, an expectant smile on his face. "First of all, where the heck did you learn that stuff? Y'know, the...the..."

"Acr'batics?" The fox asked, a humorous twinkle in his eye.

"Yeah!" Brutus said, amazed by what he'd just seen.

The fox sat down cross-legged on the grass of the field where he'd been practicing his exercise drills. "My mum an'dad were acrbats in a circus until the Plague came along an' shut it all down. They took t' farmin' t' keep theirselves fed an' all, but taught us kids a thing 'r two 'bout th' life." He then rolled himself backward and brought himself to a one-armed pawstand.

The Sheriff gaped wordlessly at the lad. Normally, members of his species were very shy and retiring; almost to the point of reclusiveness; seeming to prefer the least inhabited corners of Britain and often living in segregated communities because of persecution by other animals, though the reasons for this had been lost to time. The Sheriff himself held no such prejudices; figuring that so long as one broke no laws and paid ones taxes, one had the right to be as sociable or reclusive as one desired.

The fox held his pawstand for an incredibly long time, then lowered his other one and did a standing pawspring to his feet.

As the fox gathered his clothes from a pile on a nearby rock, the Sheriff said, "Well, I don't know of any circuses in these parts. In fact, I'm not sure there're gonna be any more circuses at all if our new King has his way."

The fox stopped dressing and turned to face the Sheriff, his expression now serious. "Wot d'ya mean?" He said.

The Sheriff looked surprised. "You haven't heard?" He asked.

"'eard wot?" The fox demanded. "You're th' first bloke I've seen in these parts in days!" He explained.

Brutus shrugged. "King Jenner has decreed that all Fairs and Festivals are cancelled as of a week ago. He said that all animals who didn't already have a useful occupation needed to be at work in the fields growing their daily bread."

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Will Scarlet was astounded by this news. "Bu' wot 'bout havin' some fun? Life's not worth livin' if y' can't have fun while you're livin' it, a least that's wot my daddy use' t' tell me; 'e did!"

Brutus shifted his feet uncomfortably. When he'd helped to bring Jenner to power by not interfering with the Prince Regent's plans to seize the throne and his adopted brother's crown, he had not suspected that Jenner would favor murder as his primary method. And when he'd received the order to arrest that mother fox and her four adopted kids he'd had to drink himself into a near stupor in order to gather the courage to do so. In fact; he still couldn't remember much of what had happened that night, although his Deputies kept jabbering behind his back about something involving a minstrel singer and a mud-pit. But yesterday he'd found out that a Troop of the Kings Guard had attacked and burned the house of that harmless old coot, Dr. Ages, the night before. Unfortunately, that incident had occurred in the next Shire where he had no jurisdiction; otherwise he'd have given the new King an earful on respecting one's constituents. And just this morning, the daily courier dispatch had delivered an edict that both Ages and that mother fox were now wanted on charges of sedition and treason to the Crown. This had all just been too much to comprehend. He'd told the Deputy-in-Charge that he would be out on a short hike for the rest of the morning and not to expect him back until around lunchtime. After walking aimlessly about for a while, he was headed back for town when he saw a most amazing thing. A small gray fox was doing various flips and pawsprings over rocks, logs and other obstacles. After watching silently for several minutes, the lad noticed his audience of one and introduced himself. He also noticed the quarterstaff that Brutus carried with him at all times and proposed a game where he, Will Scarlet, would, using only his skill, would try to touch any part of the Sheriff's body while the Sheriff tried to knock Scarlet down with his 'staff. But, of course, the young fox had been much too quick even for the Sheriff.

But now Brutus uneasily brought himself back to the present, not wanting to face the fact that he had, however unwittingly or even unwillingly, been at least partially responsible for the death of a good King and his Chancellor and had helped to put a murderer on the Throne of Britain. He shrugged his massive shoulders, not knowing what to tell this lad.

Will Scarlet finished dressing himself. He had decided that as a subject of the Crown he would go to Londontown and seek an audience with his Sovereign and explain to him that; while work was not a bad thing in and of itself, it was certainly a bad thing by itself if not relieved by a bit of fun once in a while.

Scarlet bade the Sheriff of Nottinghamshire farewell and made off for the City, whistling a happy tune that his father had taught him long ago.

Brutus returned the wave and watched the lad leave with a sadness in his heart. "Ah, to be that young and free of spirit." The bear thought to himself. But, whether he liked it or not, he had sworn himself to the service of an unstable Ruler and he had a feeling that he would probably end up paying a dreadful price for this choice.

Chapter 16: 15

The past three days had been the most taxing that Justin had ever spent. While Mrs. Brisbee, as she now preferred to be called, managed to help him tend to both Dr. Ages and Jeremy's injuries even as she looked after her children; he had spent most of the time either pulling the cart or giving aid to its occupants. Ages was actually doing rather well. He had come down with a slight fever during the second day of travel, but this had broken after he had been given some of the ginger-pepper-willow tea that he favored. Jeremy, however, was a different story altogether. Even wrapped in layer upon layer of sheets and blankets in these warm mid-Summer days the badly burned rooster shivered with his own fever, slipping in and out of consciousness or; worse yet; going into shock accompanied by delirium; either screaming in unbearable pain or giving way to fits of uncontrolled hysterical laughter, as if unaware of his immediate surroundings or situation. He tried to rest the group at least one hour out of every four, by his best estimate, but other than the occasional short nap he'd been able to get no real sleep and, while his physical reserves still seemed rather strong; his mind was beginning to rebel, reacting more slowly and indecisively to this or that situation or flashing back to the collapse of the wall that killed King Nicodemus and Sir Jonathan. In fact, the only real respite had come early that morning when they had come to a small creek and gotten a chance to drink and bathe in the cool, clear water; Mrs. Brisbee finally getting a chance to drain and bandage Justin's own burns. She had also helped him change Dr. Ages bandage and cast and bathe poor Jeremy, who'd had to be carried like a small child because of the condition of his feet.

But now, in the waning daylight of the late afternoon, Justin was feeling more tired than he ever had in his life. Even now his mind seemed to be playing a cruel joke; he could have sworn that he recognized the small group of trees that stood at the divide of the road up ahead. He blinked twice and looked again, focusing all of whatever was left of his will toward remembering a certain landmark from his long-forgotten childhood.

"That's it." He whispered as the realization struck him so suddenly that Mrs. Brisbee was nearly thrown into the pushbar when he stopped dead.

"What're we stopping for?" Brisbee asked, a look of hollow-eyed annoyance on her face. She had not gotten much sleep over these past days either and the stress of caring for Justin, Jeremy, Ages and her own children had taken a very visible toll on her.

Justin pointed to the group of trees and said, "That road, the one going to the right, leads to my parent's cottage! If we don't make anymore stops along the way, we can make it there by sometime after sundown!" The children, who had said almost nothing since the fire, let out a collective groan.

Ages, who had been asleep, exclaimed, "No, he's right! The cottage is just a few miles away! We're already well inside Sherwood Forest!"

"Well I hope you two are right!" Mrs. Brisbee said coarsely, picking up the pushbar and resuming the cart's slow progress. "I'm not sure just how much longer the children and I can keep going!"

Justin smiled weakly. "Please, Marian," He implored her, "Trust me. I grew up here. The forests of Sherwood have been my home for as long as I can remember. Their trees are as familiar to me as the castle is to you. The rivers run through my own veins as much as they run along their banks."

A smile came to Mrs. Brisbee's own face for the first time in many days. "Why, Justin!" She said coyly, "I didn't know that you had the air of the poet about you!"

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"I don't, really." He said, a faraway look in his eyes. "But no matter how long I'm gone or how far away I am, I always feel that; somehow; this place and I are meant to be one with each other." He then cupped one paw under her chin, brought her eyes up to meet his and whispered, "Just as you and Jonathan were."

Mrs. Brisbee tried to blink back the tear that had formed at the corner of her eye, but it fell to the dusty road as she slowly nodded her understanding of what Justin meant. The moment passed far more quickly than either of them would have liked; after which, they bent to their shared task with a renewed vigor.

Many hours later, to the accompaniment of a chorus of chirruping crickets and croaking frogs, Justin opened the bolt of the heavy wooden door of a large stone-and-wood cottage. He directed the children to a closet where he thought some blankets might still be stored. He sent Mrs. Brisbee to the kitchen to look for some candles or a lamp. He then carried both Jeremy and Dr. Ages to his adoptive parents room and one of his adoptive brothers rooms, respectively.

The children did indeed find a number of old quilts; and by dim candlelight Justin, crying tears of both joy and sadness as childhood memories surfaced through the haze of his present exhaustion, recognized and identified by name the adoptive brother, sister or cousin to whom each one had belonged those many years ago. They were distributed among the group as Justin assigned beds to each member, giving a brief but loving description of the member of the family who had originally slept there.

At last all was quiet once again, the Brisbee family sharing a large children's bedroom; for Justin had explained that there could be as many as fifteen of his adoptive siblings and younger relatives sleeping in the room at any one time; while Justin took his adoptive father's bed next to Jeremy, the better to keep tabs on his unstable condition.

Chapter 17: 16

Will Scarlet had heard much about the sights and sounds of Londontown over the years as he was growing up. His parents had, before the Plague struck, performed many times in the City, as it was more popularly called, with the Circus to which they had belonged. They had regaled him and his brothers and sisters with tales of life in the travelling shows of old and performances before the King of Britain and various Crowned Heads of the Continental Empires.

But soon, for reasons that nobody knew even to this day, war broke out among the various kingdoms of Continental Europe. Heads of State turned against other Heads of State, even though the two might be cousins or, worse yet, brothers. Vicious battles were fought and sometimes won, but more often lost by both sides as thousands upon thousands of soldiers slaughtered first one another; then, in the throes of an unquenchable and uncontrollable bloodlust, commenced to slaughtering, pillaging and raping whatever populace happened to be within reach of these earthly demons.

After the battles had collapsed under their own weight, the dead were often left unburied for periods of up to several weeks. The rotting flesh seeped into the water during the rains or gave refuge to other diseases; alternatively, when the corpses were cleared from a field of battle, the fleas that had infested the dead soldiers, who often lived in extremely poor sanitary conditions because the governments of the various warring nations were usually too corrupt and averse to spending the extra gold or silver piece to give them decent living conditions, jumped from their now dead and often diseased old hosts onto a new one. As the carnage progressed through the countryside, many refugees, wishing to escape this bloodsoaked madness, went to other villages, towns, cities or countries.

This spread and expanded the group of small diseases and sicknesses, usually treatable individually, into an all-consuming Plague which; while a single battle in the war might result in the loss of a few thousand lives depending on the number of troops involved and the number of "collateral casualties", as the War Leaders politely called whoever else besides their own troops who just happened to be on the battlefield at the time; in just days could depopulate whole swaths of land, leaving no one to harvest those crops that had not already been destroyed or stolen by rampaging bands of stateless renegades. This, of course, had led to a massive famine which had led to even more war as populations now fought over food rather than ideology.

Eventually refugees, finding no safety on the Continent, began flooding, legally or not, onto Britain's shores; often bringing with them the same bodily, political and ideological pollution that had destroyed their previous homes and cost not a few of them relatives, close friends or even a body part or two.

And so the Plague began to sweep through Britain with the same overwhelming force that had reduced most of Europe to anarchy. The animals had known the flea since time immemorial, but these new fleas from the Continent carried a disease that seemed to defy all attempts to treat or cure it.

It took several years and many more lives; but eventually the wars and sicknesses ran their lethal, interweaving course. The dead were buried or burned and, while there was still the occasional isolated outbreak or individual death attributable to the Plague, life returned to something approaching normal.

But that had been years and years ago, even before Will had been born. The only reason that his parents had decided not to return to the performing life was their advanced years and the fact that they were actually somewhat comfortable in their chosen agricultural pursuits. But Will had always known that he wanted to be a circus acrobat and his parents had gladly taken the time to pass this part of their lives on to him, spending as much as possible coaching him in the finer points of tumbling, juggling and even some tightrope and trapeze skills. His father had even given him one of his old costumes, a garish ensemble of black-fluted dark red

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velvet consisting of pantaloons, tunic, vest, waistcoat and a beret topped with a large red feather.

When he'd entered the city gates he could not help but notice how tense and downcast the residents were. Many scowled at him or stared in disbelief at his colorful clothing, at least he assumed that it was his clothing; because all but a few passers-by wore mostly drab, threadbare, even ragged clothes. As he walked down various avenues, some animals would give him a suspicious glance or try to avoid eye-contact altogether while mothers would pull their children to them a little harder than was necessary and hurry away to whatever supposed errand brought them out onto the streets. Several times he'd tried to ask soldiers, who seemed to be wherever one looked, directions to the Royal residence but was answered only by silence and an icy stare.

When he did finally find the castle, it was early afternoon and he'd had to use his wily youthful charms to convince the King's Scribe to grant him a short audience with His Majesty before the afternoon's regular appointment schedule began.

He was escorted by two very large wolves, in the uniform of the King's Guard, into the throneroom. Being no slouch in the etiquette department, he removed his hat and knelt in the presence of his Sovereign. Jenner regarded him coldly, not bothering to conceal the bored expression on his face. He already had a full day planned of listening to various and sundry other animals who would try to flatter and suck up to him with schemes; a few practical, most not; that they promised would make them mutually wealthy and powerful beyond his most avaricious dreams.

"Rise and state your business." He sighed, resting his bearded chin on one paw.

Will gracefully rose to his feet and, in his most dignified manner, said, "Beggin' your Maj'sty's indulgence, bu' is it true tha' you've cancelled all th' Summer fairs an' festivals?"

Jenner rolled his eyes and held his paw out, motioning the fox to say no more. "Don't tell me," He said, cynicism dripping from his voice. "You represent all of the barkers, hawkers and other riff-raff who make their living taking advantage of the gullibility of the fair-goer. Am I correct?"

Will's jaw dropped for a moment as he was taken aback by the King's attitude. But he'd come here for a purpose and decided to hold his ground. "No, Maj'sty." He answered. "Acshully, I'm an Acr'bat, an' I'd planned on performin' at some o' them fairs an' festivals 'til I co' find a circus t' join."

One of Jenner's brows arched questioningly as he began drumming his fingers on an armrest. "Circus?" He asked skeptically. "Why should anyone want to join a circus?"

A wide smile brightened the young fox's face. "Oh, your Maj'sty!" He exclaimed, his eyes wide as if still listening to the stories that his father had told him over and over but that he had never tired of hearing. "Bein' in a circus is somethin' I've dreamt abou' me 'ole blessed life! I always dreamt o' performin' for others an' bringin' a bi' o' fun into their lives!"

Jenner suddenly stopped drumming and leaned forward, his teeth bared in a nasty sneer and his eyes burning with anger. "FUN?" He screamed, "Fun is for idiots and dreamers! I expect my subjects to serve me with the work of their paws, the sweat of their brow and the love that they hold in their Hearts for the Glory of their King and Country!" Jenner then pushed himself off of his Throne, stalked toward the now impassive fox and began to circle him as a shark circles prey whose blood it has scented.

"My "dear" departed brother was like you." He sneered. "He seemed to believe that by appealing to the baser instincts of his subjects he could somehow gain their approval or even their so-called Love!" He stopped his circling and, drawing himself to his full height, declared imperiously, "But a true King must rule with a

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disciplined paw! His subjects must either earn their daily bread or starve until they learn that this is the only means by which they will eat. If the other Kingdoms wish to spend themselves to destruction by wasting their precious resources on bread and circuses without getting anything in return, then they shall have been quite deserving of their fate. But I will not be known a thousand years hence as a Ruler who led his subjects down such a ruinous path!" He then stalked back to his throne and seated himself wearily in its cushions. "Thus endeth your lesson in civics according to your new King. Your request is refused, this audience is at an end. The Guards will see you to the castle gates." Jenner hesitated a moment and then, smiling brightly, added, "Oh! And, uh, have a nice day!"

Will had been growing angrier by the moment as he'd listened to Jenner's self-aggrandizing monologue. But to be brushed off in such an arbitrary manner as this, King or not, was absolutely intolerable. He was about to object to his treatment when a guard appeared, seemingly from nowhere, at each side, sword drawn.

"If he makes a sound," Jenner said, the boredom once again evident in his voice, "Behead him, burn whatever's left and then throw it into the garbage pit at the edge of the City."

Will bared his teeth but held his temper in check. He knew that his skills, while quite good, would be at a major disadvantage inside such a small room. He turned contemptuously and stomped out of the castle.

In a deeply shadowed niche near the door of the throneroom, Sullivan frowned. What was going through his mind right at that moment would have been considered by any reasonable animal to be nothing less than high treason. But Jenner was quickly going out of control. The rumors about his unworthiness to wear the Crown of Britain were spreading far beyond the ability of anyone to hold in check. Even the best of Jenner's so-called "friends", loyal as they pretended to be, were questioning his fitness to rule. Sullivan shrugged. His own agenda was more important than anything having to do with mere politics; he simply desired to survive to a ripe old age, even if a few others had to get hurt, or even die, in the process.

Sullivan slipped silently and unseen out of the castle. He had a very important appointment to keep.

Chapter 18: 17

Afternoon slowly faded to dusk which, itself, faded to the blue-black of a moonless night. Sullivan waited a few more minutes just to make absolutely sure that he had not been followed to the clandestine meeting place that had been specified in the note passed to him during his afternoon rounds of the castle. He knew that Jenner was getting more and more paranoid about his safety by the day, keeping a large, heavily armed escort at hand even when he was just out on a walk through the castle grounds. He had also learned that Jenner had hired a number of spies to keep tabs on the few members of the house-keeping staff that remained from King Nicodemus's reign. He knew that they wouldn't hesitate to report that his own Captain-of-the-Guard was involved in a subversive plot against him if he were discovered in this place.

But he'd seen no sign that any of the staff or his subordinates had taken any interest when he'd left the castle. In fact, much to his amusement, he'd heard a rumor to the effect that he'd taken a mistress and that it was her that he was seeing when he was away from the barracks or the castle. Well, if that was what they chose to snicker about, it certainly suited him just fine. Deception was a time-honored military tactic.

With one last glance into the near-darkness, he made his way to a door set well into a small stone building. Above, a street lantern threw a dim light on the entrance. After giving a prescribed series of knocks, which were answered by another series, he was told to enter, the voice on the other side of the door obviously heavily disguised. Sullivan took a deep breath and stepped into what he knew would be his most dangerous power-play yet.

The darkness of the room almost matched that outside, but was punctuated by the weak light of about a dozen small candles that were set into niches in each wall.

"Please take a seat on the stool in the center of the room." The voice came from a backlit figure that, now that his eyes were adjusting to the new light level, he could see was seated behind a long table. He didn't recognize the voice, nor could he tell what kind of animal had spoken. He could also see a number of other figures at tables to each side of the first. He figured that they must have been wearing masks or hoods in order to disguise their profiles. Sullivan strolled to the stool and took a seat. He knew that intimidation was a game that two could play and that if things got out of hand, well, he had plenty of experience in changing or, if the situation demanded it, breaking the rules; and if a little blood got spilled or a few heads got broken in the process, so much the better. He could always tell Jenner that he'd stumbled into this ring of potential traitors on his way to visit his "mistress" and did what he saw as his patriotic duty by rounding them up.

"Alright, I'm here," He said, his voice hinting at arrogance. "What d'ya want from me?"

"Please remember, Captain," The voice warned sternly, "That it was you who requested this meeting with us." Sullivan smiled to himself. Whoever he was dealing with, they weren't the bumpkins that he was expecting. Sullivan had indeed cornered one of the maids and asked her to put him in contact with someone, anyone who could be considered to be against Jenner's rule. She had been suspicious at first, but when no one had come to arrest her during the intervening weeks, she had slipped a note into a pocket of his vest.

"Yeah, yeah. Whatever. Let's just get down to business. What exactly is it that you're planning against His Majesty?" He asked matter-of-factly.

"At the moment, we really have no plan to do away with King Jenner. But we do believe that he is leading Britain on a road to destruction and he must, somehow, be stopped!" The voice said gravely.

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Sullivan nodded. His interrogators had arrived at their conclusion from a more idealistic angle than he had, but the answer was pretty much the same: Jenner must, if he could not be steered toward a more moderate course of governance, be overthrown. But Sullivan was no fool. He had decided that if he were going to put his life on the line to betray his Sovereign, the price to be paid for his cooperation; even if all that was required of him was to look the other way; would be very, very steep. "Okay." He said slowly, carefully trying to form some terms in his mind. "But what's in it for me? I mean, I'm only the most exposed member of this little plot in the whole room. I expect something more than a pat on the back and a 'Hip Hip Hooray!' once Jenner's off the throne."

"What do you have in mind, Captain? You want to wear the Crown yourself I suppose?" The voice asked sarcastically.

Sullivan laughed out loud, the sound echoing from the walls.

"This question amuses you, Captain?" Irritation replaced sarcasm.

"Well, I must admit that the idea has a certain, uh, temptation to it," He chortled. "But recently the job has had a less-than-secure status accorded to it."

"Aided by your own efforts, no doubt." The voice pointedly replied.

Sullivan shrugged. "I'm no soothsayer. Yeah, I'll admit that I helped Jenner plan to overthrow his brother. But I was as surprised as anyone that he actually stooped to murder. Even I couldn't have predicted that; so far as I knew, once Jenner had stripped Ol' King Nic of the Crown, he was gonna send Nic off to a permanent exile in either the Scottish Lands or one of the Continental Empires. How was I supposed to know that Jenner'd had a change of whatever passes for his Heart?"

"Then exactly what sort of reward do you expect, assuming that our efforts meet with success." The voice asked.

"I'll make it pretty simple for you." Sullivan stated. "I want The Chancellorship, I want a Titlement; a Barony, or perhaps even a Duchy; and I want the Amulet passed down generation to generation only in my family, no matter what offices they happen to hold in the future, in perpetuity."

This elicited a collective gasp throughout the room, then a heated, whispered argument among those at the tables. When calm was restored, the voice asked, "Is that all? Perhaps we could also arrange for the clouds to descend during your funeral and take whatever passes for your soul up to the spirit world."

Sullivan stood and angrily motioned toward the door. "Look," He sneered, "If you want my help, you gotta pay my price! Otherwise, Jenner'll stay on the Throne. An' you know as well as I that the longer he's on it, the harder it'll be to shove 'im off! So d'we talk a deal or do I walk out that door?"

Another whispered argument ensued. After a few moments, the voice asked, "Would you please excuse us for a few minutes? My, er, colleagues and I wish to consult on your demands in a more private venue for a few minutes. Please don't leave your seat."

Sullivan nodded and relaxed as the other conspirators made their way through another door to another small, dark room. This was actually going a lot better than he'd ever expected. They had not thrown him out of the room or, worse yet, killed him when he'd asserted his demands. The details of a deal would probably take some time to work out with this crowd, but they seemed to have a leader with a couple of brain cells to rub together and he obviously wasn't afraid to use 'em. Besides, he reassured himself, he was going to take every

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precaution that, even if this bunch couldn't get its act together and wound up on a one way trip to the gallows, he'd leave no evidence that could possibly connect them with him.

He could now hear a noisy debate through the walls of the small building; voices, none of whom he recognized, rising or falling to the tide of the passions of their views. Eventually, the committee of conspirators proceeded solemnly from the other room and resumed their seats.

"We've come to a decision." The voice stated. "Since we have no workable plan, as yet, we've decided to do nothing at present. If you, at some point, should see an opportunity to accomplish our mutually stated goal, please don't hesitate to take direct action toward that end. We've decided that your price, while pushing certain ethical boundaries, is acceptable; but be warned, our King is not the only employer of spies. We are also watching."

The meeting was then adjourned. Sullivan was instructed to remain seated until the others had left and three knocks were given at the door. Sullivan was tempted to try to follow one of the conspirators, but he needed them to trust him in order for his plan to succeed; so he decided to obey the instruction.

After what seemed an eternity, but could not have been more than a few minutes at most, Sullivan heard three taps at the door. He ran and threw it open, but in the dimness of the nearby street lantern found himself staring down at a tiny young rabbit; a street urchin from the look of him, dressed only in a raggedy old shirt several sizes too large; who stared back at him from empty, emotionless eyes. For a moment, Sullivan wanted to kick the child out of his way and run back to the barracks. He had spent years trying to forget that he too had been left to the horrors of the streets after his mother had abandoned him just after his father had been killed in one of the riots started by two factions involved in the Continental Wars. He'd had to steal food, clothing or anything else that meant another day of survival. The Plague had somehow missed claiming him as yet another victim, but he was near starvation when he was caught stealing from a fruit vendor. The vendor had called the local constable, but a member of the King's Guard had showed up instead and explained that the Guard was under orders to augment the local constabulary until the situation quieted down. The vendor had made his opinion clear as to what kind of punishment Sullivan should receive for his infraction; but the Guard, a wise and experienced Sergeant-Major, had merely listened politely and bundled him off to the King's Orphanage where he'd received his first hot meal in memory and slept in a warm and comfortable bed instead of shivering himself to sleep on some chilly footpath. But old habits had never really died. Even though the Sergeant-Major had eventually adopted him and tried to instill in him some sense of honor and honesty, he never seemed to be able to rid himself of the anger that he felt toward his real parents; but because they were no longer a part of his life he would take it out on others, usually anyone smaller and weaker than himself. The thought of what he had been and what he had let himself become; a traitor, a murderer in thought if not deed, an arsonist and damn near a child-killer; sickened him. If he was already beyond redemption, so be it. He would reckon with his fate when the spirits called.

But the pitiful creature at his feet stirred something within him that he'd never felt before. He bent down and gently took one of its grimy paws in his own. "How would you like to eat a hot meal and sleep in a warm bed tonight, huh?" The child looked at him uncomprehendingly. For what was probably the first time in his life, Sullivan gave a smile of genuine warmth and said, "Come on, young'un, I'll see if I can get a bath thrown in for you as well." Paw in paw, he led the bedraggled young rabbit down the street.

Chapter 19: 18

In the fortnight after their escape from the fire that had destroyed Dr. Ages house, Justin had spent what little free time he had available from tending to Jeremy's injuries taking walks along the banks of a nearby creek and brooding about his future. Mrs. Brisbee tended to Ages broken leg and, with Justin's permission, once again made herself the head of the household; giving her children pretty much the run of the property. They had made friends with one of the local kids; Toby, a tortoise; son of the local constable. And when Mrs. Brisbee was at first reluctant to let them play with the youngster, his father stopped by for a visit. Justin was instantly delighted to see his former childhood playmate and reassured her that he could vouch for the constable's unwavering friendship and loyalty. The constable also assured her that he too was opposed to King Jenner's rule and would offer whatever aid discretion would permit.

On a bright, sunny mid-Summer morning, Timothy and Cynthia were exploring around the house looking for whatever items that could be used as toys to play with. He and his older sister had just discovered a closet in one of the unused rooms of the old house. Inside, they had found a large gray-painted trunk with the name "Justin" scrawled across the top. "Let's open it!" Cynthia suggested excitedly, "Maybe it's his old toybox!"

Timothy frowned and shook his head. "No, Cynthia. It's too big for that. It looks more like the trunk that mom used to keep our really good clothes in." He said.

"Well, let's open it anyway! Maybe it's got stuff he'll let us play with!" She prodded.

Timothy rolled his eyes and sighed. He knew better than to try to come between his sister and her chance to have some fun. But then a thought struck him. "Maybe we better go ask Captain Justin for his permission; after all, it does have his name on it."

Cynthia jumped to her feet and was out the door shouting, "I'll go! I'll go!" Before Timothy could think to stop her. He was getting a bad feeling from this box in front of him. Not bad in the sense of the dreams about his father or the fire a couple of weeks ago, but bad in the sense of a great sadness that he could somehow feel coming from it, like someone had gone on a long trip promising to return, but never being able to do so. Timothy could hear his sister calling out for the fox and wished that they had never found the room, the closet or the trunk. He wondered if maybe he could just walk out of the room, lock the door, and try to convince his sister that they had all been nothing more than a part of her imagination. But now he could hear several sets of footsteps coming quickly toward the room, Cynthia overenthusiastically describing what they had found. His sense of impending dread gave way to resignation as Cynthia dragged Justin into the room.

"There it is! There it is!" She squealed and pointed with excitement.

Justin bent down and examined it more closely. "Yeah, I guess it is mine." He said, his voice betraying a hint of confusion. "Although I must confess that I don't remember ever having seen it before."

"Open it! Open it! Pleeeeeease!" Cynthia begged, jumping up and down, unable to contain her excitement.

"Calm down, Honey." Mrs. Brisbee told her. "Why don't we help Justin take it into the main room so he can open it where there's more light?" She suggested.

"An excellent idea!" Justin said. He placed a paw on Martin's shoulder and said, "Would you be willing to help your sister and I move it? It looks a bit heavy for just the two of us to carry."

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Martin smiled and said, "Sure, but I get dibs on any really neat stuff that might be in there!"

"Done!" Justin said. Then he noticed Cynthia and Theresa scowling at him. "But," He quickly added, "You've got to promise me that you'll share that really neat stuff with your sisters and little brother; they're your family after all."

Martin nodded and they, along with Cynthia and Theresa; who also volunteered her help; moved the trunk, which wasn't really all that heavy after all, into the larger, better-lit main room.

The main hasp was unlocked and all that Justin had to do was unsnap the two fasteners to each side and lift the lid. Inside was a neatly folded ceremonial uniform coat and shako.

"My Troop-Captain's uniform!" Justin said in amazement. "I gave it to my mother after my promotion to Captain-of-the-Guard." He sniffed back a tear. "My father didn't live to see that moment, but Mama always said that it would have been the proudest one of his life. I always knew that it was the proudest moment of hers." Justin gently lifted the uniform out and ran his paw over the fine gold, dark blue and black embroidery. "Martin," He said in a reverent tone, "If you promise me that you will take extra-special care of it, I'll let you have this uniform. All that I ask is that you remember that, while I wore it, I was pledged to serve, and if necessary die for, my King. That events turned out differently is my own shame."

Martin gulped and nodded. "Thank you!" he whispered, awed by this new responsibility. To his mother he asked, "Mom, can I go and hang this over my bed?" Mrs. Brisbee nodded her approval, her own eyes misting from the empathy that she felt for Justin.

Under the uniform were various childhood toys and knick-knacks that Justin thought that he had long since forgotten about but was able to identify particular individuals or events; whether birthdays, relatives or both; that were associated with them. He distributed them among the children until they were gone. The last item in the trunk was a small box wrapped in a silk kerchief that had browned and faded with age, but still visible was a very elegant rose motif. "Mama loved roses." He said, a hint of both sadness and pride in his voice. "I used to think up all sorts of excuses to leave the farm after my chores and the farmwork were done just so that I could wander the forest to look for the most beautiful roses to bring back to her. Papa never seemed to mind; even if I arrived after the sun had gone down and was late for dinner, because he always saved me some; just so long as I had some roses to give to her."

"You must have loved her very much." Mrs. Brisbee said quietly.

Justin shrugged. "I suppose I did," He sighed, "Even though I knew that she wasn't my real mother. Not that she and Papa didn't give their Hearts and Souls to welcome me into the family and be the best parents they possibly could under the circumstances; but I was always somehow different from the other kids, even though we shared the same home and the same color fur."

Justin carefully weighed the small box in his hand. After a few moments, he gently removed the age-brittled cloth from around it. Mrs. Brisbee took the kerchief, expertly folded it and placed it in the drawer of a nearby desk.

It was a small jewelry box made of dark mahogany. On its lid was a relief of a family seal covered in gold leaf. The seal was a pair of foxes supporting a shield. On the shield was an open heart-shaped lock. Above the shield was a pair of crossed keys, and supporting the whole was a ribbon-scroll emblazoned with the name "Locksley" in red. Justin opened the box and removed a silver locket, identical in shape to the lock on the shield. On the front, a seal identical to the one on the lid of the box had been painstakingly engraved into the metal; on the reverse, written in an elegant script, were the words: "To Justin, Our Son, On the Occasion of

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His First Birthday. With All Our Love, Emma and Jonathan." Justin's eyes widened in shock. He fumbled with the tiny catch on the side and the locket popped open. In one compartment was a miniature painting depicting a trio of regal looking foxes; father, mother and child. The father had a grand, beaming, confident smile and his eyes twinkled with merriment. The mother gazed lovingly at the young kit that she held in her arms. In the other compartment, in the same elegant script as was on the cover, was engraved: "Emma, Jonathan & Justin Locksley". "It can't be!" Justin whispered.

"Unfortunately it is, Justin. Although I'd hoped that this was a secret that would remain lost."

Justin and Mrs. Brisbee turned to discover Dr. Ages, supported by a nearly mummy-wrapped Jeremy, at the doorway. Suddenly, Justin raised an arm and pointed an accusing finger at the badger. "You...You KNEW! Damn you, you old Bastard! YOU KNEW ALL ALONG!" He screamed in realization. He made as if to leap on Ages, but Mrs. Brisbee quickly grabbed him in a bear-hug shouting, "Calm down, Justin! Give him a chance to explain!"

The tension in Justin's body drained away as he collapsed onto Mrs. Brisbee, who led him to a nearby chair. Jeremy, himself in pain, helped Dr. Ages hobble to another chair and made himself as comfortable as possible on the large couch under the front bay window. An envelope with writing on it lay on the floor next to the jewel box, which Justin, in his anger, had dropped. Mrs. Brisbee picked them up and read the faded but still legible writing on the envelope aloud, "To J." She handed it to a morose Justin, who glared hatefully at Ages. He opened it and began to read silently. Soon anger was replaced by sadness as tears flowed down his cheeks. He then handed the letter to Mrs. Brisby. "Read." He whispered, his voice choked with conflicting emotions.

Mrs. Brisbee cleared her throat and proceeded. "My dearest Justin," She said evenly, "If you are reading this letter, then I have failed in my duties as your mother. Since the death of your father I have done my best to provide a decent home for you. But due to circumstances over which I have no control, I have been forced to place your father's estate in the care of the Royal Trust. When I might be able to regain it, I have no idea. I am now being evicted from the manor and must move to Londontown. Unfortunately, I am unable to bring you with me. Therefore, I have had to make the most difficult decision in my life and place you in the temporary custody of a local orphanage. Even now the thought of you alone, even surrounded with children your own age, makes me want to hold you and never let you go. Always know that you are first in my thoughts at all times; from the moment I rise in the morning to the moment my eyes close in sleep at night. My love to you always. Your mother, Emma."

A long silence filled the room. After a while, Justin looked at Dr. Ages through bloodshot eyes and said, "I-I don't understand."

Ages sighed and asked Mrs. Brisbee to bring him the two books that he'd brought from his now-ruined house. When she returned, he took them from her and broke their seals and unwrapped the cloth ribbons that kept them shut. "Just after your first birthday," He began, opening one of the volumes, "Your father became ill with the Plague and died soon after. On paper, he was a very rich landholder who owned vast tracts of land in both Nottinghamshire and other parts of Britain. But after his untimely demise, his creditors began circling like the vultures they were, demanding immediate return on their investments. Your mother placed all of the land that he owned in this Shire into the protection of the Royal Trust while she paid off your father's debts by transferring the various deeds to their respective credit-bearers. This kind of legal maneuvering takes vast amounts of time and your mother felt that she would be unable to care for you properly so she placed you in a local orphanage until she could return for you.

"But three events in the intervening months occurred that were to change your fate forever. First, you were given for adoption; even though, from what precious few facts I've been able to gather, your records supposedly forbade this course of action. Whether this was an accident, a clerical error, some malicious hand

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at work or simply a bizarre twist of fate, I have no idea. But soon after, a fire destroyed the orphanage and your records along with it. During this period, your mother met and married a young, up-and-coming physician named Dr. Lawrence Brisbee; who, I might add, was my best and brightest student when I taught at my Guild's Medical Academy. After she had cleared your father's legal debts, she came back to Nottinghamshire to reclaim her land and, most importantly, her young son.

"But with the orphanage reduced to a rock-strewn cinder and no trace of you to be found, she spent all of her spare time searching through birth certificates, public adoption records, even death certificates, but with no success. During this time, about five years after you were born, she gave birth to another son, whom she named..."

"Jonathan!" Justin blurted out in disbelief.

"Yes." Ages nodded. "After your father. While you were growing up on this farm, Jonathan was growing up in Londontown. He went to some of the finest schools, excelling in all his educational pursuits, and earned a Masters Degree in Public Administration. He then took a post in the Lord Mayor's government and eventually rose to the position of His Majesty's Coroner."

"And when did you realize that he was my brother?" Justin demanded angrily.

"Half-brother." Ages corrected. "Actually, I suspected it the moment I saw you two in the same room. The physical resemblance was uncanny. In fact, I'm surprised that you never picked up on it; and to this day I suspect that Jonathan had, even though he never gave any indication of it."

"So why didn't you tell me? I think I had a right to know!" Justin fumed.

"Don't you think I wanted to?" Ages retorted, "There were nights when I got no sleep whatsoever because I wanted so badly to tell you both! But I also believed, and still do, that, for whatever reason, Fate had placed you on different paths and it was not my place to intervene, whatever the consequences."

"Even if it got two good animals killed." Justin said bitterly.

Now Ages became angry. "You have no right to lay that on my conscience!" He shouted. "I mourn the deaths of King Nicodemus and Jonathan just as much as you and Mrs. Brisbee do! After all, Jonathan was my friend too! Remember?" Ages paused a moment to calm himself and gather his thoughts. "Let me ask you something," He said, leaning forward in his chair. "If you had known that you and Jonathan were half-brothers, would that have changed anything between you? I'm not totally blind; although my eyes aren't as sharp as they were in my prime; and I could see that you and Jonathan had become brothers even without the actual knowledge of your blood-tie with him. Are you so sure that simply by knowing this that it would actually have saved him from his eventual fate?"

Justin opened his mouth to answer, but the logic of Ages question made him hesitate. Would events have turned out any differently had he known? Justin's friendship with Jonathan had been of a very brotherly intimacy, now that he looked back on it. They had shared confidences about their lives that had made it seem as if they actually had grown up together. "I...I don't know." Justin answered truthfully.

"None of us do, my boy." Ages said in a comforting tone. "We must live our lives with whatever resources we are given at birth, whether it's a strength of mind, body or will. Some are blessed with two of these and a very lucky few are blessed with all three. But the vast majority of us must muck along through our lives and somehow cultivate that one resource that we've been given, just as a farmer cultivates his crops. Like a hailstorm or a flood or a drought; Fate can sometimes damage, or even kill, this resource. If we're lucky, we

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can repair or regrow this resource; if not, then we must go through the often painful task of adapting to life without it. Your resources through all this have been an unswerving strength of purpose, a determined will to see justice done and an uncanny sense of what's right and wrong. Jonathan saw these qualities in you even better than I did, which is why he knew that you would help us in our fight to keep Jenner off the throne. Obviously," He reflected bitterly, "Fate had other plans."

"What happened to my mother? My real mother." Justin asked, his voice flat and drained of emotion.

She passed away several years ago." Ages said. "She never gave up on her hope that you were alive and, even to the moment that her heart stopped beating, believed that you two would be reunited. Lawrence died soon afterward. The death certificate says "natural causes", but I think that he simply could not deal with the death of the wife that he loved so much and just sort of gave up the will to live. They're buried together in the City Cemetery in a plot near the small lake by the Southwest Gate. I'll take you sometime if you wish."

Justin nodded thoughtfully. "I'd like that." he whispered. He then got up from his chair and walked out of the house and wandered along the creek that meandered near his "home". He found an isolated bend and waded through the cool, shallow water to a large rock that he used to sit on as a young kit. Mrs. Brisbee, who had silently followed him, stepped into the water as well and waded in his footsteps and sat down next to him, draped her arms around his shoulders and began nuzzling the fur at the back of his neck. "Ages didn't tell the whole story." He said as he examined the locket, which dangled from his paw.

"Mmm?" Was Mrs. Brisbee's only response as she hugged him closer to her.

Justin snapped the locket shut and placed it on top of a nearby rock and gently took Mrs. Brisbee's paws in his own. "When I was twelve, a recruiter for the King's Army came through the area and told the various families around here that His Majesty needed strapping young farmboys to help him defend Britain against imminent invasion by the Continental powers. Memories of the Plague and the factional rioting in the City were still quite fresh in everyone's mind, but most of the folks around here needed their sons to help with the harvests at least until they got married and got their own farms and had kids of their own to help them with their harvests, and so on, and so on. But my parents, my adoptive ones, asked him if recruits went to school. The recruiter told them that schooling could be arranged, but only if the recruit were a candidate for the King's Guard. My parents had my best interests in mind, I suppose, because neither they nor my brothers, sisters and cousins had gone to school and I guess that they wanted something more for me than being a poor, simple farmer for the rest of my life. So they signed me up on the spot and I was on my way to the City that very afternoon; I didn't even have time to pack a bag because the recruiter had told them that I would have everything that I would ever need for the rest of my life issued to me by the Guard's Quartermaster-Sergeant. The problem was that a Sergeant, Lieutenant; even The Captain-of-the-Guard himself; can't order a twelve-year-old not to be homesick."

"Mmmmm." Mrs. Brisbee answered in agreement, stroking the inside of his ear with the tip of her nose.

Justin wrinkled his brow and asked, "Have you been listening to a word I've said?"

"Your parents enlisted you in the King's Guard to give you an education for your future and you missed them very much." She purred softly.

Justin rolled his eyes and said, "Yeah, close enough I guess. What's with you anyway?"

Mrs. Brisbee brought her eyes level with Justin's. "Until today," She said, her voice quavering slightly, "I had denied to myself that I had feelings for you. I guess I thought that if I admitted them to myself, I thought that I would be betraying Jonathan's memory. But don't you see? In a way, Jonathan's a part of you now! You've

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shared a parent! You've shared a friendship! I want to be a part of that too!" She closed her eyes as a tear dropped into the creek. Justin reached around and held Mrs. Brisbee's head and shoulders to his chest in a passionate embrace, rocking her gently back and forth.

"I see nothing wrong with that." Justin said softly.

Mrs. Brisbee pulled away a bit, smiled and wiped a tear from her eye. "And I'm sure that the children will be delighted to learn that they have an Uncle."

"Half-Uncle." He reminded her, placing emphasis on the word "half". Then he gave a chuckle.

"What's so funny?" Mrs. Brisbee asked, somewhat perplexed by the enigmatic smile that lit his face.

"I just realized that I'm 'half'-everything that Jonathan was. 'Half'-brother, 'half'-uncle. Why, who knows! You could very well be my 'half-wife'!"

"And you're quite possibly my 'half-husband'!" She giggled. "Even if you can sometimes be a bit 'half-assed'!"

Justin laughed and said mock-indignantly, "Madam, I can be well-and-truely 'assed' when I wish to!" He then picked Mrs. Brisbee up and quickly carried her to a waist-deep part of the creek and unceremoniously dumped her into the water. She emerged soaked and spluttering. He laughed at her bedraggled appearance. She responded by giving him a sly smirk and slipped one of her feet behind Justin's heels and gave him a mighty shove to the shoulders. With a yelp, he toppled into the water like a fresh-cut tree. He came up floating on his back and spit a line of water toward Mrs. Brisbee, who dodged it, and it splashed harmlessly on the creekbank. She then leaned back and let herself float next to him, where they took each others' paw and let themselves enjoy the freedom of the clear rippling, gurgling water.

Sometime later, as Jeremy and Dr. Ages drank a late afternoon cup of tea, Justin and Mrs. Brisbee, both of whom were dripping wet, sauntered arm-in-arm into the house laughing and giggling. Ignoring the astonished stares of the badger and the rooster, they exchanged a passionate embrace and kiss; then walked past them, leaving two parallel trails of water on the floor, and made their way to Justin's room.

When he regained his voice, Jeremy looked at Ages and asked, "Am I missing something here?"

Ages sighed and said, "My boy, something tells me that you'll be sleeping in a different bed from now on."

Jeremy looked confused for a few moments, but then he nodded his realization. "Oh I see!" He exclaimed.

Ages nodded his consensus and continued drinking his tea as if nothing had happened.

Chapter 20: 19

Will Scarlet was utterly disgusted and discouraged. For the past several weeks he'd been trying to book passage to the Continent, but his lack of money meant that he'd had to try and hire himself out as an inexperienced deckhand. Unfortunately, most Captains ignored him because of his youth and wiry build. "I need a strong back!" One had told him with a sneer. "Not some pip squeak who's gonna cry for mama at the first breeze!"

He'd managed to survive so far by lying about his age to get a job tending bar at one of the sleazy little dives that dotted the river front. He worked the late shift, which left his days free to try to look for a way to leave the forsaken place that Britain was fast becoming. He was paid a pittance, the owner explaining that the King had raised the taxes on drinks through the roof. At first, he'd been skeptical of this claim; but, after talking with a few of the other public house and inn workers, he'd come to realize that Jenner was indeed going to attempt to live up to his philosophy of wringing more work out of his subjects. Almost daily, new decrees and edicts were being issued to raise this or that tax or begin taxing something that hadn't been taxed before. Just days before, a near-riot had broken out when Jenner had issued an order closing the City's largest soup kitchen, blithely explaining that the workload was now to be more efficiently shared among the remaining smaller kitchens.

Will himself looked far different than when he'd first come to Londontown. He'd put away his acrobat costume and was now dressed in an old shirt and bib-overalls that he'd found in the "penny-pile" at the salvage store of a local charity. They were both a couple sizes too large and in need of some repair, but they were comfortable and, after a few hours with a needle and thread, he figured that he blended somewhat better into his surroundings. On his back he carried an improvised knapsack sewn from an old sea-bag and strips of sailcloth for the straps.

He was on his way to the dosshouse where he'd rented his room when he noticed a crowd gathering around a street lamp. He made his way to it and pushed his way through the crowd. Pasted to the lamppost was an announcement which read: "By order of His Majesty, King Jenner, on this date; The King's Orphanage is hereby ordered to cease all operations immediately. All resident children are to be removed to an alternate facility of his choice until further notice." Several people in the crowd began scratching their heads and asking, "Can he do that?" or "Whadda they mean, 'alternate facility'?"

From a distance, a new sound could be heard; the booing and jeering of a large distant horde. He fought his way out of the growing crowd and started running full-tilt in the direction of the Orphanage. When he arrived several minutes later, he skidded to a stop and stared wide-eyed in astonishment at the scene before him. "Cor!" He muttered under his breath.

A single file of children, all in shackles and chains, was being led from the somber stone building, dark with grime from its long-ago days as a coal-storage warehouse, by members of a troop of the King's Guard. On the surrounding streets a crowd of thousands was milling aimlessly about or hurling curses and taunts at the soldiers and growing by the second.

The Troop-Captain; a beady-eyed weasel named Ezekiel Stabb; looked down on the roiling mass of animals from his perch atop the highest step of the entrance portico with contempt and loathing. Weasels did not generally associate with any other animals except fellow weasels and, even then, were generally suspicious and paranoid about any outside their own clan. But Stabb had been a mercenary soldier during the Continental wars and had, he thought, been rather good at his chosen vocation. He'd grown to love the smell of the fresh blood that had stained his sword-blade during the campaigns he'd fought for whichever Empire had bid the highest for his services; in fact, in his youth, he had gotten an almost erotic thrill after each battle by seeking

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an isolated spot away from the main body of whatever carnage had just been wrought and slowly licking the fresh, warm red liquid off of whatever weapon he happened to be using, shivering with pleasure as he savored the salty taste with each stroke of his tongue. This secret bloodlust had not been appeased in many years and had faded into nothing more than a distant, shameful memory. When the wars had wound down, he'd found that employers wanted more useful skills than slashing an enemy's throat or bashing his skull in with a mace or battle-axe. Stabb had no stomach for such namby-pamby pursuits as farming or commerce. Eventually, he'd had to enlist in one of the regular imperial armies, being forced to rise through the ranks even with his extensive military experience. His family and clan had long ago perished in the wars and resultant Plague and he was far too old to try to fight for a place in another. He had, in a bout of bitterness and depression, been contemplating suicide several months earlier when he'd heard from one of his old buddies that the new King of Britain was looking for a few ruthlessly efficient animals to be all that they could be while promising not just a job, but an adventure; and if they aimed high, well, who knew how far one could go? He'd immediately resigned and hopped the next boat to Britain and enthusiastically offered his services to His Majesty, who had immediately commissioned him as a Troop-Captain.

But now here he was taking a bunch of little kids from their only home, such as it was, in chains like a bunch of criminals on their way to a work detail. This was most definitely NOT the kind of work that he'd signed on for! A King's Guard was just that: a bodyguard for the Sovereign of the Realm; not some Secret Police force to be used on a whim to crush those opposed to his rule! Stabb had never before disobeyed a direct order from the boss who signed his paycheck; but when Captain Sullivan had given him this assignment and told him how it was to be carried out, Stabb had been tempted to refuse it outright; telling Sullivan that chaining up innocent children was beyond his job description. Sullivan had replied that the chains were for the children's own safety so that they would not get lost on the way to their new homes. But Stabb had known better than to trust the word of his commander. He'd remembered numerous situations in his past where his supposed "leaders" had lied to him in order to further their own careers and wasted the lives of many good soldiers, including some good friends, in the process.

He'd asked one of the aides to the King's Scribe; a harried, weak-willed hedgehog; for the original order. The aide had tried to put him off, but Stabb was persistent and had become very upset when he'd learned that Jenner was simply using the residents of the orphanage to maintain his grip on power. Just after he'd joined the Guard, he'd heard rumors of another betrayal by them against a former Captain-of-the-Guard named Justin. At first he'd dismissed them as nothing more than the usual backbiting among the upper echelons of power. But when he'd heard that a reward had been placed on the fox's head, he'd begun to get an inkling of just what these two were capable of. Even now the conflicting feelings; rage at Jenner and Sullivan for their lies and betrayal, guilt for letting himself be used in such a shameful manner, even a certain amount of sympathy, a feeling quite rare to his species, for the plight these poor kids who had no clue as to their future; inside of him were almost at the boiling point. He decided that he had no choice but to put up a brave, if utterly false, front. But it didn't make the job any easier.

The noise of the crowd was intensifying. Somewhere, someone had set up a soapbox and was railing against the tax and social reform policies of His Majesty. Stabb motioned his Lieutenant to his side. "Find out who that is," He hissed angrily, pointing in the general direction of the oratory, "And arrest him! And don't be too gentle about it!" The guard took a Sergeant and several soldiers with him and disappeared into the seething multitude. Several minutes later, Stabb gave a satisfied smirk as a commotion broke out among a part of the crowd and the voice that had been yelling invective against the King fell silent. "That'll teach ya to fight City Hall!" He muttered sarcastically.

The last of the children were led from the building; most were crying, some were carrying swaddled infants; but, as before, they all wore ankle-irons and manacles.

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Will Scarlet worked his way through the crowd and made his way to the steps of the portico, where he was stopped by two halfbred-armed wolves. "Ay,'ay! Wha' d'yer think yer doin', ya bloody twit? Them kids can't 'urt you!" He yelled for all he was worth.

Stabb turned to face him down and sneered from his perch. "You'd better mind your own business, boy! How we remove these brats is up to King Jenner and none of your affair!"

"Is tha' ri'? Well 'ow 'bout you go an' pick on some'un yer own size?" Will taunted.

Stabb's nose wrinkled in anger as he drew his sword. "Like YOU?" He shouted as he advanced down the steps.

Will gulped but stood his ground.

Stabb motioned the two wolves away and ordered a nearby guard to hand his sword over to the smart-ass fox who had either the brass courage or sheer stupidity to challenge the orders of his King.

Will doffed the backpack and it was picked up by a member of the crowd, a pretty, young female skunk; who said, with a lilting brogue; "I'll keep it safe for ya. Good luck!" She then gave him a quick peck on his cheek and disappeared into the crowd. He took the sword from the guard and was nearly dragged to the ground by its unaccustomed weight. He waved it around for a few moments to try to get a feel for its weight and balance. His mother had been both a sword-swallower and knife-thrower before she had married his father and taken up acrobatics, and showed her son some fencing techniques, both elementary and advanced; and he now struggled to try and remember those long-ago lessons.

Stabb watched this prancing young imbecile with a mixture of bemusement and contempt. "You shoulda stayed on the farm, boy!" He snickered scornfully.

Will assumed a fighting stance and said, "Y' may be ri', bu' m' name's no' 'boy'!"

Stabb then stepped forward and brought his sword down on Will expecting to cleave the youth in two with no resistance. He was more than a little surprised to find his stroke blocked, inexpertly but effectively, by his opponent. He then slid his blade off of Will's and used the momentum of his force to strike down again, this time from an angle.

Will, using his circus skills, quickly dodged to the opposite direction; executing a sideways sommersault; leaving the Troop-Captain's blade to clang into the grimy gray stone of the portico, throwing bright sparks as it hit. Experimentally, he slashed his blade at waist-level toward the weasel's midsection. The weasel only just had time to parry the blow. The two antagonists began to trade and parry blows and slashes against each other, attempting to gauge each other's skills and weaknesses. Will then methodically began aiming blows at other parts of his adversary's anatomy, gauging both the speed and consistency of the weasel's reactions to his moves and countermoves. He began to realize that the weasel was fighting to a prescribed rote order which probably left little room for improvisation; and while the Troop-Captain was superior in terms of his physical strength and experience in swordplay, Will knew that if he began to subtly change the rules of the fight more to his advantage, he could at least hold his own against his opponent.

He began to back slowly down the portico steps in order to give himself more room, the crowd parting so as not to be hit by a stray, slashing blade. Stabb mistakenly took this as a retreat and began to press his attack on the young fox. Will had anticipated this reaction and kept his cool, calmly blocking each of the weasel's strokes. As soon as he felt that he was in position, he began his own attack against the Troop-Captain; first using a series of feints and false thrusts to throw the weasel off of the rhythm that Will had detected in his

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fighting method. Then he began to bring a slightly faster tempo to his own movements, the weasel grimacing in frustration as he struggled to keep up.

Stabb was really pissed now. He'd figured that he'd be able to dispatch this hayseed fox to the next world in a few moments and get back to the job at hand; but somehow this little punk was not only still alive, but he was actually in control of this fight! Needless to say, this had never happened to him before. Usually a little intimidation was all that was needed to bring an enemy to his knees for the eventual kill, but this kid had shown no signs that he was in any way afraid of Stabb; in fact, Stabb could see the beginnings of a smile forming at the corners of the fox's mouth while his eyes were empty of all emotions other than intense concentration. He tried to press another attack like the one that had driven the kid down the front steps, but the kid was standing his ground like a seasoned professional; sidestepping, advancing, thrusting and parrying, but never giving up his now clear advantage. In his growing rage, Stabb lunged toward the fox and immediately regretted doing so when the fox expertly stepped aside and landed a powerful, painful slap against the back of Stabb's knee with the flat of his blade, causing the leg to buckle and Stabb to cry out in pain. The Crowd roared its laughter and approval. Stabb rubbed some feeling back into the area and felt a little bit of wetness slicking his fur. He knew without looking that the fox had drawn first blood.

Will Scarlet maintained a respectful distance from the slightly injured Troop-Captain. "We kin stop this 'ere an' now if you want, bu' ya go' t' le' them kids free!" He told the weasel.

Stabb raised himself painfully to both feet and raised his sword high above his head, his eyes ablaze with bitter frustration. "NEVER!" He screamed; launching himself on an unsteady, unwieldy limp toward Will, bringing his sword down. Will fell to the ground at the last second and used his legs to sweep the enraged weasel's feet out from under him. The weasel fell hard and his sword was knocked from his paw, skittering a short way along the stone street and coming to rest against a gutter. Before he could catch his breath; Stabb was on his back, the tip of the fox's blade resting uncomfortably on his exposed throat. For the first time in his life, Stabb knew that he had lost a fight. He stared at the winner with fear in his eyes, the fox staring back with something that he couldn't identify. Anger? Pity, perhaps? Both? He decided that death was a far better fate than that which awaited him if he surrounded to this, this BOY! "Kill me!" He hissed defiantly. The fox raised a questioning eyebrow as if unsure of the command. "KILL ME!" He screamed and tried to grab for the blade in order to plunge it into his own throat. But the fox quickly pulled the blade away and tossed the sword onto the portico steps.

"Sorry. Bu' I don' kill blokes like you, even if y' prob'bly do deserve it." Will said evenly. He then offered his paw to the weasel and said simply, "Le' them kids go. they can't 'urt you or your boys."

Stabb sighed and reluctantly accepted the fox's paw, the fox helping him to his feet. "LieuTENANT!" He shouted as they made their way to the lowest step of the portico.

"Sir!" The Lieutenant answered.

"Remove those irons from those children!" The Lieutenant nodded and moments later all of the children were free of their shackles and chains.

"What about him?" The Lieutenant asked, nodding toward Will.

"What aBOUT him?" Stabb said. The Lieutenant said,

"He's interfered with an order by his Majesty; shouldn't we arrest him?"

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Stabb glared at the guard. "Interfered in WHAT, SERGEANT?" He said sarcastically, emphasizing the soldier's new rank. "We're still closing this building down and relocating its occupants. We're simply going to modify our means of doing so." The newly-demoted officer was about to say something else, but Stabb's angry visage brooked no argument.

Meanwhile, Will had begun bandaging the Troop-Captain's leg-wound; which was neither deep nor serious; with a strip of cloth from his backpack, which had been returned by the skunk who had been keeping it safe for him. Realizing that the fight was over, and encouraged by the local constabulary who had arrived at its conclusion, the crowd began to break up and go about its business.

Stabb regarded his victor for several minutes as the young fox continued his work. "Y'know, boy, you got lucky today. How in the heck did you win? I must be gettin' too old fer this line o' work!"

Will snickered and said, "First of all, m' name's Will. Will Scarlet. Sec'nd; in yer dreams, bub! I coulda tak'n you on m' worst day! I won 'cause me 'eart was pure an' me cause was just! An' b'sides, y' kep' usin' all th' same moves an' rhythm to p'rtec' y'rself over an' over. I jus' varied my moves t' throw y' off."

Stabb shook his head in simultaneous admiration and disbelief. This was the first time that he'd ever been bested in a fight; and a fair one at that; and the kid had won by not bending to the Troop-Captain's will while at the same time bending the rules to his favor. As Will tied the last knot in the bandage, Stabb placed a paw on his shoulder. "Kid," He said in a fatherly tone, "If I were you I'd get myself outta this city. Jenner's not gonna be happy when he hears what happened today. He specifically ordered that those kids be shackled in order to intimidate these folks into doing his will. He's not gonna like the idea that there's another animal who'll stand up to him."

"nother?" Will asked, perplexed. "I sorter figger'd tha' sooner 'r later we'd all jus' ge' tired o' 'is bullyin' an jus' toss 'im ou' on 'is flamin' can!"

Stabb laughed and said, "Boy, you are a hayseed, aren't you? These animals are afraid of Jenner!" He made a sweeping motion with his paw toward the few hangers-on near the building. "They want more'n anything to be subjects of their King again, rather than his slaves; but he has the Crown, the Throne, his power an', not least, an Army to back 'em all up!" He then removed his uniform coat, neatly folded it, laid it on the step next to him and laid his steel helmet on it. "If you are gonna take on Jenner, you'd best find a fox, a red, named Justin. He has as much reason as anyone to want the King off his Throne."

"Wot 'bout you?" Will asked.

Stabb was touched by the genuine concern in Will's voice. No one had ever shown consideration for him, beyond his abilities as a fighter, before. He shook his head sadly. "I'm too old to be doin' this if some hayseed can lay me out in a few minutes an' not break a sweat. I suppose I'll just have to go back to Jenner an' throw myself on his not-so-tender mercies an' count myself lucky if I die in whatever prison he cares to toss my tail into." He said, a bitter tear forming in the corner of one eye.

"Why no' come wi' me?" Will asked, helping the weasel to his feet. "If this Just'n needs 'elp gettin' Jenner off th' Throne, I wanna be there with 'im!"

Stabb regarded the fox with a skeptical admiration. This kid seemed willing to look Death square in the eye and DARE it to blink first! But he could detect no arrogance in Will's voice or manner; just a magnificent self-confidence that Stabb wished he'd possessed in his own prime. He chuckled and said, "Sure, why not? I get antsy in dungeons anyway! SERGEANT!" He called out to the former officer.

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The Sergeant, a wolf not much older than Will, hurried to his Troop-Captain and stood at attention. "SIR!" He answered.

Stabb removed the gold insignia pin from his vest and gave it to the wolf. "Tell Captain Sullivan that I'm resigning my post effective immediately. Tell 'im that I'm too old to be lockin' kids in chains, an' that Jenner'll have to get someone else t' do his dirty work for 'im." He said bitterly. "You've got this detail now."

The Sergeant saluted. Stabb returned the honor and, assisted by Will and the female skunk, began limping away. "You realize, sir, that if we meet again I may have to kill you." The Sergeant's voice held no hint of malice.

Stabb turned and almost said something, but sadly nodded his understanding and limped off down the street supported by his new comrades.

Chapter 21: 20

Once Will and the skunk; who introduced herself as Heather Kilcannon, an art student from Eire; retrieved their various possessions from their respective dosshouses, they left the City as quickly as possible. The weasel, who had introduced himself just after leaving the orphanage, directed them to an unguarded gate that was part of one of the many public gardens scattered around Londontown. They were now headed North toward where Stabb had heard that Justin had gone.

"So what's your story, girl?" Stabb asked as he limped, now under his own power.

"I heard tha' King Jenner is plannin' to close most o' the universities." She explained. "Includin' mine. I was waitin' for a boat t' take me home when I saw you 'n' your troops startin' t' take them poor little children away in those awful chains! I rushed back t' the school an'got a few o' me friends together an' we began t' protest."

Stabb grimaced at the accusatory sharpness in her voice and words, well aware of how correct she was to harbor those feelings. "I'm sorry," He murmured, "I hope that someday you'll find it in your hearts to forgive a foolish old soldier for not having the courage to disobey an order that had no business being issued in the first place."

Heather took one of his paws in hers and said softly, "I dinno' mean t' hurt your feelin's. Ye've already taken your first step toward redemption by defyin' tha' loathsome tyrant of a King." She then took one of Will's paws and said, "The spirits protect those who try t' do tha' which is right, don't they? Tha's what me father always taught me."

Stabb smiled at this girl's innocence. He'd seen and caused far too much death and bloodshed to ever look at the world with anything but a cynical and jaundiced eye. But he now began to hope that, in the time left before his inevitable judgment before the spirits of the afterworld, he might be able to right at least a few of the many wrongs that he'd done over a lifetime and maybe, just maybe, learn to appreciate some of the beauty that was in the world rather than dwell on the evils that he'd been witness to. He nodded hesitantly. "My feelings were hurt long before now, sister, and I suppose that there may yet be hope even for this old idiot. Whether your father was right about the spirits or not is anybody's guess; but he seems to have given his daughter enough faith to make even this old soldier want to believe that it might be true." He told her.

Will had been listening to them in rapt silence, mesmerized by the sound of Heather's voice and her glowing beauty. He'd been a bit too busy when he'd first seen her, what with being in the middle of a fight and all. But her luxuriant, silky black-and-white fur and large, sparkling eyes now made his heart flutter. But that wonderful voice! Music from the most expensively crafted archlute or harpsichord could only pale in comparison to that which this girl made simply by speaking!

After a while, Stabb began to lag behind and Will tried to work up some suddenly elusive courage to talk to Heather; marvelling at how easy it was to risk one's life in a sword fight against a veteran soldier, but how difficult it was to risk embarrassment while talking to a beautiful young girl. "So, um, where in Eire're ya from?" He asked, trying desperately to keep some bravado in his voice.

Heather giggled. "Ye don' have to be me Knight in Shinin' Armor all the time, Will!" She chided. "I can like th' Love-struck teen-ager just as much!"

Will chuckled nervously in spite of himself, well aware that he'd lost control of the situation. "Tha' obvious am I?" He asked.

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Heather smiled and nodded, saying, "I dinno' fall out o' th' turnip-cart yesterday, y'know. As t' your question, I was born 'n Dublintown..." She then went on to explain that she was the youngest in her family and her parents were well-to-do merchants who owned several small quarries and sold stone for buildings and statuary. She was in Britain to learn painting and sculpting because she had no interest in being a stonecutter for the rest of her life.

They talked and laughed for quite a while, not noticing the lengthening shadows as day gave way to dusk and dusk to night. Stabb limped his way to them and pointedly suggested that they either find an inn or make some sort of provision for a night's rest. Will remembered a nearby inn and he, Heather and Stabb used what little money they had between them to take a meal and a room.

Chapter 22: 21

"...I mean, what could I do, Sir? I couldn't very well've struck them down in cold blood, could I?"

Sullivan sat listening as the young wolf finished his report of the days disastrous events. "No, son," He sighed, massaging the fur between his eyes to alleviate the growing ache there. "You did the right thing. I suppose that we should all be thankful that this didn't degenerate into a riot situation. I shudder at the thought that our streets might someday flow with rivers of the blood of His Majesty's subjects." He absentmindedly turned Stabb's Troop-Captain insignia-pin over in his paw. Once, a long time ago, Sullivan himself had worn one just like it; and back then, at least in his mind, it may even have actually meant something. But now it was nothing more than a worthless hunk of sculpted, gold-plated tin symbolizing blind obedience to a King who seemed to be growing more unstable by the day. Stabb had probably been right to resign his commission when he did. Earlier in the day Jenner had signed a number of decrees that promised to reduce the animals of Britain to abject slavery, in fact if not name. The most troubling of them stripped all but a very few landholders of deeds under the premise that all of Britain belonged to the King and only he could legally buy, sell or grant lands. Sullivan knew that this would bring the animals dislike of their King to; if not sheer hatred, than something mighty close. But he also knew that, in terms of his political power, Jenner was now too strong to overthrow by non-violent means. He had too many "friends in high places" who had too much to lose if their roles in the deaths of his brother and his brother's Chancellor were ever discovered.

Sullivan placed the badge on his desk and said, "Look, I know that it's probably a bit early in your career to get saddled with this kind of responsibility; but I'm in need of a cool head right now." He leaned back in his chair and began to rub the tense muscles at the back of his neck. "I just happen to have a Troop-Captain position open, if you want it.

The Sergeant looked as if he might lose his composure for a moment, but he remained at attention and simply said, "Yes sir, I'd like that very much, sir."

Sullivan handed the wolf the Troop-Captain's badge and took possession of the Sergeant's stripes as he carefully peeled them from the sleeves of his coat. "By the way, soldier," He asked, "What's your name? So I can put it in the paybook."

"Gisbourne, Sir. Troop-Captain Giles Gisbourne." The wolf said proudly.

He then dismissed the newly re-commissioned officer and, after exchanging salutes, closed his office door. He then began to set pen to parchment; it was time to have another meeting with The Voice and his crowd again.

Chapter 23: 22

A cool breeze whispered through the pre-dawn late-Summer air. A few stars still shown through thin wisps of cloud in the still-dark canopy of sky.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Dr. Ages asked, a grave concern in his voice. "Remember, there's still that reward on your head!"

Justin adjusted a strap on his backpack and said, "Look, it's not about want; this is something I have to do, NEED to do! My past has eluded me all these years and I'm on the verge of finally discovering who I really am!"

Ages shrugged, resigning himself to his inability to talk Justin out of this potentially dangerous fool's errand. He had given Justin the two books that he'd brought with him from his now-demolished home. They were a record of every scrap of information that he'd been able to collect about Justin and his late half-brother. Justin had stayed up numerous nights since the discovery of their relationship poring over the two volumes and marvelling at the subtle similarities, as well as the obvious differences, between himself and Jonathan. Both had risen to the top of their respective fields by a dogged persistence and a willingness to adapt their thinking and actions to whatever circumstances their situation demanded. Both, while growing up in radically different childhood environments, had excelled in their respective educational surroundings. Justin had told Ages in secret that he'd decided that he must see for himself whatever might remain of the Locksley estate in order to find out whether he might uncover more information about his past. Ages, leaning on the crutch that Justin had fashioned for him, held out his paw and said, "Well, if you're so bound and determined to make this trip, I guess that I can only wish you a prosperous journey and ask you to take extra care not to place yourself at unnecessary risk."

Justin took Ages' paw and gripped it firmly. "Don't worry, you old goat, I'll be back safe and sound; you'll see!" He said, a wry smile coming to his face. "You just remember to tell Marian and the kids why I felt that I had to do this alone; it may not make them feel any better, but I think they'll understand eventually." He then turned and began striding purposefully toward the path that led to the main road.

"Good luck, boy, and may the spirits keep you safe." Ages whispered. He then rubbed the tears that were forming out of his eyes and began limping back to the cottage.

Chapter 24: 23

Will, Heather and Stabb checked out of the inn at the first light of dawn. They had no more money left and knew that; until they found the fugitive fox known as Justin, IF he could be found at all; they would have to live by their wits or skills alone. It was Heather who sat them down during one of their breaks in their walking and had them list some of their talents. Will, of course, demonstrated his acrobatic skills; impressing both of his companions; and told them of his farming expertise. Heather showed them some of her sketches and drawings and told them of her housekeeping abilities. Stabb; skeptical of just where this was leading, but not wishing to be a total pessimist; thought hard and told them that aside from fighting, he knew several escape and evasion techniques that required an ability and willingness to live off the land. He told them how he knew what plants or seeds, besides what were grown in the fields and sold at the markets, were safe to eat; even if a few were less than appetizing. Heather immediately put him in charge of the group, pointing out that he was the oldest and most experienced in decision-making. Stabb made a show of being reluctant, but commented with a gentle irony to Will when she was out of earshot that he was not fooled for a second as to who the real leader of this tiny band was. Will nodded his agreement and simply asked the weasel to play along anyway, which Stabb agreed to do.

They spent most of the rest of the morning walking as Stabb explained the finer points of survival without the trappings of civilization. After some prodding; he also, reluctantly, told them of his days fighting as a mercenary for the Continental Empires, even tearfully confessing to his taste for enemy blood. Much to his surprise and relief, they had not expressed revulsion on hearing this; but had comforted him and tried to encourage him by telling him that, while he couldn't change his past, they could see that he was trying to change himself, and hopefully his future, for the better.

Chapter 25: 24

"Oh, Doctor! How COULD you?" Mrs. Brisbee cried. "You should have told me that he was going to do this!" She and Theresa held each other and tried to fight back their tears. Cynthia had fled to another part of the cottage and could be heard sniffing occasionally. Martin and Timothy tried their best to console their mother and older sister, but were themselves on the edge of tears. The children had been ecstatic when their mother had informed them of their familial relation to Justin and had pleaded to hear him tell stories about himself every night before bedtime.

"Believe me, Mrs. Brisbee, I was sorely tempted to do just that!" He said earnestly, "But Justin has his own reasons for doing this. Like you, he has yet to fully reconcile himself to the loss of his half-brother and best friend. But the sudden discovery that he actually has a past beyond the memories in this house, as well as a last name, has made him curious of his heritage. He fully realizes the danger of his journey, and he hopes that you'll understand the reason that he felt he had to make it."

Mrs. Brisbee sniffed back her tears and reluctantly nodded. "Yes, I suppose I do." She whispered. "I'm just afraid of losing my only living link to Jonathan."

Ages took one of her paws in his and said, "Justin is one of the smartest and wiliest animals I know. If anyone can navigate the dangers that he faces, it's him."

Mrs. Brisbee again nodded and whispered, "I know. Thank you."

Ages then excused himself and tottered off to Jeremy's room. The rooster was out of danger but still required a good deal of care as his burns slowly healed and his feathers began to grow back, covering the scarring on his skin. Ages own leg was healing and the scar from that injury was, as Justin had predicted, quite large.

"What do we do now?" Theresa asked.

Mrs. Brisbee composed herself and gathered the children; including Cynthia, whom Timothy had found and led back; around her and said quietly, "We'll just have to hope that your Uncle finds the answers that he's looking for. Dr. Ages was right when he said that Justin can take care of himself and we, too, owe him this confidence. In the meantime, we're still a family and we must depend on each other to get us through until his return, whenever that may be."

The children nodded and she told them to go outside and play until she called them in for lunch. After they were outside, she went to the window that faced the road and bowed her head, saying a silent prayer to the spirits that they keep Justin from harm.

Chapter 26: 25

The meeting that Sullivan had requested of the forces opposed to the rule of "Jenner the Cruel" as he was now being called, although certainly not to his face, was set up at a location deemed acceptable to both parties. Like their last meeting, the conspirators had disguised themselves in some kind of masks or hoods and backlit themselves with small candles.

The Voice, as Sullivan had come to think of their leader, called the meeting to order. "What is so important that you've found it necessary to endanger all our lives by calling us here?" It demanded.

Sullivan stood to address the conspirators. He had been memorizing this speech throughout the day and, while he knew that he was no public Orator, he hoped that his words would have some influence with them. "The time that you or I could have toppled King Jenner without bloodshed is, I'm sorry to say, past..."

"Tell us something we don't know!" The Voice interjected sarcastically. "Now Jenner's trying to steal the very Earth from under our feet!" The Land Repossession Decree had been made public just hours before the meeting had begun. Much to Sullivan's horror and regret, rioting had broken out among the inhabitants of the City; and while the streets were not yet awash in rivers of the blood of British subjects, many were comparing the uproar to the worst days of the interfactional brawling during the Continental Wars. With nightfall, it had all simmered down to small isolated pockets of scuffles between the local constabulary, who were trained only in maintaining public order by as non-violent means as possible, and roving bands of irate lower-class workers; whose home was very often the only thing between them and a future of seeking alms; or students protesting the proposed closing of several of the universities.

The other conspirators nodded and whispered their agreement. After this commotion died down, the Voice said, "Since our first meeting, Captain, the situation in this city has only become more volatile. Your employer has enslaved the homeless and alms-seekers in all but name by forcing them to work lands owned by his wealthiest friends by day and incarcerating them in the Debtors Prisons by night. He's closed the only orphanage large enough to deal with all of the homeless children on our streets. Remember that waif that you brought to them a few weeks ago? He and dozens of others like him are back out on the streets having to scrape through the garbage for their daily bread because none of the orphanages that Jenner ordered them sent to had the room to accommodate them and were forced to send them back onto the streets!" The Voice now took on a tone of utter contempt. "At least the Troop-Captain that you sent to do Jenner's dirty deed had the sense and honor to ultimately refuse to carry out the order and resign his post!"

The other conspirators broke out in applause when the Voice had finished. Sullivan glared angrily at them for not hearing him out, but knew that the Voice was right. "What would you have me do?" He asked.

"Our previous offer still stands, even if your chances of collecting on it grow smaller by the day. But you should also be aware that we're exploring, shall we say, other avenues when it comes to dealing with the King." The Voice stated.

"Other avenues?" Sullivan asked, instantly suspicious. "If you're planning something, you'd best let me in on it! Knocking off Jenner is fine by me, but some of my Guards have families to support!"

"Your concern for your subordinates is touching." The Voice said, dripping with sarcasm. "But you need not worry. We, too, wish to avoid shedding 'innocent' blood. We can promise that none of your charges will come to harm as long as none of them actively interferes with our plans."

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Sullivan arched a skeptical brow. "And how am I supposed to know when one of them is in danger of meeting your criteria for 'active interference'?"

"Just keep them to their daily routine. As long as you don't make any major variations to their work or training schedules, we'll know that our own avenue for dealing with Jenner is unobstructed." The Voice assured him.

Sullivan nodded. Unwittingly or not; and Sullivan didn't believe for a second that the Voice did anything without good reason; It had revealed that this cabal, whoever they were, had somehow infiltrated one of their own agents into the King's Guard, HIS King's Guard, without his having suspected it in the least. Strangely, Sullivan wasn't angry at this breach of security but was actually somewhat relieved. If he could somehow manipulate events carefully enough, he might be able to use this agent to kill Jenner then, if he acted quickly enough, kill the assassin without anyone suspecting his role in the two deaths and still walk away with his life, a Title and the Amulet. The problem with that was: where was the Amulet?

Sullivan was brought back from his thoughts by the Voice. "This is acceptable then, Captain?" Sullivan grunted his affirmation.

"Good. This meeting's adjourned." The voice instructed Sullivan to wait for the last candle left lit after the conspirators had gone from the room to go out before he should attempt to leave.

Sullivan spent the time waiting to consider his options. Remaining loyal to Jenner was out of the question. Even if His Majesty's star was still on the rise his kingdom lay, if not on the brink of civil war, then uncomfortably close to it. Power, influence and money were the only things that the King understood. If you didn't happen to have them or an intimate understanding of how they could be used in a mutually beneficial manner, you were nothing more than a pair of idle hands to be put to work in the crop fields of those who did.

Outright assassination was an option only if one had no qualms about the probability of having ones own life ended violently in the process; which Sullivan, being the consummate survivor, had no stomach for.

He'd seriously considered resigning his commission, but the thought of walking away from a prize, even as ill-gotten and dishonored as this one had become, that he'd worked so hard to obtain was too much to bear. Besides; in his spite, Jenner would no doubt consign him to one of his rich friend's fields to slave away the rest of his life alongside the other anonymous poor to "serve the Glory of his King".

His last option, while the most dangerous of them all, offered the greatest chance of success. In effect, he would be tying his own strings to the strings of whatever puppet the conspirators were going to try to use against Jenner. The problem would be in trying to discover the identity of the puppet and tying his own strings to it without tipping off the true owners or the puppet itself; who may not even be aware that he WAS being manipulated!

The room went completely dark. Sullivan then heard the door open and saw a young female squirrel, probably six or seven years old, carrying a small lantern. "Captain Sullivan? Captain Sullivan, are you still here?" She timidly whispered.

Sullivan stood and gave a polite, if perfunctory, bow. "I'm still here, child." He said.

She held the lantern out and peered into the dimness of the room. "My father says that you can come out now." She said shyly.

"Your father?" He asked, hoping that this girl might give him some clue as to the identity of the conspirators.

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"The Innkeeper." She said, "Daddy needs to clean this room for the Coopersmiths Guild meeting tonight."

"But I thought that they were just here." He said, trying to trip her up.

The squirrel giggled and said, "You must be really confused, Captain Sullivan. The ones who just left were the Society to Maintain the Rule of the King, whatever that's supposed to mean." She tilted her head questioningly to one side when Sullivan chuckled to himself. "What's so funny?" She asked.

"Oh, you are a clever one aren't you my enigmatic acquaintance!" He thought to himself. The choice of such a name would no doubt have amused even Jenner. He dug two crowns out of a vest pocket and gave them to the little squirrel. "Buy yourself something at the Market tomorrow, child." He said. He then slipped out the door, leaving a confused and elated young girl behind.

Chapter 27: 26

Lady Euphigenia Kluck tossed and turned as she struggled to relax enough to fall into a peaceful slumber. The news out of Britain was grim and growing worse by the day. From her home in the city of Edwin's Bourough, one of the few truly civilized places in The Scottish Lands, she had been worrying about the welfare of the young fox who had once been her best friend when she herself had been a Lady-of-the-Court; before that fox's marriage to a smart, handsome, recently Titled, and best of all, single, young Chancellor.

But just after the marriage Kluck had been called home to tend to her mother, who was well-advanced in age and very frail; although she still possessed a mind as sharp as her tongue. With the death of her mother just days ago (she had lived over twice the usual lifespan of a chicken; surviving the Plague, nine mates and parentage of almost three dozen broods), Kluck was growing less and less comfortable with the thought of remaining in her late mother's house by the day. It was not for lack of happy memories, goodness knew. Kluck's mother; while a strict, Old-School matriarch; had been a gentle, wise and loving parent always fiercely concerned with the well-being of her scattered offspring.

But several weeks ago she'd seen a posting of a reward for the capture, dead or alive, of a female fox who was accused of being a member of a conspiracy; along with a once trusted but now disgraced physician, a badger who fit the description of old Dr. Ages; that was suspected of having been responsible for the death of King Nicodemus and his Chancellor and was now supposedly plotting the assassination of the present Ruler. The charges against the two supposed plotters had been very vague, but the one piece of information that had caught her immediate attention was the mention that the fox would probably have four young rabbits, two boys and two girls. Marian's last letter, written almost a year ago, had mentioned that she and her husband were in the process of adopting some rabbits whose parents had apparently abandoned them at the King's Orphanage; also two boys and two girls.

This had made no sense to Kluck. Marian had been one of King Nicodemus's most loyal courtiers. Kluck herself had recommended Marian for the Administrator-of-Household post just before her return to her native city. And none of her infrequent letters to Kluck had indicated any kind of dissatisfaction with either the King or his rule. And that Marian, even if she had been party to some plot to overthrow her Sovereign, would have allowed her own husband to be killed along with him? This was absolutely unthinkable! "No," She thought to herself as she rolled over on her side for the umpteenth time that night, "Something is terribly wrong with this whole picture." She resolved then and there to find both her friend and, if possible, the truth about this whole affair.

Chapter 28: 27

Mrs. Brisbee, too, lay awake. Emotionally, she felt as if her world were nothing more than a sea of bitter tears; the children and Justin her only islands of refuge. That Justin had left without telling her was bad enough; although, in truth, her intellectual processes actually DID understand his reasons for doing so. But she had already lost two important figures in her life; and the thought that there was even the slimmest possibility of losing a third...

She felt yet another tear roll down the fur of her cheek and squeezed her eyes shut in anger and frustration. "Damn you, Justin!" She thought to herself. "I love you too much to lose you now! Every time I look into your eyes I see Jonathan's soul looking back and telling me that there's still hope that the children and I can somehow put our lives back together! But without that reassurance I feel like a storm-tossed boat without a sail or rudder, adrift and on the verge of sinking!" She sniffed and wiped her eye with the edge of her sheet. Sleep, at least restful sleep, had been an evasive commodity since this whole vile episode had begun just a few months before.

"Damn YOU most of all, Jenner!" She hissed into the cool night air. Only that afternoon, Toby's father had shown her, Jeremy and Ages one of the reward postings that was circulating through the Kingdom. Somehow Jenner had shifted the implication for King Nicodemus and Jonathan's death toward her and the Doctor. The constable had assured them that no one in the Kingdom could possibly believe such an outrageous fabrication. But when Ages told him how Jenner had laid the exquisitely constructed plot that had resulted in his own exile, the tortoise had expressed skepticism. "You've just proved my point!" Ages had replied sternly. "Jenner only needed to sustain that tiny bit of doubt in order to ruin Nicodemus's trust in my loyalties. Once a well is poisoned," He'd pointed out, "It can be many years before anyone chances another sip from its waters!" The constable had been amazed by the simplicity of Ages logic and reaffirmed his earlier promise of discrete support.

She gave up trying to fall asleep and slipped on a robe that had once belonged to Justin's adoptive mother. A few feet away Justin's bed, made with crisp military precision, served only to add to the pain that she felt. She tried to imagine the contours of his sleeping form under the quilted blanket, but could only see a flat, empty surface.

Taking care not to disturb the others, she made her way through the house. Ages wheezy snore could be heard. Jeremy sometimes snored too, but this night he was quiet. She stopped by the children's room and gazed upon them. Theresa, as was her habit, had thrown off her bedclothes at some point and was tightly hugging her pillow. Martin, a mouth-breather, was drooling onto his pillow. Cynthia, when scared, sometimes preferred to strip the "blankies" off her mattress and seek an illusory safety under her bed; such was the case tonight. Timothy was not in his bed, although it had been slept in.

She left the house and strolled to the creek, the light of a waxing gibbous moon giving her enough light to navigate the path before her. A slight late-Summers breeze rustled the leaves of the surrounding trees and a few crickets still chirruped.

Silhouetted and facing the gurgling water, Timothy sat cross-legged on the grassy bank. "Couldn't sleep, right?" He asked.

"No." she said, sitting down next to him. "I was going to ask you the same question."

"I had another dream." He replied. "It wasn't scary like the ones about dad or the fire."

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"What was it about?" She asked.

"I'm not really sure." He said, cocking his head to one side. "I saw animals walking on a road. I couldn't tell what kind they were, but it seemed like there were about three; maybe four of them. They were walking like they were looking for someone."

"Is that all there was?" She asked. "Do you remember anything else?"

Timothy nodded. "Uncle Justin's safe. I saw that in my dream." He placed a paw gently on her sleeve. "Mom, are you gonna marry him?" He asked.

Mrs. Brisbee was taken aback by the directness of his question. "Why do you ask?"

"I dunno." He said. "Up until this morning you two were always together. An' he reminds me a lot of dad, y'know always lookin' out for us an' seein' that we get our baths in the morning an' we don't go t' bed without brushin' our teeth. Like dad used to."

She gently picked him up and placed him in her lap, embracing him in a protective hug, and began gently rocking him. "Yes, Timothy, Justin is a lot like your father. He loves you and your brother and sisters very much and feels that he must bear responsibility for raising you in the way that he believes your father would have tried to. But he also feels that in order to do that he needs to know who he is and if he can fulfill that duty properly. It doesn't make the fact that he left any less painful, but I know deep in my heart that he needs to learn about his past in order to find a direction for his future."

Timothy nodded his understanding. "Just like a ship needs a map to find its way home." He said.

"Yes." Mrs. Brisbee whispered, "Just like that."

They spent a while longer listening to the sounds of the night before Timothy yawned and rested his head on his mother's shoulder and fell asleep. She gently carried him to the house and tucked him into his bed. She then crept quietly to her own and crawled under the sheets. In a few minutes, she was asleep; dreaming of ships sailing on a peaceful sea.

Chapter 29: 28

Heather awoke slowly and opened one eye, then blinked both open.

"G'morning." Stabb said quietly. He was leaning on the sill of a broken-out window frame, staring into the morning's first light. They had found the abandoned building, an inn by the look of it, late the previous afternoon and made themselves as comfortable as possible under the circumstances in an upstairs room; gathering enough wildfruits, nuts and seeds to make a modest, if rather bland, meal.

"Is Will still asleep?" She asked, careful to keep her voice low.

"He left a little while ago t' see if he could get us some food an' a few supplies. Said he'll be back sometime soon." The weasel said.

Heather nodded and then began digging around in her pack.

Stabb regarded her curiously as she brought out her sketch pad and a pencil and began to sketch him.

Heather smiled. "Could ye please look out th' window, Mr. Stabb? It makes ye look s' handsome when th' light shines on ye just so. Bye-the-bye, me father knows a Cecil Stabb in Wales. Are ye related?" She asked.

Stabb thought a moment then shrugged. "I dunno. Possibly." He said, "Might be a very distant cousin 'r something. Far as I know, I'm the last of my clan; the Blacktails. The rest died in the wars and the Plague years ago."

Heather stopped her sketching and nodded. "Aye, me grandfather used t' tell us about his service in th' Plague Camps. Said it was th' most fright'nin' time o' his life."

"The wars an' Plague touched everybody." Stabb said, his voice heavy with regret. "I can't count the number of families that I deprived of a father, a brother or a son. I suppose that in my youth I was full of fire an' thought I could take on the world. But now I'm old, an' tired of fightin' an' the killin' that goes with it. If I have anymore years left in me I want t' live 'em in peace without havin' t' look over my shoulder t' see who's tryin' t' stick a sword in my back."

Heather looked downcast. "I hope ye get your wish." She said softly.

"That's up to the spirits I suppose." he replied. Then his face brightened a bit. "Let me see your handiwork, girl. No one's ever immortalized me on paper before."

"Give me a few minutes t' add some finishin' touches." She said. She resumed her work and for several minutes her pencil flew over the page as she captured every detail she could, Stabb watching with interest the range of emotions that unconsciously brightened and darkened her face. She then got up from her ersatz bed, some ragged quilts and blankets left by the former occupants, and walked over and showed him the result of her labor.

"Not bad!" He said, amazed at how a bunch of; to his untrained eyes at least; lines and squiggles could be made to coalesce into a fairly detailed portrait. He noted that she had even correctly defined the exact shape of an old scar that ran down one side of his face from forehead to cheek. "May I keep this?" He asked. Heather nodded. Stabb carefully rolled the drawing up, fastened it with a piece of string and placed it into the wallet that hung from his belt.

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"I still have plenty t' learn, believe me." She said modestly. "I'm only in me third year o' classes." She then sighed and went to her backpack and began carefully putting her belongings into it. "But now that tha' tyrant Jenner's closed all bu' th' agricultural an' engineerin' schools, I'll have t' find some other way t' finish me education."

Stabb genuinely wished that there was something that he could say or do to help this young innocent. But he knew far more about leading troops into battle than consoling fledgling artists.

At that moment, in the distance, a stick could be heard being broken underfoot. Stabb motioned Heather to silence and kept watch through the dilapidated window-frame. A few minutes later Will appeared, laboring under a large canvas sack and three bedrolls that had been tied together.

"Sall right." He told her. "It's just th' hayseed."

They went down and helped the fox bring his load up to their room. "Whew! I di'n't think I'd make i' back!" He said, sitting down against a wall and gasping for air. "This stuff gets pretty 'eavy aft'r a while!"

Heather began emptying the sack as Stabb untied the bedrolls. "Where did ye get all o' this stuff?" She asked, lining each item from the bag up for a spot-inventory.

"One o' my uncles on my mum's side lives a ways from 'ere an' when I 'splained our fix..."

"You TOLD him we're on the run?" Stabb asked, appalled by this development. "We're out here lookin for an outlaw! Hell, boy, we may already be outlaws ourselves!"

"Don' worry!" Will said, unfazed by Stabb's concern. "'E's as much mad a' th' King as we are! Seems 'is Greediness 'as decreed tha', wi' a few excepshuns, all lands in private paws are now proper'y o' th' Crown. 'E cou'n't wai' t' 'elp us fin' this Just'n fella!"

"Wait! Wait!" Stabb exclaimed, "Jenner'd be crazy to do something like that! He's risking a civil war!"

"'Ey, I saw a copy o' th' decree m'self! Crazy or no', 'e's serious abou' i'!"

"You two can argue politics some other time!" Heather said sharply. "We'd better be leavin' this place 'r someone's bound t' discover us!"

Will and Stabb looked at the rubble-and-junk-strewn floor in chagrined silence. "She's right, y'know." Stabb muttered, "Sun's gettin' higher every minute."

Will nodded and the trio began to quietly repack the various items that Will had brought backamong themselves.

A short time later, Will and Stabb replaced what was left of the door to the building on its broken and rusty hinges and continued their search for the, so far, elusive Justin.

Chapter 30: 29

Justin had been on the move since well before sunrise. He had awakened with a start during an incredibly vivid dream. In it, he had been pursued by an unknown but incredibly evil force. When he'd attempted to draw his sword, he'd found the scabbard empty. He had then turned to confront it and had found himself face-to-face with a monstrous creature that looked like some vile, unholy fusion of both himself and Jenner. When he'd tried to run again, the creature had used a long whip to entangle his legs and bring him down hard to the ground. Then he'd tried to untangle the whip from his legs, but it had taken on a life of its own and entangled his wrists as well. He'd struggled desperately to free himself as the demon-creature approached, saying, "YOU HAVEN'T THE COURAGE TO FACE ME! I SHALL DESTROY YOU AND THAT WHICH YOU MOST CHERISH!" A sword, which Justin recognized as his own, then appeared in the creature's paw and he raised it as if to strike. All of a sudden, he'd found himself standing at the helm of a sailing vessel in a tranquil sea; Marian at his side. She gazed at him questioningly, her expression a mixture of both sadness and joy. He knew without asking that she wanted to know why he had left her in the manner in which he had. But her expression had also told him that she knew the purpose of this voyage and that she understood why it had to be made. He had tried to tell her that he would return as soon as he was able, but her image had begun to fade out of sight.

"Don't worry, mother understands." A voice that sounded like Timothy's stated. "I told her that you're safe."

He'd then found himself sitting bolt-upright in his bedroll, sweating profusely in the cool of the pre-dawn night. He'd tried to get himself back to sleep, but he'd been so unnerved by the night-time vision that he decided that movement, even in the darkness of the forest, was preferable to lying awake until sunrise.

He'd covered quite a bit of ground in the last few hours even though he'd stayed away from all signs of civilization. The Sun had risen, but the forest floor received only a meager amount of its light. But his surroundings were very familiar and he knew that he was close to his destination. He followed a barely visible path to a small stream and followed the stream to a cleared heath. At the far end, he could see a tiny thatched-roof cottage. A curl of smoke from the chimney told him that its residents were awake.

He noiselessly made his way to the door and gave it a soft knock. "Linney, are y'home? It's me! Justin!" He called out as quietly as possible. He heard footfalls on the bare wood floor and then the rough-hewn door opened.

"Justin! Is that really you?" Asked the female fox, staring at him through sightless eyes.

"Yeah, Sis, in the fur. Where's Galen?" Justin asked, placing his paw in his adoptive older sister's when she reached out.

She quickly brought him inside and sat him in a nearby chair in front of the fireplace. "Would you like something to eat or drink? Tea perhaps? Or some veggie stew?"

"I suppose I could use some stew. I didn't get to eat breakfast." Justin said politely.

"I'll be just a few moments." She replied and headed toward the kitchen.

Linnette, the oldest of Justin's adoptive sisters, had been born during the height of the Plague and had contracted a serious case of it before her first year. Miraculously, she had survived; but by her third birthday she had gone completely blind. This had not meant that she had been left helpless. Far from it, in fact! Linney had been as rowdy as any of the other children in the extended family that Justin had been adopted into and

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had played, fought and worked just as hard. A few adaptations in lifestyle had been called for, but Justin had always treated his sister with a certain unnameable combination of love, loyalty, awe and; on those extremely rare occasions when she had tried to use her blindness to gain some unfair advantage over her siblings and cousins or wallow in self pity; a small amount of playful disrespect.

Eventually, she had married a farmer, Galen, and they had moved to this isolated heath.

"Galen's at our field." Linnette said from the kitchen. She and Galen, along with several other poor families, had bought a small plot of land and shared in the work in exchange for an eventual share of the harvest. She quickly returned and handed Justin the bowl of stew and a spoon. "I'm going out there later to take him his lunch. You're welcome to come along if you wish." She said as she made her way to her chair and sat down.

"No." Justin said, "But I do have something very important to tell you." He then related the events of the past several months, including his discovery of his true parentage and his desire to find the Locksley Estate. He read her passages from Dr. Ages biographies of himself and Jonathan as well as his mother's letter, and he let her hold the Birthday locket.

"I-I'm not sure what to say." She stammered, a tear running down one cheek. "I mean, I'm glad that you've found your real parents; I know it's something that you'd wanted all your life. And I'm glad that you have..." She paused a moment to correct herself. "Had a half-brother, even if the time that you got to spend together was far too short. And I think it's wonderful that you're taking the responsibility for protecting his widow and children."

"Then why are you sad?" Justin asked.

"I suppose I'm just afraid that in this excitement to find who you might have become, you'll forget who you actually are. True, mom and dad weren't Jonathan and Emma Locksley or Lawrence Brisbee; but even though our family never lived in the lap of luxury I can't remember a night when any of us went to bed without a full belly and the promise that, no matter what kind of problem might befall us in the future, mom and dad would be there to listen to us and help guide us through it and, most importantly, love us for who we are."

Justin got up from his chair and knelt in front of his sister and took her paws in his own. "Linney, I could no more forget or forsake my adoptive family than I could forget my own name. I'm doing this to enhance my knowledge of my past, not to replace my past. My debt of gratitude to mama, papa and you and all the others for all the love that you've given me over the years is unrepayable."

Linnette slid one of her paws from her adoptive brother's clasp and began gently stroking the soft fur of his muzzle and face. "No, little brother, you've repaid such a debt; if it ever existed at all; many, many times over. I don't know why they never showed you the box or the locket or the letter; perhaps the thought of losing you was simply too much for them to bear. I can still remember that first night when you were away after they'd enlisted you in the King's Guard. None of us could sleep because we missed you so much. Mom and dad cried in each other's arms and more than once dad questioned the wisdom of his decision. But they knew that you needed an education in order to have the kind of future that you truly deserved." Linnette then stood and, after helping Justin to his feet, lovingly hugged her adoptive brother. "Whatever you may think of mom and dad for keeping your past before your adoption a secret, I hope you'll always remember that they never, ever meant to hurt you."

"I know." Justin said, "A wise old soul recently pointed out to me that even if I had known who I really am it probably wouldn't have changed anything. Mama and papa had no reason to believe that my real mother was still alive and looking for me."

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He then picked up the now-empty bowl and spoon and handed them to Linnette. "I don't suppose you could spare s'more stew for this hungry vagabond, eh? Us wanderers never know when we'll be able to get a decent home-cooked meal."

Linnette giggled. "Flattery will get you everywhere, little brother." She playfully chided him. She then went to the kitchen and returned with Justin's bowl, as well as one for herself, and they spent a while reminiscing about the joys of simpler times in a large and loving family.

Finally, Linnette reminded Justin that she had to take her husband his lunch. Justin gave his sister one last hug and good-bye kiss and, feeling much refreshed, continued his journey with a renewed sense of mission.

Chapter 31: 30

Pain. Such pain. The pounding in Brutus's head was just more than he could bear. He tried to open his eyes but the blinding light of the room only made the pounding and the pain that much worse. He let out a long, loud groan.

"Ah, sir, you're awake." A familiar voice said.

Brutus groaned again. One by one, his rational thought processes began to kick themselves into activity. He tried again to open his eyes, but once more the light overwhelmed him. "Deputy." He grunted.

"Sir?" The voice asked.

"Why is it so damn BRIGHT in here?" Brutus demanded. A wave of agony and nausea enveloped him, making him wish that he could fall back to sleep. Or die. He didn't really care too much at the moment just as long as it meant an end to the awful pain.

"Oh! Uh, sorry, uh, I'll...uh, I'll get that, sir!" The voice exclaimed. The room, whichever room it was that he was in, began growing perceptibly darker as Brutus could hear curtains or drapes being pulled across windows.

As soon as the noises stopped, Brutus once again ventured a peek at his surroundings. He brought a massive paw up to shield his eyes against whatever excess light remained to lance into his aching brain. He slowly blinked his tired eyes open and, after an initial twinge, they adjusted themselves to this more tolerable level. He slowly brought his paw away from his face and took in his surroundings. To his dismay he realized that he was lying in the holding cell of his own Jail. The iron bars of the room surrounded him on three sides; while he knew without having to look that he lay on a large stone slab attached to a many-feet-thick stone wall. The Deputy who belonged to the voice; a young, over-eager, wet-behind-the-ears weasel named Wendell Cravenbrook; stood on the other side of the bars, his pink nose twitching in anticipation. "Deputy." He grunted again.

"Sir?" the Deputy asked.

"Why am I locked in my own holding cell?" Brutus asked, slowly lifting himself to a sitting position.

"Oh, gee, sir! Don't you remember, sir?" The weasel began, "You got into a fight with some of the soldiers from the local troop. I'm not sure who started it or why, but I heard that you whupped seven 'r eight of 'em single-pawed! I hear one of 'em's even got a broken arm 'r leg..."

"Enough, Deputy!" Brutus exclaimed. It was all coming back to him now. The Land Repossession Decree had landed on his desk that morning along with all the other usual bureaucratic junk that His Majesty's courier delivered each morning. He had read in disbelief how King Jenner had, with the stroke of a pen, deprived all but a chosen few of his own subjects of their rightful property or, worse yet, their livelihood. He'd locked himself in his office the rest of the day and debated what course of action to pursue. Simply posting the decree and expecting his constituents to swallow their pride as well as the loss of their lands was out of the question. In certain instances, a piece of land might have belonged to a family for several generations. He'd thought about writing a letter of complaint to Jenner. But he knew that not only would such a complaint be ignored, but Jenner would rightfully point out to him that, as Sheriff of Nottinghamshire, Brutus himself was not only exempt from the effects of the decree; but he had acquired plenty of land himself by taking a percentage of tax foreclosures.

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In the end, he'd done what he'd been doing almost every night since about mid-Summer; he'd had one of his Deputies post the decree and then walked to the local public house and drank himself into a stupor.

He remembered very little about the fight; other than that one of the soldiers had made some smart-ass remark about how the peasants would now have to put up or shut up in respect to their allegiance to the King, which he'd taken as a personal insult. He could only guess that he'd attacked the soldiers, apparently inflicting grievous injury on several of them. Then, somehow, he'd been subdued and ended up in the holding cell.

Brutus hung his head in shame. As Sheriff of his Shire he was sworn to keep the peace and uphold the laws of the Crown and the King on whose head it rested. But Jenner was growing more tyrannical by the day and his so-called "laws" were, directly and indirectly, bringing untold misery to those under his rule. That Brutus himself had helped Jenner ascend the throne only added to the pain of the shame that he felt. But now he was becoming no better than a drunken street brawler.

He tried to stagger to his feet, but his legs were shaking like those of a cub attempting its first steps. "Deputy." He sighed.

"Sir?" Wendell said expectantly.

With all the patience he could muster Brutus slowly asked, "Would you please open that DAMN door and help me to my DAMN feet and help me to my DAMN office?"

A stroke of realization hit the weasel like a lightning bolt. "Oh! Uh, yeah! Uh, jus' a second!" He scooted over to a nail on the wall above the watch-desk on which hung a large ring of keys. He then quickly unlocked the cell door and helped the bear to his office.

Once Brutus had dismissed the Deputy, he scrawled out the letter that he knew he should have written the day before. He placed it in an envelope and placed it in the basket of correspondence to be picked up by the King's Courier. He also wrote out a letter of resignation and placed it in his safe.

He then lay his head on the desk and began weeping softly.

Chapter 32: 31

Justin stood under the massive arch of the door in awed silence. The last rays of the late-Summer sun gleamed off of the gold of the family crest, still untarnished even after years of neglect. The manor-house was a massive and still beautiful, if somewhat dilapidated, testimony to the stonemason's art. Over the years many of the beautiful stained-glass windows had fallen victim to the stones of vandals and a portion of the rear wall had collapsed, leaving what looked to be the kitchen exposed to the elements.

The Locksley Estate had not been difficult to find. He had asked various peasants for directions and they invariably told him to follow the gravel road that branched off to the left of the main road and paralleled a small brook. But the peasants had also warned him that the manor-house and its lands were cursed by the spirits and best left alone.

But he decided that, curse or not, he must start the search for his past at the place of his birth.

He picked up the lantern that stood at his feet and walked a close perimeter around the house. He tried to imagine what this dark, cold edifice must have been like when he, as a child, his parents and the various servants were there to make the place a hive of activity. But try as he might, such an image would not come. It saddened him to realize that he had absolutely no memories of his life before the orphanage and his adoption.

As soon as he completed his patrol, he headed to the breach in the wall and; making his way carefully through the small pile of rubble (he suspected that the pile should have been somewhat larger and that not a few of the houses in the surrounding area could claim at least one stone from this wall) ;into the house.

What once must have been one of the most luxurious manor-houses in all Britain had been stripped bare of just about all furniture and ornamentation. Here and there the pieces of a broken something-or-other littered one of the many rooms, but he decided that everything that might have held any monetary value was gone.

Justin sadly shook his head and trudged to what must have been the Grand Dining Hall. In the dim light of his lantern, he could make out the faded outlines of various scenes from British history and legend painted on the walls; which themselves were covered in a layer of accumulated dirt and grimy mold. A damp, rotting, threadbare rug covered the inlaid wooden floor; which was still in immaculate condition in spite of the depredations of Nature.

He was meandering toward the Grand Staircase admiring the vast size of the room, which rivaled anything in the Royal Palace, when he felt a strange sensation underfoot. Through his footpads he could feel some sort of pattern of bumps in the floor. He got down on his paws and knees and began to probe the vicinity. After a while he determined that the bumps were within a relatively small, roughly circular area. He tried to rip away the section of rug that covered the mysterious pattern but the fibers, though slimy with mildew, were still strong enough to withstand his assault. He drew his dagger and began carefully cutting into the woven cloth. Once he'd tossed the fragment aside, he shined the lantern on the large octagonal bronze plaque, surrounded by stone, that had been laid into the floor. The bumpy pattern was actually raised lettering which read:

Here lies Jonathan
Locksley, loving Husband and devoted Father.

He was taken from
his Wife, Son, and All the World before his time.

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May he be made
Welcome by the Spirits.

"Father." He whispered, the word barely audible. He half-collapsed and half-sat staring wide-eyed at the monument; a million thoughts and questions cascading through his mind. Unable to stop himself he burst into tears, bitterly remembering his farewell to his King and Half-Brother in a "potter's field" so many months ago.

"Oh, Father!" He cried, "I have so many questions to ask you! So much that isn't in the record that Dr. Ages kept on our family!"

But only the echo of his words answered him as the flickering lantern threw quivering shadows onto the forbidding gray walls.

Justin sadly bowed his head in acceptance. What he was looking for, his past, was gone. And Justin would never be able to bring it back no matter what kind of effort he expended or how long this journey lasted. All of his questions would probably remain unanswered. He remembered what Ages had said about personal resources and how they were sometimes damaged or destroyed by a mere caprice.

"I don't know anymore if I have the strength to face the future." He said aloud. "Marian and her children need someone to protect them from Jenner, but am I up to the task? If I couldn't protect King Nicodemus and my own half-brother, how can I trust myself to keep them from harm?" He sighed and shrugged in resignation. "Dr. Ages would no doubt tell me that there's always hope so long as I keep fighting and don't give up. But what am I fighting for? On the other paw, if I'm not fighting FOR something, what am I fighting against?" Justin shook his head in frustration. "I just don't KNOW anymore!"

Other than the low moan of the wind outside, no sound gave answer to his self-doubt.

With another sigh, Justin got up and replaced the rug scrap over the plaque. He then made his way by the pale yellow light of the lantern up the Grand Staircase to the room where he'd left his pack. He unhitched his bedroll and laid it out on the floor, acutely aware of just how much he missed the warmth of Marian's fur next to his own on a cold, lonely night such as this. Even now the nights were getting longer as the last days of Summer were making way for the growing harshness of Autumn. Justin shivered, as much from the thought of the coming hard days as the cool of this night, extinguished the tiny flame of the lantern and crawled in; falling into an uneasy sleep as soon as his head hit the pillow-flap.

Chapter 33: 32

The dark figure stealthily approached the manor-house as soon as he saw the light in the upper window go black. Other than the windblown leaves and the occasional birdcall, the moonless night was ominously silent. The figure slowly and carefully made its way toward the house using whatever cover was available. In a few minutes, it was climbing over the rubble-pile that marked the hole in the side of the structure.

Justin sat bolt-upright in his bedroll. Something was WRONG! The fur of his back was standing on end and all of his warrior instincts were telling him that he was in danger. He sniffed at the night air, but all that he could smell was the pervasive odor of the mold that covered virtually every interior surface of the building.

As quickly and silently as possible, he slid out of the bedroll and drew his sword. He then crept on tip-toe out of the room and down the hall. Unable to see more than a few arms lengths, he kept his ears open for any foreign sounds.

The dark figure held the quarterstaff ready. It slowly approached the door, but backed away when it saw a pair of legs belonging to some intruder taking one step at a time down the large once-ornate staircase. The figure took an ambush position to one side of the door way and gave the floor a light tap with one end of the 'staff.

Justin pricked his ears up in alarm. Someone, or something, WAS in the house! In the next ROOM in fact! Instinctively, his ears lay back on his head and he could feel his heartbeat increasing as if it would leap out of his ribcage at any moment. He took a close-quarters fighting stance that he knew was best suited to the room that he was about to enter and proceeded to investigate. Slowly, step-by-wary-step, he neared the doorway. He could now hear breathing; but whether it was the intruders or his own, he couldn't really be sure. After what seemed an eternity, he stepped through the door and into the room. Out of the corner of one eye, he saw a sudden movement from a vast, dark shadow. Almost too late, his reflexes brought his sword up in front of him. The blow of whatever had hit him had been stopped, but the actual impact sent him flying back through the door and he landed on his back; stunned; on the damp rug.

As the multi-colored burst of light that filled his vision after the back of his head hit the floor cleared, he saw a giant hooded and cloaked figure approaching and raising some sort of spear or staff to bring it down on him.

Luckily, he'd managed to retain a tight grip on his sword. The figure swung its weapon down on Justin, who brought up the sword and blocked the blow but shuddered under its unnatural force. Again the apparition raised it to strike, but Justin had now regained his senses and rolled to a safe distance away from his assailant and rose to his feet; quaking in both fear and anger. "Who are you?" He demanded. "Why do you attack me?"

The attacker expertly twirled his staff to a ready-defensive position and slid the hood off. "I'm Brutus, Sheriff of Nottinghamshire." His opponent's voice boomed in the darkness. "You're trespassing on property owned by the Crown."

Brutus? Justin's jaw dropped. He'd known a bear named Brutus in his childhood. While they had not been best friends, they'd played and worked together over many seasons. He dropped his sword to the floor and said, "Brutus, it's me! Justin! I used to live with the Frasier's. Remember?"

Brutus thought back to his childhood. He'd been so depressed lately that he'd been seeking solace in both Ale and nostalgia to relieve himself of the burden of the guilt that he'd been carrying since helping Jenner to power. Yes, he dimly remembered a family of foxes named Frasier who'd lived a short ways down the road. But it'd been a very large one and he'd always had trouble remembering the names of all those brothers and sisters and cousins. "You're gonna have to do better than that!" He called out. "I knew plenty of Frasier's when

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I was a cub! You couldn't walk the fields without stepping on one 'r another of 'em."

Justin laughed and let himself relax. "Yep, that was us!" He said. "Your father, his name's Benjamin, right? He was always complaining about how we were going to overrun the Shire one day, but he was never happier than when Papa would 'volunteer' some of us to help him when he was late bringing in the Harvest."

Brutus was flabbergasted by this remark. Indeed, his late father HAD often made such a comment; though only in jest. Brutus shook his head in disbelief as more memories began to surface. He now recalled that there HAD been a kit named Justin living with the Frasier's, an orphan or something, but he'd run away years ago for some reason. "If you're who you say you are, why'd you leave? The Justin I knew ran away from home years ago an' never returned!" Brutus recalled bitterly.

Justin walked to the staircase and sat down heavily on the lowest stoop. "I never ran away." He said despondently. "Papa sent me to join the King's Guard because he wanted me to be more than a simple farmer all my life. But I never got a chance to say good-bye to any of my friends. Maybe that's why you think I ran away."

Brutus regarded the dark shape that sat at the bottom of the stairs quizzically. The tone of Justin's voice, if indeed this WAS the same Justin that he had known those many years ago, betrayed no hint of any attempt at deception. After a few moments hesitation, he decided to take the chance that this trespasser was telling the truth. He relaxed his guard and joined his former adversary, taking a seat next to him. "So why are you here?" Brutus asked. "The Frasier place is a good two days South of here."

Justin recounted as briefly as possible the events of the past several months and explained the events that had caused him to end up being adopted, showing Brutus the locket, jewel box and letter by the dim yellow flame of his lantern. He also showed Brutus the bronze monument embedded in the floor.

Brutus, while somewhat skeptical about certain details of the fox's story, nodded his agreement to its overall factuality. He bitterly confessed to Justin his own role in bringing Jenner to power and the betrayal and injustice that he felt he'd done to his constituents, explaining to him about Jenner's Land Repossession Decree.

"Incredible!" Justin exclaimed in disbelief. "I knew his greed was boundless, but this puts him around the bend! Doesn't he realize that something like this could cause a civil war?"

"Probably." Brutus said disconsolately, "But I get the distinct feeling that he doesn't really give a tinker's damn. He an' his rich friends are on a power trip an' they expect his poorer subjects to pull the cart."

Just then, Justin had a disturbing thought. "Linney and Galen!" He blurted out.

"Who?" Brutus asked, perplexed by this sudden turn in the conversation.

"My oldest sister and her husband!" Justin exclaimed.

Brutus thought back. "Isn't she blind or something?" He asked, trying to sort out his memories of the Frasier family.

"Yes, she's blind, but that's not my point!" Justin cried, frustrated at Brutus's interruptions. "The plot of land that they farm is their only source of food; not to mention about a dozen other families! Without it, they'll have nothing to eat this winter!"

"Wait! Wait!" Brutus interjected. "The decree says nothing about taking the food itself! Only the land!"

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"Think about it!" Justin said, a frightened urgency in his voice. "Jenner doesn't want JUST the land! He also wants to be able to control the supply of the food that's grown FROM that land! Otherwise he has no control over his Kingdom!"

Brutus arched his brow in skepticism. "You think that he would actually use food as a weapon against his own subjects?" He asked, wondering if the fox had taken leave of his senses.

"No." Justin said confidently. "I believe that he will use CONTROL of food as his weapon. Remember, not many animals know how to live off the land anymore. We've grown too dependent on our grown crops. By taking control of the food supply this close to the Harvest, Jenner intends to prove to those of us who continue to refuse to bend to his will just how far he's willing to go to maintain his rule."

Brutus, now deep in thought, rubbed at the fur on the underside of his chin. What Justin was proposing was incredible! Yet when looked at in the context of the events since King Nicodemus's death, a chain of evidence; which he as a law-enforcement officer was trained to recognize; began to fall all-too-clearly into place. But as a law-enforcement official he was also, by nature, distrustful of all but the most solid physical proof. He decided that he needed more and thought he knew exactly how to get it. "Look," He said, "Your story, unbelievable as it sounds, has a ring of truth to it so I'm not going to dismiss it out of hand." Justin made as if to speak, but the bear held up one of his huge paws. "I know what you're going to say! You wouldn't be here if it weren't. And believe me, my gut tells me that you are who you say you are! But my gut also told me that Jenner would make a good King and look how THAT turned out! I know a few friends in high places who should be able to verify enough of your story to determine whether you're on the up-and-up. Meanwhile, I'll inform my Deputies that you're just a harmless tramp who's down on his luck and that I've taken pity on you and am allowing you to stay here for as long as you need to.

Justin chuckled. "Imagine that! A tramp in my own home!" He said ruefully.

The bear smiled and said mock-indignantly, "May I remind you, Sir, that this whole Estate is still technically owned by the Royal Trust; I'd hate to imagine what kind of interest you're gonna have to pay in order to get it back!"

Justin laughed for a few moments but then became serious once more. "Look," He said to the Sheriff. "I need to go visit Linney and Galen and see what kind of help, if any, I can offer them."

"No problem." The bear replied. "I'd like to tag along with you and renew our acquaintance if it's alright with you."

Justin shrugged. "Sure, I could use the company." He said. "Let me get my things together. It'll only take a few minutes."

Brutus nodded and waited as Justin recovered his sword and hurried upstairs to the room that he'd appropriated.

Chapter 34: 33

As the first light of the sun began to penetrate through the mist of the cold late-Summer morning, Justin and Brutus expertly navigated their way through the still-dark forest.

"So how did you know that I was at my father's Estate?" Justin inquired.

"I'm the Sheriff. It's my job to know what's goin' on in my baliwick. When several peasants began telling the local constables and several of my Deputies that a stranger dressed in a military uniform and carryin' a sword was askin' directions to a place that hadn't been inhabited in twenty-some years, well, that sort of caught my attention an' I figured that I'd better investigate. Glad I did too. You never know what sort of ruffian you'll run into in these here parts." Brutus replied only half-jokingly.

Justin nodded his agreement. "Yeah. Almost as bad as the ruffians you're bound to run into at the Royal Palace these days." He said sarcastically.

Brutus winced at the implication of Justin's observation. "Touch`e." Brutus muttered.

They hiked at a fast clip for most of the rest of the morning, stopping only once to rest and have a portion of the rations that Justin had packed for the trip.

Just after Noon, they came to Linney and Galen's cottage. A group of several dozen animals was gathered in the Heath and around the outdoor firepit with its cookstand; a column of smoke and the smell of cabbage-pepper soup telling them that an important event was in session. Even from a fair distance they could hear the sound of voices raised in anger and debate. They both double-timed their steps to hurry themselves toward the commotion.

"Linney!" Justin called out, hastening through the gathering crowd toward the firepit. "Linney, I'm back!"

Linnette ceased stirring the soup and handed her ladle to one of the other wives, grabbed her walking-stick; a thin but strong willow switch; and tapped her way over to where she heard her brother's voice. "Oh Justin! I'm SO glad you're back!" She cried as she embraced him, a tear of joy soaking into the fur of her cheek. She gently began to caress his face and asked, "Did you find what you were searching for?"

"Yes and no." He answered cryptically. "I'll tell you later. What's going on here?" He asked, the puzzlement plain in his voice.

Linnette began quaking in anger and frustration. "Our so-called "Majesty" has decided that the people of Britain aren't worthy of the land on which they walk..."

"The Repossession Act." Justin stated bitterly.

"When did you...?" Linnette began.

"Last night. Brutus, the Sheriff of Nottingham, told me all about it." He gently took her arm and began leading her to a knot of farmers were arguing with the Sheriff and among themselves. "He says that he'd like to meet you again."

One of her eyebrows arched questioningly. "Again?" She asked. "I can't remember ever meeting him a first time." She said.

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Without further word, Justin silenced the farmers debate and introduced his sister to the Sheriff, treating her with a genuine respect that would have pleased any Lady-of-the-Court.

Brutus bowed, gently took her paw and kissed it and said, "My apologies to the Lady of this house for the conduct of His Majesty and the decree that makes this gathering necessary. Jenner has become a spoiled brat and a menace to all Britain and one day I shall see to it that he is shown the error of hisways."

Linnette thanked Brutus and the crowd broke into applause.

The farmers then resumed their debate and one of them made his way from a path leading into the forest through the crowd to Justin, Brutus and Linnette. He was a strong and handsome fox, gray at the muzzle, and was dressed in old, but clean, work-clothes and a well-worn felt hat. "Linney, what's going on?" He asked, his voice a gentle baritone. "I heard cheering. Did someone recind that awful Repossession Decree?"

"No such luck, Honey." She said. "But I think you remember my adopted brother, Justin. He was at our wedding."

The older fox shook Justin's paw. "Linney told me about your troubles with Jenner and your search for your family. I sincerely hope that everything turns out for the best."

Justin thanked him.

She then introduced her husband to the Sheriff.

"Galen Talbot." The fox said, doffing his hat and firmly gripping the bear's powerful, massive paw. "It would honor us if you would stay for our meeting, Sir. We need as many calm and wise heads as we can find in a moment of crisis such as we find ourselves in today."

The Sheriff smiled at the fox's optimism even in the face of such bad news. "I'll be happy to stay and help in any way I can within the limits of my office." He stated.

"Excellent! Although I have the feeling that this situation may be a test of those limits." Galen replied. The fox then raised his arms and called on everyone to gather around the firepit.

Once the various farmers and their wives and children had found places to settle themselves for the meeting and several of the wives began serving the cabbage-pepper soup, Galen called the meeting to order. "My friends," He began. "Only days ago His Majesty, King Jenner..." The congregation began to jeer noisily at the mention of the King. Galen once again raised his arms and called for silence, looking to the Sheriff with an embarrassed expression in his eyes. The Sheriff sat silently and nodded his encouragement to continue. After the crowd quieted down he resumed. "King Jenner issued a decree calling for the transfer of almost all privately deeded lands to the Crown. Why he's done this? I don't know. Although I'm sure that everybody has their suspicions. But for the moment we have no real proof to confirm or contradict our suspicions. Thus it is my belief that we need to discuss how we can best resolve this situation, which is why I've called this little gathering of the various local landholders."

"I'll tell ya one 'option' we 'ave!" A voice cried angrily. "We can 'ang tha' idjit fr'm th' 'ighest TREE! Tha's wha' we c'n do!"

Several in the crowd, mostly the older children, let out a cheer; but their parents angrily hushed them and the rest remained silent.

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"Please, please!" Galen said, the distress plain in his voice. "I know how angry we all are! I stand to lose my home and garden plot too! But just being mad and making threats won't make the situation any better! We have to make some sort of plan in order to get through the Harvest season because, like it or not, the days are getting shorter and colder and Winter is just around the corner!"

"Well wha' d'yer suggest, Talbot? I don' 'ear you comin' up wi' any bri' idears." The owner of the voice stood. He was a grizzled old otter dressed in ragged overalls and an equally ragged peacoat and a battered sea hat. He'd originally been a sailor and had even lost an eye during a shipwreck. Somehow, after his retirement, he had ended up on one of the surrounding farms. Although his real name was Jonah, he went by the nickname "Blinkey".

Galen shrugged. He knew that the other animals in the area often looked to him for advice and guidance because of his experience as a Colonel in His Majesty's Army. "I don't know what to tell you, Blinkey." He said. "I served King Nicodemus proudly for many years and could no more think of committing Treason against the Crown than any of you. But this decree threatens us all. Somehow we have to let Jenner know that he's overstepped his authority."

"Y-Yes, bu-bu-but how?" A field mouse squeaked fearfully. "One of m-my cousins who lives in The City says th-that Jenner's b-been throwing smaller animals into the p-prisons to fatten them up s-so he can eat them!"

The crowd reacted with a buzz of uncertainty and Galen once again raised his arms to quiet them. "I don't know which of your cousins is feeding you such nonsense, Mortimer," He said angrily, "But even Jenner wouldn't stoop to something as vile as flesh-eating!" He then began to pace along a well-worn path. "Look, this is a very serious situation! We can't allow ourselves to be misled or frightened by every little rumor that we hear! We need FACTS!" He then walked over to the fallen, moss-covered log where Brutus and Justin sat. "Sheriff, you get news from His Majesty's courier every day. What've you heard?"

Brutus stood and gave a lopsided smile. "Well, first of all, I think that I can reasonably assure everyone that Jenner, whatever you may think of him at the moment, eats the same food as the rest of us." Most of the crowd gave a collective chuckle. "But Farmer Talbot is correct; facts are a far better indicator of any situation than rumor. And, unfortunately, the facts are that King Jenner seems to have forgotten his obligations to both Britain and his subjects in favor of a few rich friends. I would be lying if I didn't tell you that I, myself, had helped him to get where he is today..."

The crowd gasped in surprise, but Brutus continued.

"...But I've come to realize that this was a huge mistake on my part and I'm willing to either use my Office to try to get him to reconsider his position on the decree or, barring that, resign my position as Sheriff of this Shire."

Again the congregation was in an uproar. Several began to jeer the Sheriff, accusing him of attending the meeting so that he could report them to Jenner.

Justin stood and unsheathed his sword, placing the tip of the blade into the soft dirt of the Heath and stood impassively until the crowd fell quiet. After a few tense moments of silence he said, with barely controlled anger. "It seems to me that you folk have more important problems than deciding who's to blame for Jenner being on the Throne! The Sheriff has told you of his role in helping Jenner to the Throne and he has apologized for doing so and he has indicated his willingness to sacrifice his own livelihood for you!"

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"An' who're you t' be talkin', Mister?" The otter demanded. "What, 'sides fr'm tha' thar steel toothpick, gives you th' right t' be havin' any say here?"

Justin stalked out to the middle of the clearing. "I'll tell you what gives me the right!" He said. "I grew up in this Shire believing that I had no parents other than the ones who adopted me. I didn't even know my last name! A few weeks ago I found out that my real parents were Jonathan and Emma Locksley and that they owned most of the land in the Shire, possibly including land that some of you may be farming at this very moment! I don't happen to care if ALL of my father's lands are gone except the manor-house and its immediate Estate! But the thought that Jenner might someday turn my father's lands and all of Britain into a slave-camp to enrich himself and his friends at the expense of my sister," He pointed to Linnette, "Or my brother-in-law," He then pointed at Galen, "Or any of you or your children!" He swept his paw around to indicate the gathered circle, "Such a thought makes me sick to the very pit of my stomach!" Justin then walked to the Sheriff and pointed at him. "Brutus has told you that he will give up his job in order to help the residents of this Shire." Justin then walked back out to the middle of the clearing and knelt down and placed the tip of the sword back into the damp ground. "But on my Honor as a soldier I hereby swear to defend the animals of Britain and, if necessary, GIVE MY LIFE to remove Jenner from the Throne and restore the Crown to a ruler as wise as Nicodemus was!" He then stared hard into the eyes of the multitude that was gathered around him. "Who among you will take this vow with me for your own and your children's sake?" He asked.

"I will, little brother!" Linnette cried, almost jumping from the rock on which she had been sitting; and she began tapping her way toward him.

Galen walked to his wife's side and, gently taking her by the paw, began guiding her to where Justin was kneeling. "I'll accept that vow as well." He announced. "From this day forward, I'll treat my wife's brother as my own flesh-and-blood." Linnette, crying tears of joy, gave her husband a loving hug. They then knelt beside Justin.

Brutus also stood and said, "I helped to bring this misfortune upon you good folk and I'm willing to bear the burden of correcting my mistake. I too will give my life for Britain and our future!" He also went to the middle of the clearing and knelt at Justin's other side.

Individually and in family groups, the gathered animals took up Justin's vow and knelt, surrounding him in a vast circle. Even Blinkey, after some hemming and hawing, took it; grumbling about how this was no way to spend a retirement.

Afterward, the animals again took their seats around the Heath. "I s'pose y' have a plan t' help us now tha' we've committed ourselves t' treason agin' th' King!" Blinkey said dourly.

"Actually I do have one." Stated Justin, who had stood and resheathed his sword. He then walked to Brutus and placed his paw on the bear's huge shoulder. "But I'm afraid you're not going to like it very much, my friend."

Brutus smiled and shrugged. "Hey, I just took an oath against my own Boss! Any request that you make of me can't possibly be any worse of a hardship on me than that!" He said.

Justin nodded. "Alright," He said, "The Plan is this: We are going to create an Army of our own to defy Jenner and his friends and restore some sanity to our lives!"

The crowd gasped and Blinkey stood. "Are y' DAFT, Boy?" He asked angrily, his voice a whip of sarcasm. "How d'ya expect t' create 'n army out 'f a few Farm-folk? Jenner's got a trained Army 'f 'is own tha' c'n turn us

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int' so much chum if'n he wanted ta!"

"And do you know how he got that Army?" Justin countered. "He recruits it from British families like yours! He takes fathers and brothers and sons from their farms or shops and trains them to do his bidding; whether that's defending our beloved Country from outside invaders or taking your livelihood and lands and using it to satisfy his own lust for power and riches!" Justin then began pacing the inner edge of the clearing, as if trying to address each of the gathered animals individually. "If we are to meet Jenner in battle, and I can pretty much guarantee that that's the ONLY way that we'll get him off of the Throne, then we'll have to do some recruiting of our own! We'll have to start spreading the word to all of Britain that there's a group of animals in Nottinghamshire who've decided that they will DIE fighting for their freedom rather than be condemned to live as slaves in their own land!"

"But who's gonna train us?" A squirrel in the audience asked. "An' where're we gonna get weapons? All we have're farm tools!"

Justin walked over to his brother-in-law. "Galen?" He asked, "Do you think you're up to the task of helping me to raise a citizen Army?"

Galen beamed proudly. "Just give the word, brother!" He said happily.

Justin laid a paw on Galen's shoulder and smiled. "The word is given, brother." He stated.

Justin then walked back to Brutus. "I'll need to use my father's Estate as my headquarters if this little rebellion is going to have any chance of success..."

"Say no more." The bear interjected. "I'll see what I can do to give you enough time to get yourself established."

"Thank you." Justin said.

He then went back to the center of the circle. "My father's manor-house will be my headquarters from now on." He stated. "Any family who feels that they cannot safely remain on their own lands after they've harvested their crop is invited to move into it for the Winter so long as they're willing to share in its repair and upkeep."

Justin then motioned Galen to come to him. As Galen did so, Justin announced, "My sister and brother-in-law are in charge of my father's Estate until I can take care of some unfinished business. I should be back in about a week or so. If they tell you to do anything in connection with the vow that you took today, assume that I'm telling you to do it too."

Justin then took Galen aside. "Galen," He said, "I want you and Linney to move out of this house," He pointed to the cottage. "And into the manor-house as soon as you can."

A look of concern crossed Galen's face. "But why?" He asked. "This is our home."

Justin nodded sadly. "I know! I know! But believe me when I say that I don't give this order lightly! As soon as Jenner hears that we're standing up to him, he's going to start pushing us to see just how serious we are! And we've got to be able to push back without my having to worry all the time whether my family is safe or not!" He exclaimed.

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"But we live in such an isolated part of the forest..." Galen tried to argue.

"All the more reason to get you and Linney out of here!" Justin said flatly. "Jenner's already killed his own brother and my half-brother! And he tried to kill Jonathan's widow and four children as well as two other innocent animals. Do you really think he'd hesitate to add a retired soldier and his blind wife to that kind of tally?"

An expression of terror crossed Galen's face as he imagined his wife alone as a Troop of soldiers rode into the little Heath with Jenner at its head. Galen sighed. "I guess you're right, brother." He said reluctantly. "Let me go break the news to her."

Justin nodded again. "You don't have to start right this second, but please don't take more than a couple of weeks at most." He instructed. Galen nodded and rushed off to tell his wife the bad news.

Justin trudged wearily to the log where Brutus was sitting and began to put on his backpack.

"I hope you know what you've started." Brutus said.

"I know what I've started!" Justin said sharply, anger dripping from his words. "It's something I should've started months ago! If I'd had the guts to kill Jenner when I discovered that he found out that Jonathan, Dr. Ages and I were the ones who were keeping him from power; then maybe, just maybe, King Nicodemus and Jonathan would still be alive!" He then sat on the log and wiped a tear from the corner of one eye with the back of a paw. "The cruelest irony in all of this," He continued sadly, "Is that some of these innocent folk, most of whom just want to make a decent living for themselves and their families, probably WILL end up dying! And not through any fault of their own! That thought alone makes me want to kill Jenner all the more!"

Brutus frowned, worried about Justin's sudden change of mood from spellbinding leadership to self-pity. "I didn't mean to imply that their situation is somehow your fault." He said. "If anything, I bear a good part of the responsibility for putting Jenner on the Throne by letting my own selfishness and greed for a piece of his action override my sense of duty to my constituents!"

"You had no way of knowing what Jenner was up to!" Justin cried, burying his head in his paws. "I'd suspected for years that he might try to kill King Nicodemus! But there was always some small part of me, some awful little voice, that always DENIED that one animal could do such a thing to another! And by the time I was smart enough to stop listening to that voice, my half-brother and my King; the two friends I'd sworn to give MY VERY OWN LIFE to protect; were dead under several tons of stone and Evil itself was wearing the Crown of Britain!"

Brutus decided that he'd heard enough. He reached down and grabbed Justin by the scruff of his collar and stood him up. "On your feet, Soldier!" He barked. Several heads turned but Brutus ignored the gawkers. "What the hell is your problem, boy? Of course some of these animals are probably gonna die! You've just declared war on their King! And war usually means a lotta death an' destruction!"

Justin tried to fight his way loose, but Brutus's grip was vise-tight. "HAVE YOU EVER SEEN SOMEONE DIE?" Justin screamed. "Someone you loved like a brother! Someone who WAS your brother!" He whimpered. He then began to collapse in a faint and Galen, who had heard the commotion and had come running to find out what was happening, quickly supported him under one arm to keep him from falling.

Galen, with Brutus's assistance, slowly walked his weeping brother-in-law into the house and, after removing his sword-belt and hanging it over a chair, laid Justin in his bed and placed the covers over him.

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Justin grabbed Galen feebly by his arm. "Brother." Justin rasped.

"I'm here, brother." Galen answered.

"Have I done the right thing?" Justin asked, his eyes beginning to glaze over with exhaustion.

Galen gently took Justin's paw. "These folk need their freedom back and they need a Leader who can motivate them to fight for it. That you recognize this and are willing to bear the responsibility shows everybody that you care for them. Yes, I'd say you've done the right thing."

Justin smiled weakly and closed his eyes. Galen laid Justin's paw on top of the blanket and he and Brutus quietly left the room, closing the door after them.

Linnette was waiting for them in the main room, her face drawn with worry. "What happened? Is Justin alright?" She asked.

"He's asleep." Galen said. "I think that the tension of the past several months has finally taken its toll on him."

"What was the yelling about?" She asked. "I only heard a few snatches of what was said."

"He feels guilty that some of us will die when Jenner comes to put down our little rebellion." Brutus said.

Galen nodded his agreement. "The responsibilities of Leadership aren't for the faint of heart." He said. "I led a Brigade of some five thousand well-trained and well-disciplined soldiers for almost ten years. Putting that many lives in one paw is, to say the least, a daunting prospect." Galen then made his way to his favorite chair and motioned Brutus to take a seat on the couch. "Certainly in the beginning I enjoyed the power that I had over so many lives. But soon I found myself responsible for making sure that the soldiers with families kept those families clothed and fed and didn't drink their last pence away. I was responsible whenever one of my soldiers got into a fight or broke the law in some other way; and, mind you, military law is by necessity a good deal harsher than civil statutes; so I sometimes had to impose punishments that would have been considered most unfair by your standards, but were well in line with the regulations that I, as an Officer in His Majesty's Army, was required to follow.

"Justin, on the other paw, will be at a distinct disadvantage because he won't have had a basic training course to weed out those unfit or unqualified for service. We'll basically be starting this Army pretty much from scratch and you can bet your bottom crown that none of these farmers has ever had to endure the kind of punishing discipline that will be necessary to turn them into anything near an effective fighting force.

"Also, these farmers all have families to feed and crops to harvest even while they're beginning their training, so he'll have to somehow adjust any training schedule to take that into account. And once the crops ARE harvested, training is going to have to continue through Winter no matter how bad the weather might become because, sure as Spring rain, Jenner's gonna attack as soon as the weather gives him the opportunity."

Galen ran a paw through the fur at the top of his head. "And that doesn't even begin to cover things like how we're going to acquire and distribute decent weapons, plan perimeter patrols and all the other arcana of life within a military camp. We'll also have to figure out how to deal with taking care of those families who, like us, decide to move to the Locksley Estate."

"Leave that to me and the rest of the wives." Linnette said, her thoughts turning to practical solutions to these problems. "I expect that between us we ought to be able to figure something out."

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"Excellent!" Galen said. "Sheriff, how many of your Deputies do you think will go along with us and how many will go to Jenner?"

Brutus shrugged. "I'm not sure." He mused. "They take their oath of Deputization pretty seriously, but that oath is to the spirit of the Law rather than the person of the King. I think it'd be best if I just explained my reasons for joining you and let them make their own decision."

Galen nodded. "I suppose you're right. 'Flies to honey' would seem to be the appropriate method to deal with this situation." He said.

While Galen went to collect wood for the night's fire, Linnette made her way to the bedroom and sat near the foot of the bed in which Justin slept. She listened to his deep, steady breathing and wondered what kind of dreams he was having.

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Jenner scanned through the papers that the Scribe had just given him. "Very good, very good." He muttered, riffling through the pages. "Seventeen hundred bushels of turnips from Sussexshire? That's more than any other two Shires combined." He commented with obvious delight. A moment later, one of the reports caught his eye. "What's this?" He asked, shoving the paper down in front of the hedgehog who was waddling to keep in step with his King.

The hedgehog grabbed at the paper and fumbled with it for a moment. Jenner put on an air of irritated disdain. But secretly, the fat little creature amused him to no end with his unintentional antics. "Just a moment! Just a moment!" The hedgehog squeaked. "Uh...Ah, yes! It says: 'Nottinghamshire, no report', your Majesty."

Jenner snatched the paper from the hedgehog's paws. "I know WHAT it says you spineless dolt!" Jenner said sternly. "What I want to know is WHY it says that!"

The hedgehog cowered in fear, his quills rattling as he shook. "I, uh, I'm not sure, your Majesty! The courier reported that the Sheriff has been away for the past couple of days and left no orders for his Deputy-in-Charge!" He blurted.

Jenner frowned and stopped, the platoon of guards that surrounded him doing the same. "Odd." He said. "I wonder if it has anything to do with that letter he sent me a few days ago."

The hedgehog was about to answer, but a warning glance from the Troop-Captain made him think better of his words and he remained silent. The letter from the Sheriff had sent Jenner into a rage the likes of which had never been seen before. For over an hour, the King had raged through the castle breaking any object and tearing down any tapestry which even remotely reminded him of his adopted brother's rule. His temper had then cooled enough that he'd gone to his quarters, threatening a horrible death to anyone who disturbed him for any reason. The next day he had ordered that all objects bearing the crest of the House PenWallace, Nicodemus's family, be either destroyed or have the crest removed and replaced with that of the House Argellaeus, the family of which Jenner had been the only survivor.

Jenner shrugged. "I'll give the good Sheriff a few more days. Perhaps he's just busy supervising his charges and motivating them to work harder for the Glory of their King." He said distantly. He then shoved the sheaf of papers at the hedgehog and dropped them before the nervous creature had the chance to get a paw under them, the growing early Autumn wind scattering them in the Castle courtyard.

The hedgehog darted after the reports as quickly as his short legs would carry him. The Troop-captain stayed behind and helped him. "He's gone mad!" The Hedgehog said despairingly when he was sure that no one was around to overhear them.

"That may be, Iggy." Giles Gisbourne said quietly. "But he's still your King and I think that you would be wise to remember that fact." Gisbourne handed the hedgehog the papers that he'd collected.

Iggy narrowed his already tiny black eyes and adjusted the wire-rimmed spectacles that were perched on his snout. "Do you want to be ruled by a nutcase for the rest of your life?" He asked accusingly. "I have a wife and kids! I want my children to have a future other than being subject to the whims of that looney for the rest of their lives!"

Giles thoughtfully stroked the fur of his chin. As a soldier he was trained to obey the orders given to him by a lawful authority, whether it be Captain Sullivan or King Jenner himself. But as a son, his own father was

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suffering under the rule of the very personage that he was sworn to protect. "Listen. I can imagine how you must feel. Do you think that you and your family are the only ones affected by Jenner's decrees?" He asked.

Iggy bowed his head and closed his eyes, a tear falling from the corner of one eye. "No." He whimpered in his small voice.

Giles knelt and gently and carefully laid a paw on the hedgehog's spiney shoulder. "My own father is in the same situation that you seem to be facing. Let me talk to him and see if I can get you two together to talk things out. Okay?"

Iggy nodded sadly and began shuffling toward the entrance to the castle.

Giles watched sympathetically as the scribe disappeared into the castle. Ignatz wasn't a bad sort, Gisbourne knew, but Jenner's erratic behavior over the past several weeks was causing many of the household staff to fear not only for their jobs, but their very lives and those of their families. Most had left, deciding to take lower paying jobs outside the castle walls. But Iggy's wife had just given birth to another child and; other than a few secretarial or transcriptional occupations, none of which paid as much in the private sector as they did in the bureaucracy; he'd had little choice except to stay and accept whatever abuse Jenner meted out to him as the designated bearer of bad news. But Giles was also worried. If even a timid soul like Iggy was desperate enough to voice his concerns about the state of the Royal mind, what must the rest of Britain be thinking?

Chapter 36: 35

Lady Euphigenia Kluck shivered in the isolation of her tiny room, not so much from the cold early-Autumn wind that penetrated through the cracks in the window that looked out onto the road, and beyond it the vast darkness of the forest; for she was well insulated by her travelling clothes and feathers; but because the news that she had been hearing during her journey was so bleak.

After selling her mother's house and possessions and distributing the money as evenly as possible among her various siblings and relatives, she had also sold many of her own possessions as well; keeping only a few travelling clothes; and left for Britain.

As word of the Land Repossession Decree had spread, small pockets of violent rebellion had flared throughout the countryside. While there had been reports of numerous injuries, so far; thank the spirits; there seemed to have been no fatalities.

But along with this chaos came those who were well-prepared to take advantage of it. In the past couple of days during her travels, Kluck had been warned by other travellers that robbers pretty much owned the roads after the sun went down and that the only shelter; however illusory it might actually be; was to be found at the roadside inns. When she had asked why the Sheriff's and their Deputies weren't keeping the ways safe, one traveller had sarcastically explained to her that the Sheriff's were either too busy trying to implement the Repossession Decree and putting down the resultant uprisings or, if they had a bit of time to spare from doing that, were themselves demanding a gratuity to assign a Deputy to escort the traveller through their Shires.

Lady Kluck shook her head glumly as another wave of wind tore at the dying leaves of the surrounding trees and rattled the panes of the window. Of Marian and her children there had been no word even after sending inquiries to many of the former Ladies-of-the-Court. They had either gone home or been forced to take employment as governesses, House-matrons or other servant-occupations; at least three going to the Continent to do so, their replies conveying a hopelessness that conditions in Britain would probably remain intolerable until King Jenner no longer wore the Crown.

She had found this inn just as darkness had descended on the forest. But the innkeeper, a ferret, had been none-too-enthusiastic about renting her even this tiny room and had made it plain that he would light no fire nor serve any food if the King was going to take his livelihood from him. "Let his Piggishness cut my wood an' cook my meals if he's gonna own my business!" He had growled before stomping away from his desk.

Kluck was about to undress for bed when she heard a commotion from downstairs. Quietly she opened her door and stepped out onto the catwalk that gave access to the upstairs rooms.

"Please, sir! Me friends an' I'll do anythin' tha' ye wish! I'm a fair cook an' Will an' Mr. Stabb can chop ye a night's worth o' firewood!" A lilting Irish voice implored.

"No deal!" The innkeeper barked. "I'm not runnin' a charity here! If'n y' can't pay, y' gets no room! N' hit th' road 'for I calls th' Sher'ff!"

The trio of bedraggled animals gave a collective shrug and started for the door.

Kluck took pity on them immediately. "Wait!" She said, gathering the pleats of her cloak and starting down the stairs. "I'll pay fer their nights stay!" She stated in her heavy Scottish brogue.

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"Thank you, Ma'am." The sad-faced weasel said. "We wouldn't want to trouble you, but we'd be much obliged."

"T'would be nay trouble." Kluck said. "A fire an' a meal'd do me a world o' wonder aboot noo." She indicated her ample girth.

The innkeeper fumed. "Waitaminnit! Hold it! You got no call â 't tellin' me how I'll run my place, you ol' biddy!" He yelled.

"Ey! Tha's no way t' talk t' someone 'oos jus' tryin' t' 'elp!" Said the young gray fox.

The innkeeper pointed a clawed finger at the fox. "Was I talkin' t' you, boy?" He sneered.

The fox cocked his head questioningly to one side. "No, bu..." He started.

"Then shut y'r trap!" The ferret snapped. "An' you!" He pointed to Kluck. "Get y'r things an' get outta my inn!"

"Now YOU wait a minute!" The weasel said sternly. "There's no call to throw this lady out of her room! She was just tryin' to do us a favor!"

The innkeeper brought an old rusty sword from under the desk. "I'll throw out whoever the hell I PLEASE!" He yelled, his eyes burning like embers in a fire.

The fox's eyes widened and his jaw dropped and he quickly grabbed the arm of the skunk and dragged her across the room and up the stairs to join Kluck.

The weasel, meanwhile, had just narrowly dodged two savage slashes by the enraged ferret, who was starting to bring the blade down for a third time when the weasel grabbed the ferret's wrist and, with a half-turn of his own arm, slammed it on the edge of the desk; causing the sword to drop with a harmless clatter to the floor and eliciting an audible crack from the ferret's forearm.

The innkeeper dropped to the floor next to his sword, howling in pain. The weasel looked down blankly at the writhing animal at his feet; then an expression of horror spread across his face.

"I-I didn't mean to break it." He said hoarsely. "I just wanted to make him drop the sword."

Kluck and the skunk raced down the stairs. The skunk took the weasel, who was now shaking with fright, by an arm and led him to a bench and sat him down, doing her best to console him. Kluck kicked the sword aside and knelt down to examine the ferret's arm. The ferret was now whimpering like a child, tears flowing from his tightly closed eyes.

"Here, Laddie, give me yer paw." She told him. She carefully examined the quickly swelling limb but determined that any treatment was beyond her abilities. As she laid his arm gently on his chest, the door burst open and the fox; who had dashed out the door after the fracas; returned with another ferret and an old, snow-white badger, who seemed oddly familiar to her.

The badger, using a paw-made crutch, limped over and stiffly knelt down next to Kluck.

"Och! Ah think he's go' a broken wrist, sir!" Kluck said, her voice heavy with worry.

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The badger carefully felt along the length of the ferret's forearm, then ordered him to bend each finger in turn. Slowly, and obviously in great pain, the ferret complied.

"Well," Said the badger, "The bad news is that the bone is broken."

The other ferret, who was questioning the weasel and the skunk, excused himself and ambled toward Kluck and the badger, bending down to pick up the sword on the way. "Well, Doctor, if that's the bad news, then I guess that this won't a terribly exciting night after all." The ferret said with a hint of sorrow. He bent down and stroked the fur behind the injured ferret's ear and shook his head. "Mom always told you that your temper would be your undoing. She said that one day you'd meet someone bigger or stronger or faster than you and they'd kick your tail."

The wounded ferret moaned softly.

The other ferret sighed. "OK, Doctor, what's the GOOD news?" He asked.

The badger, using the crutch, slowly and with difficulty stood and said. "His bone has a partial fracture just below the wrist. If I get it into a cast tonight, it should heal by sometime after the first snow."

The other ferret nodded and pointed to the young fox. "You," He said authoritatively, "Take Robert over to the constabulary," He indicated the injured ferret, who was being lifted to his feet, "And gather whatever supplies Dr. Ages," He pointed to the badger, "Needs to make a cast."

The fox nodded and helped the wounded ferret out the door with Dr. Ages shuffling close behind.

The other ferret then introduced himself as Tom Binns, the village constable. "I must apologize for my older brother's outburst." He said evenly. "He's been mad at the world ever since the King issued that idiotic decree." He said.

The weasel, who had regained his composure somewhat, nodded wearily and said. "Yeah, Jenner seems to have a gift for doin' that. I'm sorry about your brother's arm, but the soldier part o' me jus' sorta took over. I won't resist if you want to put me in jail."

Binns gave an equally weary smile. "No, you were just defending yourself from what you thought was an immediate threat to you and your friends, so punishment would serve no purpose. Robert's been a bit of a bully all 'is life. I'm hoping that from now on he'll think twice before lettin' his temper get the better of him." He said. "By the way, what brings you to this neck of Sherwood Forest? We don't usually get many travellers this time of year." He asked.

"We're lookin' for a fox, Sir, by th' name o' Justin." The skunk said.

"And your name is?" Binns asked.

"Oh, I'm sorry!" She could almost be seen blushing beneath her dirty, matted fur. "Me name's Heather Kilcannon. And this," She waved a paw toward the weasel, "Is Ezekiel Stabb. Th' gray fox who helped wi' your brother is Will Scarlet." She stated.

"And you, Madam?" Binns asked Kluck.

Lady Kluck introduced herself. "I'm tryin' t' foynd an old dear friend o' moyn. She too is a fox, wi' four bairn rabbits."

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"Her name wouldn't be Marian Brisbee by any chance, would it?" The badger said as he limped back through the door.

Suddenly, it all came together in Kluck's mind. "'Pon m' word! You're th' one on th' 'Wanted' posters!" She exclaimed. "Please! Ah must knoo! Are the charges agin' Marian true?" She entreated â him.

Ages frowned but kept his composure. "No, Madam, I can assure you in all honesty that those charges are pure fabrication! Mrs. Brisbee is as much a victim of Jenner's foul plotting as King Nicodemus and her late husband were!" He replied bitterly.

Lady Kluck let out a relieved sigh. That this Dr. Ages could be lying to her was, she supposed, a possibility; but she very much doubted it because she did not see what he could possibly gain by doing so.

Ages then turned his attention to Heather and Stabb. "You said that you were looking for a fox named Justin." He said sternly, his gray-blue eyes narrowing with suspicion. "Are you bounty hunters? Here to arrest him and take him back to Jenner?"

Heather was dumbfounded at the accusation. "Oh no, Sir! We left th' City because we wish t' help him fight against tha' cruel tyrant!" She exclaimed.

Stabb nodded his agreement. "I resigned my commission in his Guard because he was starting to use us as a secret police force. I wouldn't be at all surprised if our names are on a few 'Wanted' posters as well." He said quietly.

Ages relaxed a bit and said, "I believe you. But you must understand that Jenner will use every means at his disposal to eliminate ANY threat to his hold on the Throne; and right now, Justin and Mrs. Brisbee represent the only hope Britain has of ending Jenner's reign."

Heather and Stabb solemnly nodded their understanding. Ages then excused himself and went to attend to his patient, Lady Kluck following behind and inquiring as to Mrs. Brisbee's welfare and that of her children.

A while later, after the innkeeper had been tended to and put to bed and the travellers had taken much needed hot baths; they, constable Binns and Dr. Ages gathered around the fireplace while Heather stirred a spicy-sweet smelling potato-leek soup in a small cauldron that hung from an iron hook embedded in the mantle. Kluck was sitting happily on a sofa humming to herself and knitting. Will was amusing the constable by performing a few basic stage-magic tricks with a gold crown that Binns had lent him. Ages and Stabb were conversing in hushed tones in an alcove.

"I'm curious," Ages said, "Why do you wish to help Justin dethrone the King? After all, what concern is it of yours if Jenner is treating his subjects badly so long as you get paid?" He asked. "Young Scarlet's and Miss Kilcannon's desire can, I suppose, be attributed to the foolish idealism of youth. You, sir, do NOT strike me as the idealistic type."

Stabb shrugged. He related his past and the incident at the orphanage to Ages in a flat, unemotional tone. "I suppose that I resented being used by Jenner as a tool to terrorize his subjects the way that he was using those poor kids. After the hayseed," He jerked a thumb toward Will. "Kicked my tail an' then showed concern for me, I guess I realized that I was fightin' on the wrong side for the wrong cause. I decided that, just once in my life, I want to fight to do some good 'cause my fightin' days; if not over; are certainly numbered."

Ages smiled sagely. "You had an epiphany!" He said.

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"Epiphany?" The weasel asked, pronouncing the word slowly.

"A flash of insight. A moment of self-revelation." Ages explained.

Stabb shrugged again and the beginnings of a smile turned up the corners of his mouth. "Yeah I guess I did, didn't I." He said thoughtfully.

"Such insight into one's true nature is very rare!" Ages exclaimed happily. "From it comes the ability to see resources that others can't and the wisdom to use them in a given situation."

"I've always thought of myself as a warrior rather than a philosopher; that is, when I was allowed to think at all." Stabb murmured. "I'm not too sure that 'wisdom' is a word that can be applied in my case."

"The two aren't mutually exclusive." Ages said, waving a dismissive paw. "King Nicodemus was a first-rate war-leader, but he could also discuss many subjects; from History to Medicine; with intelligence. Tell me, Mr. Stabb, can you read?"

"A little." Stabb sighed. "Just enough to read orders and maps." He said by way of explanation. "Why do you ask?"

"Because I sense a thirst in you." Ages said bluntly. "A thirst for knowledge that, for whatever reason, has either been denied to you or that you've denied to yourself. If you're willing, I can help you to satisfy this thirst."

"I dunno." Stabb muttered dubiously. "It's probably a bit late to be tryin' t' teach this ol' weasel new tricks."

"Nonsense!" Ages exclaimed; pounding the flat of one paw on the table between them, causing the others to look at them in surprise. Ages ignored their stares and continued. "Wisdom is NOT a matter of how old you are or how smart you think you are! Wisdom CANNOT be taught! Wisdom is not something given only to Kings and Scholars and denied to the rest of the World! For example; a blacksmith must be taught how to heat and pound and shape the iron that he holds in his tongs, but what of the muscles in the arm that holds and guides his hammer? Isn't even the tiniest baby born with those muscles?" Ages asked.

"Yeah, I suppose so." Stabb replied, unsure of where Ages was headed.

"But through many years of practice, the blacksmith has developed his muscles to a strength and accuracy that allows him to shape a rod or plate of iron into anything he desires; correct?" Ages queried.

Stabb's mind went into overdrive as he pondered Ages question. "Yes, so if I understand you correctly, you're telling me that wisdom is already within us from the moment we're born; but we need to practice USING it in order to get any use FROM it!" Stabb said.

"Exactly!" Ages exclaimed. "Now, take the example further!" He ordered.

Stabb scratched the short, rough gray-brown fur on the back of his neck in puzzlement. Then, slowly, it dawned on him the point that the old badger was trying to make. "And if given the proper training and practice, I can develop my own wisdom!" Stabb exclaimed.

"In a way." Ages said. "When I was young, and believe it or not I WAS young once!" He chortled, "My mind was like a stack of stone and wood just waiting to be built into a grand manor-house. But every house needs a foundation on which to rest or what will happen?"

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"Why, it sinks int' th' ground!" Heather, who had been entranced by Ages and Stabb's conversation, blurted out.

"Thank you, young lady, yes." Ages said, not minding the interruption. "My mind needed to be built on a foundation laid by other learned minds before me, just as their minds had been built upon foundations laid by learned minds before them; and so on and so on back through history."

"And my mind can be like that too?" Stabb asked, not daring to hope at what the answer might be.

"Of course!" Ages stated. "You can build your manor-house, as it were, as large and many-roomed as you please depending on your interests. My main interest happened to be the field of Medicine so my manor-house probably looks more like a hospital than anything else." He chuckled.

Stabb was elated by what he heard. "Would you be willing to help me? I don't want to be a soldier anymore. I told the girl a few weeks ago that I'm tired o' killin' and I still mean it." He said, his voice tight with excitement and emotion; his eyes wide with a strange joy that he'd never felt before.

Ages looked Stabb squarely in the eyes and said, "I can help, but it's up to you to develop the wisdom that you say you so badly want! I warn you now that wisdom is a much more difficult thing to wield than any sword that you may have used in your past because it doesn't penetrate any armor or draw any blood, and you'll have to make many difficult choices along the way, but when used properly it can open up worlds of thought that you probably never knew existed."

"Don't worry, Doc," Stabb said ruefully, "I already know a thing 'r two about difficult choices."

Heather served her soup and the group ate in contemplative silence. After a while, constable Binns excused himself to check on his brother's condition and make one last patrol of the village. Soon, the travellers were in their beds; sleeping off their exhaustion. Outside, the Autumn wind still blew cold.

Chapter 37: 36

Mrs. Brisbee warmed the last of the tea in the cup that she held over the tiny flame of the candle. Once again her night was bereft of badly needed sleep. It had gotten to the point that she needed at least a two-hour nap in the afternoons in order to function.

The children had been very helpful over the past several weeks, having planted a garden in mid-Summer when they had first arrived after the fire that had destroyed Dr. Ages home, they had started to harvest and, under her supervision, can and otherwise store their food for the expected harsh Winter ahead.

Jeremy too was helping. His burns had completely healed and, while he still itched a bit from the regrowth of his feathers, he supervised the children while she took her much-needed naps. But she had noticed a profound change in the rooster since the fire. He had become more serious, perhaps even a bit more angry and pessimistic, in his outlook on the future. If someone mentioned King Jenner, he would frown and try to change the subject or fall silent and walk away. He had also lost interest in being a Bard, refusing Dr. Ages offer to find a replacement for the lute that had been destroyed in the fire. Instead, he had bought an old over-under cross-bow and a quiver and taught himself to use it and make the bolts with which to arm it.

Other things had changed as well, mostly for the worse. Toby's father had been bringing them news of the various disturbances since the announcement of the Land Repossession decree. Just that morning, he'd informed them of his decision to resign his post and move himself and his son to Wales or the Scottish Lands "...until that idiot either dies or comes to his senses." Also, many of her neighbors, who would sometimes drop by to chat or exchange local gossip or ask for or give advice, began isolating themselves from each other, refusing to let her or others visit them. One of the few who still welcomed her company; a mole, also a widow with a young son; shook her head sadly and said, "Nobody trusts no one no more, Ma'am. They're afeared th' King'll have'm arrest'd an' throwed 'n 'is dungin's." When Mrs. Brisbee had pointed out the improbability of such a thing actually happening, The mole had reminded her that fear could turn the least believable notion into rock-solid truth if no facts were available to contradict them.

Which brought her thoughts to Dr. Ages. He had left a few days before; ostensibly to visit several friends and, if possible, pick up information on Justin. When she had made known her concern about the condition of his leg, he'd told her that her concern; while not unreasonable and, in fact, welcome; was less of a priority than the acquisition of accurate information. She had also expressed her fear that he might be taken prisoner by those still loyal to Jenner.

"That would, no doubt, be a major setback to our cause." He had sighed. "But I'm old. I have no fear of what Jenner MIGHT do to me. My heart is resolved to stop what he's doing RIGHT NOW to Britain." He'd stated quite forcefully.

A thin whisp of steam rose from the tea in the cup in her hand. She swirled it around the cup and downed the last of it, the slightly bitter warm liquid coating the back of her throat.

Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed a figure standing in the shadows of the doorway at the corner of the room. It was Timothy, standing in his nightgown and impassively watching her.

"Hello." She said in a half-whisper. "What're you doing up?"

"I couldn't sleep." He said. "Had 'nother dream."

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Mrs. Brisbee held out her arms and motioned him to come to her. Timothy walked tiredly to her and let her lift him onto her lap. "Was it good or bad?" She asked patiently. Timothy had been having both dreams and nightmares with increasing frequency. He had been waking up so often, screaming or crying in fear, that Brisbee had decided to move him into Justin's bed until the other fox returned.

"I dunno. Good, I think." The young rabbit said without emotion. "Dr. Ages found those travellers that I been dreaming about." He paused for a few moments as if trying to think about something. "But I still can't tell who they are." He added, obvious disappointment in his voice.

"It's alright." She said soothingly. "We'll find out soon enough, I suppose."

She then extinguished the candle and carried Timothy to their bedroom and tucked him into bed. She then slipped out of her robe, and slid into her own and lay awake wondering. Timothy had been dreaming of these so-called "travellers" for the past few weeks now. But who were they? What role, if any, would they play in helping Justin to bring about Jenner's downfall? Were his dreams of them in any way connected to the nightmares that he was also suffering from? Timothy described, in great detail, a horrible battle between a large group of animals; led by Justin, herself, Dr. Ages, Jeremy and these mysterious travellers; and a legion of beings that Timothy would only describe as "armored demons" led by an evil half-fox, half-lion demon-creature. That the "demon-creature" probably represented Jenner Mrs. Brisbee did not doubt for a moment, although she was mystified at the significance that Timothy always placed on its vulpine attributes. And she also did not doubt that, one day soon, a bloody battle WOULD take place and that, in the end, only Justin or Jenner would emerge from it alive and the animals of Britain would live in either a new era of freedom or an eternity of darkness and slavery.

She shuddered quietly inside at the thought.

After a while, she slipped away to sleep, her exhausted mind letting her rest.

Chapter 38: 37

Justin stared silently at the thin shaft of early-morning light that penetrated between the curtains of the window and shone on the ivory-white of the plaster of the wall. He remembered all-too-well the breakdown that he'd suffered yesterday afternoon. "Those folk are counting on me to be a leader and I start crying like a two-year-old child!" He angrily thought to himself. But then, he'd been doing that an awful lot lately. "I guess it can be pretty hard to keep your emotions in check when your world's being turned upside-down." He decided, not that this explanation made him feel any better.

Just outside the bedroom, he heard a rustling and, a moment later, two light taps on the door. "Come in." He said.

"Are you decent?" Linney asked, the hint of mischief in her voice clear even from the other side of the door.

Justin smiled, remembering the little game that they had played when he was young. The large number of children in the Frasier home had made privacy a rare commodity and when Justin had been given the opportunity to have a room to himself for several months one summer he'd guarded his privacy zealously, demanding that he be given time to make himself "decent" before anyone entered. But Linnette would sometimes "accidentally" barge in and; when he complained; playfully point out that as well as being unable to see him, she had changed his diapers enough that it really didn't matter if he was "decent" or not. "No," He answered with a touch of his own playful sarcasm. "But that certainly never stopped you before."

Linnette laughed and opened the door. "Alright, Sleepyhead, your breakfast is on the table. I have to go and meet with the other farmer's wives so that we can plan on how we're going to contribute to the fight against Jenner." She stated.

"Thanks." Justin said. "By the way, is the Sheriff still here?" He asked as an afterthought.

"Fraid not. He stayed the night but left just before dawn." Linnette said. "Is something wrong?"

Justin shrugged. "Nothing that can't wait until I see him again." He said.

Linnette started to leave but changed her mind and came in and sat at the side of the bed, her face more serious. She cupped her paws in her lap, a sign among the family that she wished for undivided attention; Justin acknowledged by placing his paws in hers. "Justin, you know that I would never try to pry into your affairs; but what did you find at your father's house? I mean, did you find what you were looking for?" She asked.

Justin shook his head. "I found the tomb in which he's buried, but I'm afraid that with him and my mother died the answers to all the questions that I have about my life before my adoption. It's as if there's a third book that Dr. Ages never got to write and whose pages are now forever closed to me." He said, both sadness and bitterness in his voice.

As she had years ago, whenever one of her many younger siblings had fallen and scraped a knee or been stung by a bee, Linnette put a comforting arm around Justin and drew him to her and began rocking him gently back and forth. "The past is gone little brother." She said softly. "Nothing that you or I do or say can bring it or mom and dad or your real parents back. But I always want you to remember that Galen and I will always love and support you no matter how all this turns out." She then lifted herself from the bed. "Please tell Mrs. Brisbee that we'll try to make her and her children as welcome and comfortable as possible under the circumstances." She said as she left the room. A few moments later she was out the door and tapping her way

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down the path toward the nearby village.

After he'd bathed, dressed and eaten the breakfast that his sister had prepared, Justin too was gone; leaving the darkened and lonely cottage behind.

It was well past Noon when the Sheriff of Nottinghamshire returned to his office. His Deputy-in-Charge, a ferret named Clyde Pegg, told him that all had been quiet during his absence but the courier-mail was stacking up. Brutus waved a dismissive paw and told Clyde to gather as many of the other Deputies as possible together for a meeting later that night. He then retired to his office, angrily throwing aside the courier bags that lay on his desk and chair. He then opened the safe and removed the letter of resignation. He then added to it, signed it, and shoved it into one of the bags.

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The Roll-Call room, as it was known, was filled with the controlled chaos of hushed conversation. Word had spread quickly among the Deputies that something of great importance was to be announced.

The room fell silent as Brutus and Clyde; followed by Wendell, who carried a small portable desk, paper, pen and a small bottle of ink; entered, looking very grim. Clyde took his place behind the small lectern, Brutus sat in a large chair against the wall behind him and Wendell sat at the far right seat of the front row.

Clyde then called for order and took roll-call. One-by-one, all the Deputies either answered to their names or were confirmed as on duty elsewhere.

Clyde then stepped aside and Brutus stood and took his place. He waited for Wendell to finish writing and said, "It is my sad duty to announce that, effective immediately, I've resigned my office as Sheriff of Nottinghamshire."

The room itself seemed to gasp. Then it erupted in confusion. Clyde again stepped to the lectern and began pounding a gavel on a block, calling for order. After the assembly again fell silent, one of the Senior Deputies; a weasel named Wilbur Splitbranch; raised his paw.

"Yes, Wilbur." Clyde said wearily. "I see you. What's your question?"

Wilbur stood. "I know this is askin' the obvious," He said, his voice heavy with self-importance. "But, uh, why's the Sheriff leavin'?"

Clyde frowned. While he had no problem with weasels in general; they were, after all, distantly related to his own species; he never could figure out how the Waning-Crescent Clan; of which Wilbur was a leading and influential member and to which Wendell, as well as most of the other weasels in the Shire, also belonged; had survived as long as it had. While they had reputations as hard workers, they were not considered to be the brightest members within their species. "You're right, Wilbur, it is asking the obvious." He said with more than a hint of irritation in his voice. "But I think that it would be best if I let the Sheriff tell you himself. Sheriff?"

Clyde again stepped aside, letting Brutus have the floor.

"My reason for resigning is actually quite simple," Brutus began. "I've decided that I can no longer serve my oath to the laws of Britain AND serve the King in good faith. Yesterday I took a blood-oath to give my life, if necessary, to oppose and overthrow King Jenner because his conduct toward his subjects; you as well as I; has become intolerable." Brutus paused and gazed upon the astonished faces of his Deputies; except for Wendell, who was madly scribbling his notes. He then continued. "I realize that, technically, this constitutes an act of treason on my part. Well, so be it. If I end up on a gallows at some later date, I go knowing that my conscience is clear. But until that happens, I'm going to fight against Jenner's tyranny." Brutus paused again and took a deep breath. Now would come the hardest part of all. "Now, what I'm about to do next may sound a bit crazy..."

"It can't be anymore crazy than what we've already heard!" Shouted a voice from somewhere in the audience. Some of the Deputies broke out in laughter.

Brutus smiled a bit but turned serious again and continued. "But I'm going to ask you to carefully weigh your loyalty to your oath as Deputies against whatever loyalty that you may feel for King Jenner as I did.

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Personally I found him wanting, badly, in all respects and could not see a time in the future when things might get any better. Then, if you feel the way that I do, I'm going to ask you to join me in helping to kick his tail off the Throne!"

Immediately, a whole roomful of paws shot up and dozens of questions were shouted at the Sheriff and Deputy-in-Charge or whispered between the seated members. After several minutes of gavel-pounding, a modicum of order was restored and Clyde pointed to a hare who had kept his paw raised.

The hare, whose name was Liam, stood and asked, "Join you where? And while I do believe that His Majesty's definitely gone off his rocker," This brought another round of guffaws from the assembled Deputies, "What makes you think that anyone'll help you? After all, didn't you help him take the Throne in the first place?"

An angry buzz erupted from the other Deputies and several tried to shout the hare down, but Brutus raised a paw and they immediately fell silent. "Yes, I did help Jenner to get where he is today. I let my own greed for power and fear of King Nicodemus's plans to reform the Office blind me to his transparent manipulations and override my better judgment. But now I've seen the error of my ways and can't, in good conscience, serve him any longer." He said earnestly. He then explained his meeting with Justin and the farmers the previous day and Justin's plan to use his father's estate as his base of operations against Jenner.

A buzz again rose from the audience. Then Senior Deputy Wilbur stood and said, "I have somethin' to say about this!" Several in the room commented to the effect that Wilbur usually seemed to have something to say about EVERYTHING, but Clyde gaveled them to silence and indicated to Wilbur that he could now speak.

"Now I realize," The weasel stated, "That our clan's not considered the brightest in the realm; an' perhaps this is even true. But a good-sized number of my relations are farmers themselves who've worked very hard for whatever respect the Waning-Crescent Clan HAS earned. King Jenner's Land Repossession Decree would've thrown all that hard-won respect right in the loo..." Other Deputies, themselves part-time farmers or relatives of farmers, nodded sympathetically. "...In fact, I had planned on goin' to the City myself to make a personal complaint to His Majesty. But I see now that such a complaint would only have fallen on deaf ears. But I am smart enough to know a good thing when I see it, an' if the Sheriff thinks that this Justin and his effort to dethrone King Jenner is worth givin' up his job an' even dyin' for; then so do I!"

A tremendous cheer erupted from the rows of Deputies and several shook paws with Wilbur and offered congratulations as he sat back down. Even Clyde nodded his approval.

Once the cheering had died down, Brutus addressed Wilbur specifically. "I hope you realize the danger that you'll be âplacing yourselves in. Jenner's not gonna tolerate this challenge to his power." He said.

"An' we're not gonna tolerate his abuse of power!" Wilbur spat back. "My clan has no objection to subjecting itself to the legitimate rule of the Crown, but we will NOT allow ourselves to suffer enslavement by the King!"

Again the audience cheered, several Deputies patting his sharply sloping shoulders to show their approval. Brutus nodded. "Glad to have you on board, Deputy." He said. "Now, if there's anyone who; for whatever reason; still wishes to serve Jenner, please leave the room now and nothing will be held against you." Brutus paused but, other than the scrape of a chair leg and a few nervous coughs, nobody moved from their seats. "Okay, now to the nitty-gritty. I've had Wendell draw up a resignation petition that will go out with the next courier. Basically it tells Jenner that we don't like the way he's running Britain and that we refuse to carry out the Repossession Decree. If you want to make any comments after you sign, be my guest; there's plenty of paper." Scattered laughter erupted from the Deputies. "After you sign, go home to your families. Then I

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strongly suggest that tomorrow you finish whatever harvesting you need to do and head for the Locksley Estate because I rather doubt that whoever Jenner appoints in my place is gonna be in anything like a forgiving mood."

"But what about our houses and lands?" Liam asked skeptically. "If we leave, won't Jenner just take them anyway?"

Brutus nodded. "Yes, but you'll at least be free to have a fighting chance to get them back and your family will be safe instead of being at the not-so-tender mercies of the King." He said pointedly.

"What should we bring with us?" Another Deputy asked from the back of the room.

"No more than you absolutely need." Brutus replied. "Things like your harvests, weapons, tents and whatever will help you get through the coming Winter are fine; but stuff like furniture, unless you plan on using it for kindling to start your fires, are best left at home."

"But my mother's confined to bed!" Said a third. "What about her?"

Brutus rolled his eyes in frustration. Clyde noticed and quickly stepped in to help him. "I'm sure we'll be able to figure out something." The ferret said. He then pointed to Wendell. "Remember to sign the resignation petition before you leave." He announced. He then rapped the gavel on the lectern and hastily dismissed the meeting.

Shortly afterward; Brutus, Clyde, Wilbur and Wendell were gathered in Brutus's office. It had taken about another two hours, but eventually all of the other Deputies in the Shire had signed the petition. "Well," Brutus said wearily, rubbing his bloodshot eyes. "That went a whole lot better than expected." He then leafed through the petition one last time, rolled it into a scroll, tied it with a length of scarlet ribbon and placed it in the courier's bag that lay on his desk. "At least no one tried to arrest me for high treason to the Crown." He said without humor.

"You've done the right thing, Sir!" Wendell said excitedly. "An' I'm also proud of you, Uncle Wilbur! I thought only the Sheriff could speechify like that!"

"Yeah," Clyde said, "Even I've gotta admit I'm impressed."

Wilbur shrugged. "The Waning-Crescent Clan owes a great deal of loyalty to the other animals in Nottinghamshire." He said solemnly as his voice grew hushed and his eyes took on a far-away look. "When our grandparents came to Britain during the war after escaping from the Continent, none of the other Sheriffs would let them stay for very long for fear that we'd be disloyal an' cause trouble. But for some reason Nottingham was different. The Sheriff an' the other animals actually made them feel welcome."

Brutus smiled. The Sheriff of Nottinghamshire at that time had been his own father, Benjamin; newly appointed to the Office by King Nicodemus's father, King Sigmund. That Brutus's father would extend such a kindness to other animals, even weasels from a foreign land, didn't surprise the son in the least. His father had always loved helping others and had taken his oath to carry out the laws of the Crown very seriously; but always with compassion. But Brutus's smile turned to sadness as he remembered the events that had brought him to this point. He couldn't help wondering what his father would think of him; after all, hadn't he helped create this very situation by his own complicity in King Nicodemus's murder? "But I've changed." He reminded himself. "I've sworn on my own life to rid Britain of that mistake and I fully intend to carry out my vow." Maybe his father wouldn't judge him quite so harshly after all.

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Brutus was roused from his thoughts by the sound of flapping wings at the door. Even before a first knock, Wendell was out of his seat. He bolted to the door and ushered the visitor inside. It was a rook, one of the King's official couriers.

Brutus grabbed the cloth bag from his desk and tossed it to the bird, who caught it expertly.

The rook regarded him with wary gray eyes as he felt the weight of his package. "Feels a tad light tonight." He said, his voice a throaty rasp. "Yours are usually the heaviest ones on my route." He used his beak to indicate the other bags slung across his back.

"Then what're you complaining about?" Brutus asked calmly. But inside, every nerve was on edge.

The rook shrugged. He then placed the bag around his neck and stepped back into the blackness of the night, only the sheen of his black feathers from the dim light from the lamp in the room giving any clue that he was there. A quick flap of his powerful wings sent him airborne and Southward to his next stop.

Wendell closed the door against the cold, but thankfully windless, Autumn night.

"Well my friends, I have a feeling that we're all in some real serious trouble." Wilbur observed nonchalantly.

Clyde arched an eyebrow. "Anybody ever tell you that you have a gift for stating the obvious?" He said sarcastically.

"Nope." the weasel said mischievously. "Your the first."

Chapter 40: 39

"Sir, wake up please."

Sullivan groaned. He couldn't remember when he'd last gotten a decent nights sleep. He mumbled something to whoever was shaking him.

"Sir, are you awake?"

Sullivan opened his eyes. "Yes, dammit, I am now." He growled, his anger too diffused by the fog of sleep to actually inflict on the guard who had awakened him any of the violence that he would have liked at that moment. He sat up, rubbed his bleary eyes and examined the night sky through the window of his bedroom. While he could see from the positions of the stars that it was almost morning, he could not see any hint of light blue on the horizon that would have told him that the sun was about to rise. "What the hell is so important that you wake me up before dawn?" He demanded.

"His Majesty wishes to see you immediately, Sir." The guard replied. "He told me to bring you as you are."

Sullivan sighed, grabbed his robe from a bedknob of his headboard and followed the guard from the barracks.

As he walked across the Castle's courtyard he could hear shouting from the direction of the throneroom.

When he arrived he found Jenner pacing the floor, angrily dictating a letter to one of his scribes; an overweight hedgehog that everyone called Iggy.

"...such behavior will NOT be tolerated while I rule this Kingdom! And furthermore..." Jenner stopped when he saw the new arrival. "That will be all for now. We can resume this later." He told the scribe, his icy tone sending a chill down Sullivan's back to the tip of his tail.

The scribe bowed as far as his belly would permit and waddled from the room. Sullivan could not help but notice the tears streaming from his eyes.

Jenner, meanwhile, had stalked to the throne and planted himself on it. From one of the armrests he took a scrolled document and tossed it at Sullivan. It landed short of its intended recipient and Sullivan was forced to bend down and pick it up. "Read!" Jenner commanded.

Sullivan unrolled the pages and read through it. That the Sheriff of Nottinghamshire could compose such a document came as no real surprise to him. Of all the Sheriffs of the various Shires of Britain, he had struck Sullivan as potentially the most reluctant to accept the price of Jenner's ascension to the Throne. That Jenner HAD actually exacted that price must have come as an immense shock to them. Jenner had not, after all, been terribly explicit about the method by which he would depose his adopted brother. Probably they, like himself; Sullivan imagined; were caught by surprise that he would actually be so brazen as to commit murder. It was an irony that even Sullivan could appreciate: The top law enforcement officers of the land abetting the murder of THEIR boss, even if it WAS a conspiracy of omission rather than commission.

"Well?" Jenner asked, drumming his fingers on the armrest.

Sullivan shrugged. "What can I say, Your Majesty? He wants out? I say 'Good riddance.'" He replied.

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Jenner made a sour face. "Fine time for that ursine idiot to get ethical on me!" He spat. "I had plans for Nottinghamshire and needed someone of his reputation and organizational skills to help me carry them out!"

"So? You're the King!" Sullivan said, "Your word is law! Just appoint a new Sheriff!"

"Exactly why you're here!" Jenner said, a smile slowly crossing his lips.

"Huh?" Sullivan grunted, suddenly confused.

Jenner alighted from his Throne and fairly skipped over to where Sullivan was standing and placed an arm firmly around his shoulder. "Why, who else would I appoint to be my new Sheriff of Nottingham? You've been my most faithful servant through these harsh past few months; and I've been so remiss in rewarding that loyalty and devotion!"

"If only you knew!" Sullivan thought to himself nervously. Over the Summer he'd maintained sporadic contact with the so-called "Society to Maintain the Rule of the King", often pronounced "smirk" by those few animals who knew of its existence. While he had not met with "The Voice" since the meeting at the inn several weeks ago, he was kept apprised of their status by notes slipped between his pillow and pillowcase every few weeks by, he assumed, the maid who had introduced him to them. But this development would, however unwittingly on Jenner's part, endanger that relationship. "Uh, gee, Your Majesty. I, uh, I must admit I'm flattered, but I'm sure that there're others FAR better qualified for that Office than I am. After all, I'm a soldier, not a lawman." He said, picking his words as carefully as possible.

"Nonsense!" Jenner said with a dismissive wave of his beringed paw. "The only qualifications for that post now are loyalty to me and the ruthlessness to carry out my plans for that particular Shire. Think of it, my friend, you'll have power far beyond giving marching orders to a few Troop-Captains! You'll have a whole Shire at your command!" He exclaimed, his voice rising with excitement.

"I don't know," Sullivan said dubiously. "After that Repossession Decree, I'm not gonna be the most popular public figure..."

"Pfagh!" Jenner exclaimed derisively. "Popularity has nothing to do with law enforcement! Even some of my 'dear' brother's own laws were unpopular!" ("Sure!" Sullivan pointedly thought to himself. "They were unpopular with the TRUE criminal element; not ordinary subjects!") "The line between soldier and police official is much thinner than most of your future colleagues would have you believe." A half-sneer came to Jenner's lips and his voice became a cold whisper. "In fact, I've been considering 're-evaluating' the appointments of several of the other Sheriffs. I'm beginning to have my doubts as to where THEIR loyalties lie."

Inside, Sullivan resigned himself to the inevitable. To refuse Jenner's offer, while not necessarily a career-ender, would make the lion think twice about Sullivan's own loyalty to him; and Sullivan needed Jenner to see him as someone in whom he could have the highest degree of trust so that when the opportunity presented itself, Sullivan could take advantage of that trust and use that opportunity to eliminate Jenner. "Well," Sullivan said with the merest hint of reluctance, "I guess you're looking at the new Sheriff of Nottingham."

"Excellent!" Jenner exclaimed. "Make whatever arrangements are necessary to leave this morning. You'll also want to paw-pick a group of Deputies to take with you. I'll swear you all in just before you leave." He instructed.

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"What about a new Captain-of-the-Guard?" Sullivan asked.

Jenner waved the question off. "Oh, I don't know." He said. "What about the Captain of Third Troop? Gil..."

"Gisbourne, Your Majesty?" Sullivan corrected, cleverly disguising it as a question.

"Yes. What about him?" Jenner asked.

"He's a bit young." Sullivan said, surprised by Jenner's choice. "Clemm and Sykes have more experience and they'd probably be more than a little ticked off that someone ten years their junior got fast-tracked on a whim."

Jenner's countenance darkened. It wasn't like Sullivan to show initiative. While he didn't exactly want unadulterated sycophancy (such behavior tended to quickly degenerate into insufferably irritable sniveling) he also didn't want a mind potentially capable of independent thought that might later "get ethical" and begin to question orders. But he also prided himself on being smart enough to recognize those boundaries that could be safely crossed, and those best left undisturbed. Sullivan no doubt knew his soldiers well enough that he was probably right about their reaction to the promotion that had just been proposed; and while "divide and conquer" was Jenner's usual, not to mention most effective, strategy, "united we stand" also had its own advantages. As quickly as it had come, the beginnings of Jenner's frown was gone. "Perhaps you're right, old friend." He said. He would interview all of the Troop-Captains anyway just to get an idea of what kind of loyalty he could expect from them. "I'll no doubt have made a decision by the end of the day." He said noncommittally.

The first rays of the dawn light were now beginning to creep through the window of the room. Jenner dismissed Sullivan and called for the scribe, who quickly appeared; looking more frazzled and exhausted than usual; and waddled back into the throne room. After the door had closed, Sullivan could hear Jenner resuming the tirade that he'd been dictating when Sullivan had been summoned. For only the second time in his life, Sullivan felt genuine sympathy for a fellow creature.

Chapter 41: 40

The Noon Sun shone brightly as Mrs. Brisbee stood at the back door and looked out onto the field where her children and Jeremy were working. The harvest was pretty much over now, the only work remaining being to plow under the old roots and stems and other waste that would serve as fertilizer for next years plantings. Over the past several days, she'd been taking careful inventory of what had been reaped from the garden and had not liked what she'd seen. Because it had been mid-Summer when the garden had been planted, some of what was now in the root-cellar was not yet ripe; nor was there enough of it to feed everyone in the group for the whole winter. Jeremy had assured her that, if worst came to worst, he could temporarily resume his minstreling career. When she'd pointed out that he had no lute to sing with, he'd shrugged and said that he could always trade his crossbow for one. "After all," He'd stated confidently, "It's not as if this is the only crossbow in all of Britain."

Another problem was that Timothy's dreams and nightmares were becoming more and more troubling because they were now beginning to manifest themselves when he was awake. At any time during the day or night he would slip into a trance and describe events that were either apparently happening in distant places but at that moment; or would supposedly happen sometime in the future, usually related to the previous dreams about the eventual battle that she believed would be fought between Justin and Jenner. Over the past several weeks she'd even taken to writing down the contents of the dreams; but it was of little help. Most of them were cloaked in an obscure symbolism by Timothy's young mind; no doubt created as a form of self-protection, she decided, otherwise he'd probably have gone insane from fear months ago.

The smell of lentils reminded her that lunch was on the stove. She went back to the kitchen and stirred the steaming pot of soup. She was just about to set the table and call the others in when Cynthia rushed in through the door.

"Mommy! Mommy!" She exclaimed breathlessly. "Doctor Ages came back! An' he's brought some new friend's with him!" The little rabbit quickly grabbed her mother's paw and dragged the vixen outside. At the far end of the field, Jeremy and the other children were talking to Ages, a weasel dressed in the uniform of the King's Guard, a young and handsome; if not particularly well-dressed; gray fox, a beautiful young skunk and, most surprisingly of all, a face that Mrs. Brisbee instantly recognized. She let go of her daughter's paw and ran as fast as her own legs could carry her and threw her arms around the neck of the chicken, tears of joy streaming from her eyes.

"Oh, Klucky! You don't know how glad I am to see you!" She cried.

The hen warmly returned the hug. "Och, lassie! No' as glad as I am t' see you!" She said.

"How's your mother?" Brisbee asked. "Is she..."

Lady Kluck shook her head. "She's in the care o' th' spirits now, lass." She put a wing on Mrs. Brisbee's shoulder when the vixen bowed her head in sorrow. "Don't look so down, dear. Mother lived a long an' happy life. I'm sure tha' she appreciates the thought."

Mrs. Brisbee had met Lady Kluck's mother several times as a young girl at Court. While the elder Kluck had, on the outside at least, been rather haughty of manner; when she'd been in more relaxed surroundings, she'd shown a genuine charm that Mrs. Brisbee had tried hard to emulate.

Ages then introduced Stabb, Will, and Heather; and Mrs. Brisbee introduced herself, the children and Jeremy. She then invited them in for lunch.

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After Mrs. Brisbee and Heather served the soup and they were all seated at the table; Ages had Stabb, Will, Heather and Kluck give brief accounts of their journeys and why they had risked becoming outlaws to find both Mrs. Brisbee and Justin.

"Y'see, Ma'am," Stabb said. "Jenner's hurt us all in some way. An' he'll keep hurtin' you, me,..." He swept a paw across the table to emphasize his point. "...all of us, all of Britain until he gets what he wants."

"But what DOES he want?" Asked Martin, irritation plain in his voice. "He's the King! He already has everything!"

Ages chuckled. "In Jenner's mind 'everything'; power, property, money, adoration; isn't enough. He and those who hang onto his cape believe that, by virtue of the mere fact that they have a lot of money or political power, they should be able to control the smallest aspects of the lives of those whom they consider 'inferior' to them." Ages explained.

Stabb nodded sadly. "That's what it comes down to. Control." He said. "Jenner and his friends know that if and when they can take total control of the land, they'll control what and how much food is grown and can use that food as a way to force us..." Again he used his paw to indicate those seated around the table. "...to support their lifestyle."

"Y'mean they want to turn us into slaves." Martin said glumly.

"In so many words, Yes." Stabb stated.

The rest of the meal was eaten in silence as the gravity of Stabb's words weighed upon the group.

Chapter 42: 41

Linnette Talbot was less than impressed by the Locksley Estate. While she was sure that, visually, the building must have represented untold splendor; she, being unable to see, was concerned about more practical aspects of her and Galen's move from their tiny cottage on the heath, such as navigating her way around the massive edifice. It had taken her several weeks to become completely comfortable with the layout of the cottage; and this even though Galen had designed and built it specifically with her visual impairment in mind. Unfortunately, the same could not be said for the manor-house. In the few hours that she'd spent there she'd gotten lost in the sprawling structure more times than she cared to think about. Finally, in utter frustration, she'd demanded in no uncertain terms that Galen either postpone his efforts to supervise the rebuilding of the collapsed kitchen wall and guide her through the building himself, or; if he was unwilling or unable to do this; provide either a guide or some other means that would give her free access throughout the building without her worrying about getting lost or tripping over something and breaking her neck. Galen had stood silently and unflinchingly during this dressing down, afterwards ordering several of the workers to rig a temporary system of ropes that his wife could use to guide her through the building until she had familiarized herself with the layout. When one of the workers had made a crack about who wore the pants in the family, Galen had angrily suggested that HE try to navigate a building this large while wearing a blindfold and pointedly reminded them all that the "blindfold" that his wife wore was one that could NEVER be removed after such an excercise. He then ordered that the worker who'd made the remark guide her through the house for the rest of the day. The worker had vehemently protested, but Galen pointedly reminded him of his vow to Justin and had made it clear that Justin would not take such mistreatment of his adopted sister lightly. The worker, cowed into a sullen silence, dutifully escorted her through the manor-house until the end of the work-day.

After dinner she and Galen withdrew to the small apartment that they had set up within two interior rooms of the building, settling themselves in front of a small fire in the fireplace.

"Honey, I want to apologize for that scene that I made in front of your workers earlier today." She said. "I had no right to embarrass you like that."

"No, Linney, you were absolutely right. I should have remembered how hard it was for you when we moved into the cottage and realized that a place this big would present it's own problems." He said. "Hopefully the ropes that we've strung throughout the manor will help some; and tomorrow I'll try to figure out some way to let you know what room you're in at any given time."

"I'm going to miss the Heath." She said wistfully. "Once other animals start moving in, we cankiss anymore moments like this goodbye."

"I don't see why. Even if we end up moving into a single room we'll still have a measure of privacy." He said. "And besides, we both come from large families; it's not as if we're not used to living in some rather cramped quarters." He added.

Linnette pouted a bit. "I know," She said, a hint of regret in her voice. "But I was really beginning to enjoy the feeling of being able to go through a day without someone else offering to help me do this or that chore. I kinda liked that..."

"Independence." He finished the sentence for her.

She nodded. "As isolated as we were, I really thought that it was a splendid isolation because I knew that it would always be one that I would share with you for the rest of my life." She said, her voice a hushed

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whisper.

Galen smiled and gently wrapped his muscular arm around his wife's shoulders, snuggling as closely as possible to her. "Don't worry, Honey. Even if all we end up sharing here is a bed, a couple of pillows and a few quilts; as long as we have each other, that'll always be more'n enough for me." He whispered into her ear.

"Promise?" She purred.

"On my honor as a soldier, lover and husband." He said.

"Not in that order I hope." She said with a school-girlish giggle.

"In any order you wish!" He said.

She took his paw and playfully pulled him from the couch and, after giving him a hug, began leading him to their bedroom. "C'mere lover! Let's see how good you are at keeping your promises!"

Chapter 43: 42

Justin's return was a joyous and, on Mrs. Brisbee's part, tearful occasion. After the celebratory meal, Stabb told him of the events leading to his own, Will's, Heather's and Lady Kluck's desire to fight Jenner's stranglehold on Britain. Justin told them of his plans to use the Locksley Estate as his headquarters from which to oppose Jenner's tyranny.

That night, after all the others had gone to bed, Justin and Mrs. Brisbee shared a pot of tea in their room.

"I'm sorry I left without telling you." He said. "But I knew that if I had, you would have insisted on coming with me and I simply couldn't stand the thought of you in danger."

"And we're not in danger NOW?" She asked, her voice a mixture of skepticism tinged with anger. "Jenner's been telling all of Britain that Dr. Ages and I are part of a plot to kill him! So far no one seems to have taken this propaganda seriously, but who's to say that sometime in the future someone, somewhere won't decide that they need a few thousand crowns of extra spending money and turn us over, along with this," She fingered the chain of the Amulet, which hung around her neck. "To a King who wouldn't give a second thought to doing to me and my children what he did to my husband, their father," She pointed an accusing finger at him. "Your brother!"

Justin nodded sadly. "You're right to be angry with me, I suppose. I've been so absorbed in my own obsession with my past that I've neglected the problems of the here-and-now." He said.

Mrs. Brisbee took Justin's paws in her own and held them, feeling their warmth. "Make no mistake, Justin Locksley, I still love you!" She declared. "And I want, more than anything, to help you make Jenner pay for Jonathan's murder; but I also want to know that you'll still be around when all this is over with and not out chasing every silly little rumor that you might feel is connected to your past!"

Justin bowed his head. "I understand, Marian. I know that my past, no matter how much I might want it to be different, can't be relived or changed." He said. He lifted his eyes to meet Mrs. Brisbee's. "Now I'm setting my eyes and mind to a time in the future when we and the animals of Britain can live without having to fear our own shadows. Do you remember what I told you when we were on the road out of Londontown the morning after Jonathan and King Nicodemus were killed?"

Mrs. Brisbee's eyes welled with tears as she thought back to that terrible moment in the first light of dawn. "You said that I held the future of Britain in my hands..."

"And?" He prodded gently.

"You told me that Jonathan's love for me wasn't misplaced."

"And?" He asked again, his voice more persistent."

"If I kept my chin up, all would turn out well."

"And I still firmly believe that to this very day." He stated. "But you've got to believe it too. The animals of Britain need to know that there're those of us who are willing to stand up to Jenner's reign of terror. I'm willing to lead the fight but I need a strong pillar of support and a symbol of what this fight is about." Justin gently cupped a paw under Mrs. Brisbee's chin so that their eyes met. "I need for you to tell Britain our side of the story; how Jenner and his friends conspired to murder King Nicodemus and Jonathan in order to enrich

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themselves and enslave the rest of us. If Jenner is going to use lies to seduce or terror to instill fear, then we need to use the truth to strip away those falsehoods; otherwise, Jenner WILL win and we may as well admit defeat before we even try to fight the battle."

Mrs. Brisbee pulled away from Justin, tears streaming from her eyes. "Is that all I am to you too?" She sobbed angrily, "A propaganda tool? A peg to hang this damned Amulet on while you rush off to battle for Hearts and Minds?"

"N-No, Marian! I..." Justin stammered, utterly surprised by the vehemence of her anger.

"You tell me to keep my chin up!" She cried, "But that's pretty hard to do when I'm spending my nights worrying about whether or not my children will spend the rest of their days either on the run as fugitives from the Crown or, worse, rotting in some dungeon awaiting execution for treason!" Mrs. Brisbee wiped a tear from her cheek with the back of her paw like a small child and continued. "Dr. Ages told me that he has no fear of what Jenner could do to him if he were ever captured and I suppose I can understand that. After all, the better part of his life is behind him. Unfortunately, I don't have the luxury of being able to have THAT outlook! I have children who depend on me for their survival now that Jonathan is gone!"

"You're right, Marian." Justin said. "I've spent most of my life as a soldier. I know what responsibility that entails when it comes to leading a Troop of other soldiers into battle. But when it comes down to it, my comrades and I; as soldiers; can at least fight on something like equal terms with whatever enemy we might be ordered to face. Your children, on the other paw, depend on you utterly and completely for their very lives. I guess I forgot that little detail in my rush to take on Jenner." He bowed his head, his ears drooping sadly. "You're also right about my trying to use you as a propaganda tool." He said ruefully. "Yes, the animals of Britain DO need a symbol to rally around; someone or something to personify the cause that they're fighting for; but if I make you become nothing more than an object, the peg on which to hang the Amulet or our cause, then yes, you're absolutely right, and we all might just as well let Jenner keep both the Crown and Amulet because I'll have become just like him."

Mrs. Brisbee put a consoling arm around Justin's shoulder. "Then you see what I mean? All I ask is that I be allowed to make the children my first priority in any decisions having to do with our fight against Jenner; and that I not become some battle-standard to be paraded around whenever the troops need a morale boost. I'm a thinking, feeling mother of four who is willing to do whatever she can to help; but I've got to be allowed to do it on my own terms."

Justin nodded. "Yes, Marian," He said, "I see what you mean and understand completely. It wasn't your choice for your husband to be murdered and for you and your children to be dragged from your home in the middle of the night. I know what it's like to be uprooted; not having any say in events over which you have no control. Unfortunately, Jenner pretty much has control over our lives and actions at the moment, even if indirectly. That's why I need for you to come with me to my father's Estate; so I know that you and the children will be safe from his reach."

Mrs. Brisbee sighed. Her family had been forcibly relocated twice in one year. The effects on her; the sleeplessness, the nightmares even when she was sleeping, the dark circles under her eyes that marred her once radiantly beautiful face; were bad enough. But she was, in the end, willing to sacrifice everything; including her health and, if it REALLY came down to it, her life; for the sake of Theresa, Martin, Cynthia and Timothy. But what about the effects of this whole debacle on them? Theresa and Martin seemed to be holding up well enough, although they were probably far behind on their school lessons because Jeremy; while a fine and patient young soul, bless him; was nearly illiterate; not that this was any disadvantage to a bard, whose traditions were oral anyway; and she was always, so it seemed, far too busy with the housework to continue their lessons. She resolved then and there to change THAT particular state of

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affairs. Maybe Lady Kluck would be willing to act as a teacher until some kind of school could be set up at the Estate. She would, if she could be persuaded to accept, be more than equal to the task of tutoring the children; after all, Cynthia and Timothy were also at about the age when they too should begin school. And poor Cynthia. More and more she had taken to sleeping under her bed; so often, in fact, that Mrs. Brisbee was on the verge of simply moving the little rabbit's mattress there so that she wouldn't have to sleep on the cold, hard wooden floor. And even at that, she was beginning to have nightmares with a frequency that was beginning to equal her younger brother; although none of these seemed to be prophetic, just frightening. And Timothy wasn't doing much better. She had talked to Dr. Ages about the possibility, much as the thought pained her, of drugging him before bed each night so that he would be able to get at least SOME kind of decent sleep each night. But Ages had discouraged this particular notion, telling her that he was afraid that a dose adequate to put her son into a deep enough sleep each night might, by necessity, be toxic to his small body as well. And the thought of the coming Winter loomed in her mind as well. She remembered those long sad nights of the previous Winter when she and Jonathan had tended to him when he was fighting for his life against pneumonia, even after the Royal Physician had all but given up. Somehow, by some miracle of strength or will, Timothy had survived the ordeal. But if Timothy or any of his siblings were to again come down with a serious illness, ANY illness, even Dr. Ages would be hard-pressed to deal with such a situation. At least at the Estate a harsh Winter, while difficult, would be less likely to escalate into a life-threatening crisis. "Alright, Justin," She said. "I know that this will probably place a strain on them, but tomorrow we'll move out of here and over to your father's estate. But we also need to talk about setting up some sort of school for them."

Justin's face brightened up a bit. "Don't worry, Marian." He said. "I'm sure my sister, Linney, will more than welcome the idea of a school."

Mrs. Brisbee gave Justin a hug and kiss goodnight and they slipped under the covers of their beds. After she blew out the candle, she waited for her eyes to accustom themselves to the dark. Ever so slowly, the darkness and shadows resolved themselves to a reassuringly lumpy contour as she drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 44: 43

Sullivan was both awed and dismayed by the eerie silence that greeted him and his Deputies on this cold, gloomy Autumn morning. During the week that had elapsed from Brutus's resignation the residents of the town for which Nottinghamshire was named had almost completely abandoned it.

"Almost everyone's gone, Sheriff." His Deputy-in-Charge; a ferret that the others called "Blackjack" because of his nearly jet black fur and tough, no-nonsense demeanor; said, flipping through a sheaf of notes. "The only ones left are a few of the larger local landholders who're exempted from the Repossession Decree."

"And are, therefore, loyal to His Majesty." Sullivan grunted, completing Blackjack's thought.

"I guess." The ferret shrugged. "They all wanna know what you plan to do about bringin' 'em back." He stated.

Sullivan pounded an angry fist on the desk that he sat at. "Damned idiots!" He exclaimed. "How the hell can I bring 'em back when I have no idea where they've gone!"

Just then, the door to the office flew open and in stomped another Deputy, a lynx, who was trailing a rope and half-pulling, half-dragging along a hare, who was tied at the neck and wrists. "Deputy Sillus reporting, Sir!" The cat said with the slight hiss-like lisp common to his species. "I caught THIS," He wrinkled his nose disdainfully. "spying on us from the woods at the edge of town." The hare was probably no older than his late teens and his fur and clothing were torn and mud- and blood-stained from numerous small cuts on his face, shoulders and upper chest along with a good-sized lump over his right eye. Sillus had not escaped from the ravages of whatever fracas he and his opponent had engaged in either. His clothing was equally splattered and rent and a small chunk of flayed skin hung from the underside of one of his ears, a small rivulet of blood still flowing down into the matted, clotting fur below.

Sullivan frowned. "What's your name, son?" He asked.

"I'll not tell you!" The hare spat defiantly. "You're not MY father!"

The lynx gave a sharp tug to the rope causing his captive to wince in pain. "You'll answer the Sheriff if ya know what's good fer ya!"

"Deputy. Why don't you go and get yourself tended to." Sullivan said, his voice gentle but leaving no room for misinterpretation. The cat opened his mouth to argue, but the angry glare from Blackjack made him think better of his words. Sillus quickly turned and stalked out of the office, exchanging a hateful glare of his own with the prisoner.

Sullivan then turned his attention to the prisoner. "Cut the boy loose, Deputy." He ordered. Blackjack drew his dagger, which elicited a flicker of nervousness from the hare's eyes but whose expression was otherwise one of sullen anger. "Now, what's your name?" He asked again.

"Why should I tell you anythin'?" The hare growled.

Sullivan shrugged. "Well, unless you'd prefer that I call you 'boy' all the time. But I'd rather be able to call you by name. Mine's Sullivan."

The hare looked skeptically at both the wolf and the ferret. He was in REAL deep trouble now. When his father had come home that night a week ago and told them about the mass resignation of the entire law

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enforcement contingent of the Shire, he'd pleaded with his father to be allowed to join the new army that King Nicodemus's former Captain-of-the-Guard was trying to form to fight King Jenner's tyrannical rule. But his father had scotched that idea, telling him that "this is a war, son. There's gonna be plenty of killin', mark my words, an' I'll be dependin' on you to look after your mother, sisters an' brothers if I'm sent to meet the spirits." But those words had not mollified him. Instead, he'd taken the first opportunity while the rest of the family was moving to the Locksley Estate to slip away and try to get a close-up look at their would-be oppressors. Unfortunately, he apparently hadn't hidden himself quite as well as he'd believed because the lynx had come out of nowhere and proceeded to thrash him and scratch at him. Sure, he'd gotten a few good licks of his own in; the cat would have scars of its own to prove that; but in the end the older and stronger animal had prevailed and soon had him subdued. He finally decided to swallow his pride and hoped that his father would forgive him for this small act of concession to the enemy. "My name's Declan Wyclyffe." He mumbled, spelling out the name and emphasizing the two "Y"s out of years of habit.

Sullivan nodded impassively and said, "Nice to meet you, Declan. I'm sorry about your run-in with the Deputy. He's young and a bit too eager to impress. I'll speak to him at some point."

Declan narrowed his eyes. "I know what you're tryin' to do!" He said, a measure of desperation in his voice. "You're tryin' to get me to tell you where the others are! Well I won't tell you even if you try to torture it out of me!"

Sullivan exchanged a look with Blackjack; who shrugged and gave Sullivan a confused look of his own. "I honestly have no idea what you're talking about. My job here is simply to replace the Sheriff and the Deputies who resigned last week. That's all. I have no interest in where anyone went. I assumed that they were all at harvest." He said.

Declan eyed the new Sheriff suspiciously. Any idiot should have known that all of the harvests were completed.

Sullivan sighed. Obviously this kid was no bumpkin. While Sullivan would've given one of his canine-teeth to know where the town's inhabitants had run off to, he decided that even torture, for the moment at least, was simply too extreme a measure and would only do more harm than good. "Deputy." He said; reaching for a pen, ink and paper.

"Sir?" Blackjack answered.

Sullivan scratched out something, folded the paper and handed it to the hare. "Take our young guest to the hospital to have his injuries treated, then take him into the forest and release him. Anyone who tries to stop him will answer to me." To Declan he said, "Take this note to whoever's leading the townsfolk."

Declan frowned, but finally nodded.

"Good lad." Sullivan said, and sent them on their way.

A while later, Blackjack returned and reported to him. "The boy's on his way, sir."

Sullivan nodded pensively.

"Sir, shouldn't we have sent someone to follow him?" The ferret asked.

Sullivan shook his head emphatically. "No, Deputy. We'll find out soon enough what's going on. Until then, we've gotta get ourselves organized here. When the townsfolk left, they seem to have taken every last bushel

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of their food with 'em so I'm gonna have to get Jenner to send some our way or we'll all be diggin' for roots by next week."

Chapter 45: 44

What a madhouse! Until last night Locksley Manor had been virtually empty; except for himself, Linney and a few other families who had finished their harvests a bit early. But today at least a hundred families had shown up, all clamoring to be allowed under the protective wing of the Locksley name. Fortunately Galen Talbot, late of H.M. 9th Foot Brigade, was up to the task of sorting through the chaos that surrounded him. It would be at least another week before the breach in the kitchen wall was completely repaired because finding stones to replace those that were missing was taking longer than anticipated so nights in the manor-house would be breath-foggingly cold for a while yet, not that it really mattered; he, Linney and all the other animals were growing their thick, almost shaggy, Winter coats. By day, the cleanup of the interior was proceeding apace as the walls were stripped of the accumulated mold and covered with bolts of canvas until the day arrived when the exquisite murals could be restored to their former glory. A number of families, contrary to the former Sheriff's recommendation, had brought their furniture and Galen, as Justin's paw-picked representative, had laid down the law: Any "nonessential" furniture (i.e. bric-a-brac shelves) was either to be returned or used as firewood, and "essential" furniture (such as beds, tables and chairs or benches) would become property of the Estate until the original owners were able to return home after Jenner was overthrown; provided, of course, that they could produce the receipt that Galen had written out for them.

Not all families were opting to stay in the manor-house itself. A large tent-city was springing up around the edifice and a number of businesses including both a black-and coopersmith and a woodwright were providing for this impromptu village. Galen had placed the former Sheriff in charge of bringing some sort of order to the layout and resolving disputes among animals who might vie for a "favored" spot. This Brutus did with a flair and almost military precision that amazed the former Army Colonel. With several former Deputies, he carefully surveyed and divided lots among various families, assigning them as fairly as possible under the circumstances.

By Midday most of the major problems were being ironed out and both Galen and Brutus took a respite in the small office that Galen had set up in a small block of rooms that were assigned to become Justin and the Brisbee's living-quarters. Over bowls of hot mushroom and barley soup, prepared by Linney and the other wives, Galen said, "I really have to thank you for all you're help today, Sheriff."

Brutus smiled happily and shrugged. "'Twer'n't nuthun'. These folk know that Justin has theirbest interests in mind and, while there's always gonna be the potential for friction among them, I think they're also beginning to realize that he can't do it all alone and that he needs all the support and cooperation that we can give him." He said.

Galen nodded thoughtfully. "Unfortunately, this brings up something that I wish I could avoid, but really can't." He said.

"Oh?" Brutus asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Yes." Galen answered, pulling his chair closer to Brutus's "I'd like for you to take over as Justin's second-in-command when he gets back." Brutus was about to say something, but Galen raised a paw to silence him. "I know. Justin chose me and I'm sure he had some very good reasons. But over the past several days I've come to the conclusion that, while our cause is important, so too is the commitment that I made to Linney when I fell hopelessly and passionately in love with her. I'm more than willing to serve in an advisory capacity, but I'm afraid that my main priority is looking to the comfort and safety of my wife. I hope you'll understand." He explained.

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Again, Brutus smiled. "Of course." He said. "When he gets back I'll talk to your brother about taking over day-to-day operations. We should probably also see about having some sort of "town meeting", as it were, to elect or appoint some sort of council or other governing body so that we can better see to everyone's needs."

Galen nodded his assent. Just then, one of Brutus's former Deputies and his wife appeared at the door. She was quietly sobbing into her apron and his face was contorted in both anger and worry.

"Liam, Mrs. Wycliffe. What's wrong?" Brutus asked.

"It's Declan, our second oldest; he's disappeared." Liam said quietly, obviously just barely in control of his temper.

"He-He was...helping us...with our move." Mrs. Wycliffe stated between sobs. "Bu-But we...we lost track of him sometime this morning."

"Alright, Deputy, you know the drill." Brutus said calmly, lifting himself from his chair. "Have everyone drop what they're doing and gather just outside the entrance to the manor-house so we can pick the search teams." He turned to Galen and said, "We've had to search the forest for lost kids before so we set up a special procedure." The bear then led them out of the office, grabbing his ever-present quarterstaff, and took them to the top landing of the Grand Staircase. He then rapped the 'staff on the sturdy wooden floor and called for everyone's attention, the two sounds echoing and reverberating like thunder through the immense structure. He then ordered everyone outside as quickly as possible.

A few minutes later, all of the animals were gathered outside of Locksley Manor as Brutus explained the situation. He was about to pick search teams when he saw a familiar figure, pulling a hand-cart and followed by several other animals, emerging from one of the forest paths. Mrs. Wycliffe shouted her joy as her son climbed wearily down from the cart and ran to him and gave him a loving hug. Liam strode over and quickly examined his son's bandaged wounds and said sharply, "I don't know whether to hug you or put you over my knee!" The little anger that was left on his face then faded to a relieved smile. "But since someone else has obviously dispensed your punishment, I guess I'd better give you a dose of comfort." And he too hugged his son.

By now the crowd was gathered around Justin and the strangers who accompanied him. In all the clamor, no one noticed the black rooster who was surreptitiously making his way toward the former Sheriff. The bird then approached the bear from behind, tapped a wing on his massive back and then drew it back.

Brutus felt someone tapping him on his back. When he turned around to see who it was, he found himself nose-to-beak with a young rooster wearing a dark poncho-like tunic with a cross-bow slung across his back and over one shoulder and a quiver of bolts hanging from his belt. "Yes?" He asked. This was all that he had time to say before his world suddenly went black.

Brutus had no idea how long he'd been laying in the grass when his eyes finally opened. Overhead a pair of young children, both rabbits, were on their haunches looking down at him. One, a female with a crudely made doll, asked the other, a male with eyes both sad and wise beyond his years, "D'ya think he's asleep?"

"No, Cynthia." The male answered. "His eyes are open now."

Cynthia took a closer look and her eyes widened with curiosity. "Are you alright, Mister Bear?" She asked.

A small crowd was now gathering around them and a ferret and a weasel had to jostle their way through them to reach Brutus.

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"Let us through! Let us through!" The ferret ordered. The two rabbits made room for the two newcomers, but stayed by the bear's side.

"Brutus, are you awake?" The ferret asked, his voice heavy with concern.

Brutus shook his head and blinked when he heard the familiar voice. "I think so." He groaned weakly. "What happened?"

"Do you remember a rooster we tossed into a mudpit last Summer?" The weasel asked.

Brutus closed his eyes and dredged his memories. Hadn't he heard something about that solong ago? He opened his eyes again. "Vaguely." He mumbled.

"Well, your past just caught up with you. That was him." The weasel said.

Brutus lifted his head. A short distance away, the rooster stood rubbing the circulation back into his wing and staring impassively at him.

"D'you want we should take him into custody?" The weasel asked.

Brutus lifted himself to a sitting position and felt a tug on his cloak. It was the little girl-rabbit, Cynthia.

"You're not gonna 'rest Jeremy are you, Mister Bear?" She asked, her eyes welling with tears. "He's jus' mad because the King burned 'im when he tried to help Timothy after he set Doctor Ages house on fire!"

Brutus bowed his head. Justin had told him about Sullivan's; and by extent, Jenner's; attempt to kill Justin, Dr. Ages and the Brisbee family. And now here he was face-to-face with one of the intended victims of that horrific crime, an innocent child whose only crime was being adopted by the King's Chancellor. Brutus could feel tears of his own, tears of guilt, misting his eyes. He gently put a brawny arm around the child and drew her closer. "Don't worry, little one. I understand. No one will touch your friend." He assured her. He then raised his voice a bit. "Right boys?" He asked sternly.

The ferret and weasel looked at each other, not quite sure what to make of Brutus's suddenly odd behavior. "Uh, sure, Boss!" The ferret answered nervously.

Brutus then got to his feet and dismissed them. The children were awe-struck by his size. "And what's your name, son?" He asked the boy-rabbit.

"That's Timothy! He's my little brother!" Cynthia exclaimed happily. "I'm Cynthia! Cynthia Brisbee! That ferret called you 'Brutus'. Is that really your name?"

Brutus nodded. "That's what my former Deputies call me when I'm off-duty, little one. But you can still call me 'Mister Bear' if you like."

Cynthia nodded back.

Sensing that this was a good time to leave, Timothy grabbed his sister's paw and began to lead her toward the manor-house, where Justin was heading with the hand-cart. "C'mon, Cynthia!" He exclaimed. "Let's go an' look at our new home!"

Cynthia waved a reluctant and affectionate goodbye to Brutus. "G'bye Mister Bear!" She cried.

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Brutus felt a tear roll down the fur of his cheek as he returned her wave. "Good-bye little one." He said in a choked whisper, now understanding completely why he had been willing to give up so much to fight for Justin's cause.

A short while later, after he had put the hand-cart away and settled the Brisbees, Jeremy, Dr. Ages and the others into their quarters, Justin gathered Galen, Brutus, Ages and Stabb into the office that Galen had prepared for him. Galen apprised Justin of his wish to be relieved of second-in-command status for the sake of his wife's needs and instead offered his services as an advisor on military and training matters. Justin reluctantly agreed to his brother's request and handed the job to Brutus. (Stabb had offered his services at their first meal together at Justin's adoptive home and the fox had happily accepted.) They also suggested that a "town meeting" be held to elect representatives for the various interests of the quickly-growing community. Justin readily agreed to this proposal and added that he would also put the issue of his leadership of the effort to dethrone Jenner up for a referendum as well. "After all," He pointed out, "It would be foolish for them to try toppling one tyrant while following another."

They then turned their attention to the letter that Declan had given him. Justin and his travelling companions had found the young hare sitting on a rock and crying by the side of the road. After some gentle persuasion he had told them of his capture and release by the new Sheriff that morning and of his fear of his expected punishment at the paws of his father. Justin had told him that, while disobedience toward one's parents WAS a serious affair, he was relatively unharmed and his father would no doubt be too relieved that his son was all right to dispense anything too painful. This seemed to calm the hare, who introduced himself. When Justin had introduced himself and his companions, an astonished Declan had dug the note that the new Sheriff had given him out of a pocket of his badly ripped tunic.

At first, Justin had been more than a little surprised and angry when he'd found out that his former colleague was Nottinghamshire's new chief law enforcement official; noting dirisively that a conspirator to murder and arson could hardly be expected to competently, let alone fairly, administer anything even remotely resembling justice. Dr. Ages, ever the practical soul, pointed out that sooner or later Sullivan's lack of competence would probably make Justin's job just that much easier. Justin found this a dubious assumption, but decided not to argue the point.

He read the letter aloud:

"To the townfolk of Nottingham,

By order of His Majesty, King Jenner, I have been duly appointed and sworn to the Office of Sheriff of this Shire. I wish to reassure everyone that if you return immediately to your homes you will be made welcome and not harmed or disturbed in any way."

("Okay, that's the carrot." Justin thought to himself. "Now, Sullivan, where's your inevitable stick?")

"Failure to return to your homes will result in a declaration of "Abandonment of Property". Such a declaration will result in confiscation of all lands and properties thereon. Please send a representative to negotiate at your earliest convenience."

"Who does he think he's kidding?" Justin exploded, shaking his head in amazement and anger. "Any comments?" He asked once he'd calmed himself down enough to speak.

"Bloody arrogant if you ask me!" Brutus exclaimed angrily. "That implied threat of confiscation is as empty as his head! Jenner's already made it clear that he plans to seize everyone's property!"

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The others nodded their assent.

"The 'negotiation' angle is an interesting touch." Stabb said. "In the little time I spent under him, Captain Sullivan never struck me as the negotiating type."

"He isn't!" Justin stated, his voice firm. "He doesn't have Jenner's subtleties when it comes to manipulations and machinations, so I can pretty much guarantee that anyone we might send to him will end up on a one-way trip to the gallows as an example to the rest of us!"

Again the others nodded.

"So we ignore the note?" Galen asked.

"That would be a mistake." Ages said.

"Oh?" Asked Justin. "In what way?"

Ages motioned for the others to follow him as he limped out of the cramped office and into the main hall. A dull roar of activity surrounded them as families and individuals went about various tasks. "During the time that we're fighting this war, because you all know that that's EXACTLY what this is, none of you must ever forget that this," He swept his paw around the room, "is what we're fighting for. These animals are here because they've placed their trust AND their lives in our paws and we owe them nothing less than our own blood and possibly our lives to see that they don't end up as slaves in their own land."

"We know this already!" Justin said.

"Do you?" Ages asked, skepticism dripping from his voice. "Are you so sure of your cause that you're willing to throw away an option outright simply because of your anger at the one who has proposed it? I don't dispute that Sullivan isn't to be trusted. But in addition to what I mentioned before, we owe these animals the opportunity to make their own decisions about the course of their lives; something which, I would remind you, Jenner is quite happy to deny them."

Justin conceded the logic of Ages observation. "But how do we meet him without endangering our own safety?" He asked.

"We could call a 'truce and parley'." Galen suggested. "He and a few of his Deputies meet with some of us at a place of our choosing."

Stabb chuckled derisively. "You are a hopeless optimist, aren't you?" He asked. Then, in all seriousness he said, "Our backs are pretty much against a wall no matter what we do. Given a choice; my gut tells me that the less contact we have with the Sheriff, the better. But we DO need to find out as much as we can about his plans." To Justin he said, "Let me go an' talk to him. If anything bad happens, we can chalk it up to experience and make a more cautious play the next time around."

Justin shook his head. "No way am I gonna send you or anyone else on any suicide missions." He said sternly. "We may have to take a lot of risks in this endeavor but needless, empty sacrifice is out of the question!" Justin turned angrily away and walked back to his office.

"Okay! Okay! Maybe that's not one of my better ideas!" Stabb said as he followed the others, a touch of embarrassment in his voice.

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Justin resealed himself and began to rub at his tired eyes. "Don't worry, Mr. Stabb. I'm not angry at you; at least not specifically." He said wearily. "I'm angry that I have so little control over this situation and so few options for rectifying it. Your offer simply served to remind me of that. If you feel that you can talk to Sullivan, then put together some sort of workable plan and have it ready to present to me after the meeting tomorrow." To Galen, Brutus and Ages he said, "Spread the word to everyone who's come to join me that we're going to have the 'town meeting' that you've suggested starting mid-morning to discuss both the exact nature and the future of this...this..."

"War." Dr. Ages stated flatly.

Justin nodded reluctantly. "I suppose I've been loathe to admit to myself that that's what this has come down to; But the good Doctor is right. We're at war."

Elsewhere in the manor-house, Mrs. Brisbee knocked at the door of Galen and Linnette Talbot's rooms.

"Come in." Linnette called.

Mrs. Brisbee opened the door and stepped in. "Mrs. Talbot?" She asked.

"Yes. And you must be Mrs. Brisbee." The older vixen said, a smile coming to her face. "Justin's told us so much about you and your late husband. Would you like to sit down?" She indicated a spot on the couch next to where she herself sat.

"Yes, thank you." Mrs. Brisbee said softly, trying to hide the nervousness in her voice. Justin had given her specific instructions that his sister was to be treated like anyone else and not some fragile flower that might wilt at the merest touch. She took a seat next to Justin's adoptive sister and decided to break the bad news as gently and diplomatically as possible and hope for the best. "I realize that it's not my place to come in here and..." She began.

"You're more than welcome to run the manor-house." Linnette said reassuringly. "I had no problem doing so when there were only a few families to watch over, so to speak, but now I must admit that the job has gone somewhat beyond my capabilities. And after all, who better than a trained professional to take over where this amateur left off?" She explained.

Mrs. Brisbee, somewhat nonplused by Justin's sister's concession, said, "Are you sure? The last thing I want to do is make you feel unwelcome in your own home."

Linnette smiled again, but Mrs. Brisbee thought that she could detect a certain sadness in the other vixen's unseeing eyes. "Yes, Mrs. Brisbee, I'm quite sure. This manor-house is only a temporary residence until Jenner is overthrown and Galen and I are free to move back to our cottage on the Heath." She said.

Mrs. Brisbee nodded and took one of Linnette's paws into her own. "Thank you, Mrs. Talbot." She said in a half-whisper. "I'm sure that you'll be able to go back to your home soon." Her voice then returned to normal volume. "In the meantime I happen to have a position open for an experienced Assistant Household Administrator, if you're interested."

Linnette's face brightened. "Okay, but only if we can drop all that 'Mrs.' stuff. It's WAY too formal for my tastes. Call me 'Linney'!" She exclaimed.

Mrs. Brisbee giggled. "You're right, it is." She said. "My name is Marian."

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A few minutes later, as they were discussing plans for how best to run the manor-house, Justin and Galen passed by the door to the Talbot's rooms and stopped for a moment to listen to the school-girlish chatter and laughter audible from the other side.

"Sounds like Linney and Marian have worked things out amicably enough." Justin said, a hint of relief in his voice.

Galen smiled and nodded. "See? I could've told you they'd make a great pair." He stated confidently.

Justin returned the smile with one of his own. "If those two can keep this house running smoothly," He declared. "We should have no problems winning this thing."

Unfortunately, Justin couldn't have known just how wrong he would be.

Chapter 46: 45

King Jenner made it a point to rise before dawn no matter how late he'd stayed up the night before. Today this was more important than ever. Jenner was expecting some very important guests. Normally he wouldn't have given a whit about the aesthetics of a sunrise; but today he was glad that, even though the pre-dawn mid-Autumn air was still quite crisp, the few high cirrus clouds still in the sky didn't obscure the few stars still flickering.

From his vantage point on the castle's perimeter overlook Jenner had a commanding view of the City of Londontown, a place he utterly despised. He'd always seen cities, towns, and villages as an utter waste of land and material. In his considered opinion; and he WAS the King after all, thus the only opinion that REALLY mattered; the animals of Britain could serve him and his friends best by tilling, tending and harvesting the land in the Spring, Summer and Autumn to keep them well fed and digging for coal in the Winter to keep them warm. If a few peasants starved or froze to death because the Winter got to be a bit too harsh; well, so be it. Didn't peasants, after all, have a tendency to breed (how did the old saying go?) like rabbits? Jenner shrugged to himself. Such was not his concern, he decided smugly. Sympathy was for the weak. His main interest was Power.

The oddest; and, admittedly, most frustrating; thing about Power, he'd discovered in his youth, was that it was so easy to GET (if one knew how and was willing enough to use that knowledge and, if necessary, a bit of dirty tricksterism to get it) but so hard to KEEP unless one was willing to USE copious amounts of it (along with its "kissin' cousin", Money) to keep it. This apparent dichotomy inside of a contradiction had puzzled him to no end for years until he eventually gave up trying to figure out the "why" of it and had begun concentrating on its more practical, not to mention rewarding, aspects.

His reverie was interrupted by the sight of a line of lanterns approaching from one of the cobblestone streets that radiated from the castle. He hurried into the building and through various dark passageways (by his strict orders candles were carefully rationed; they did, after all, cost money!) and down a flight of stairs and out a door to the courtyard. He slowed his fast walk to a more dignified stroll. Waiting for him at the castle entrance was the Troop of his Guard that he'd ordered turned out for this momentous occasion. Jenner nodded to the Captain-of-the-Guard; a tough, battle-scarred lynx named Sykes; who in turn nodded to the Gate-keeper, who shouted an order into a window of the turret that towered above them. With a creak of rusted iron on ancient stone, the portcullis began to rise from the grooves cut for the razor-sharp strips that the structure was constructed out of.

When the formidable-looking gate was completely open, the lamps and those who held them resumed their stately march; even if for only the distance that would bring them safely inside.

Once inside, the marchers halted and placed their lamps on the brown, Autumn-wilted grass. Also lowered was a very large, very ornate sedan-chair which was being toted by eight almost equally large and very rare; on these temperate shores at least; rhinoceri.

Jenner walked to the curtained entrance and waited for its occupant with a wide, proud, anticipative smile.

Within moments, the heavy gold-brocaded velvet drapes parted and a large be-ringed hoof presented itself.

Jenner delicately took the hoof and helped its owner (strictly ceremoniously, of course; the body to which the limb was attached weighed in excess of four-hundred-stone!) out of the conveyance.

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When the former occupant alighted (so to speak) onto the ground; planting the tip of a thick, jewel-studded cane into the cold earth; Jenner knelt before the grossly obese figure and kissed the back of its still-outstretched hoof. (This display elicited a number of startled looks and whispered comments from the ranks of the Guards, but a harsh glance from Captain Sykes brought them back to attention and silence.)

"Grandmaster." Jenner said in a half-reverent, half-excited near-whisper.

"Majesty." The hooded figure wheezed. To the casual listener the tone of voice would probably have sounded pleasant, even benevolent; but had he or she been able to see into the eyes of the speaker, he (or she) would have sworn that they had just looked into the deepest, most wretched pits of Hell.

Jenner stood and motioned the guest toward the courtyard entrance to the castle.

The hooded figure nodded slightly and the two slowly began walking, the Guards and the guest's coterie maintaining a discreet distance.

"Grandmaster," Jenner began, "Mere words cannot convey to you how honored I am by your presence." He stated, his voice still reverent as if he were talking to the spirits themselves.

"Nor mine by yours." The ancient boar grunted. With his free hoof he slid the hood of his robe off of his bald head. He wore a robe of the finest velvet; the surface of which shimmered in the light of the stars, which were already beginning to dim from the light of the soon-to-rise sun.

Jenner bowed his head and smiled. "We have much to discuss." The lion stated, trying to keep his excitement to a reasonable level.

"Indeed we do, my young acolyte, indeed we do. But first I'm afraid I must bring a certain matter to your attention." The boar said.

"You have but to ask." Jenner replied.

"You are aware, are you not, that a certain segment of the population has made, shall we say, profound objections to the recent issuance of a certain royal decree?" The Grandmaster asked.

"Yes, yes," Jenner sighed. "But you and I anticipated such a reaction when we began planning this whole sordid affair." He said. "So far, all has gone exactly according to plan."

The boar flicked his eyes in Jenner's direction, his expression hardening and his brow wrinkling slightly. "Then you are also aware that a group of, shall we say, dissenters has taken refuge in the Shire of Nottingham with the express purpose of opposing this reform and deposing you from your rightful place on the Throne of Britain?" The Grandmaster asked; a small, venomous anger creeping into his voice.

If Jenner had noticed this anger, he didn't show it; in fact, he smiled sardonically and waved a dismissive, be-ringed paw. "Yes, yes. I got a report of a rumor to that effect last night from my new Sheriff. If there's anything to it I have the utmost confidence that he'll deal with the problem with all due speed and ruthlessness." He stated confidently.

"Good." The boar replied with rather-too-much emphasis. "I have many plans, as I'm quite sure you do, that depend on a, shall we say, tranquil population in order to work. I'd hate to have those plans delayed or, worse yet, spoiled simply because some peasant rabble was unwilling to make the necessary sacrifices to the Glory of their King."

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Jenner nodded his agreement. "You needn't be concerned, Grandmaster." The lion reassured him. "As I said; the problem, if it exists at all, will be dealt with in the fastest and harshest terms."

A smile crept to the Grandmaster's pale lips. "Excellent!" He half-sneered. "Now," He said as they entered the castle proper, "How long until breakfast? Plotting the destruction of others tends to, shall we say, enhance my appetite."

Jenner, well aware of the Grandmaster's appetites; both for food and for zero-sum gamesmanship; bowed and with a sweep of his paw indicated the way to the royal dining room.

A little more than an hour later, as the Sun began to cast the full light of a new day on a troubled land, Jenner rapped a gavel on the table around which he and several other animals were seated. All were well known to him. Aside from the Grandmaster of the Mercantile Guilds who was still delicately (the others at the table would have said "effeminately") wiping the remains of his not insubstantial morning meal from his lips, were also seated the Masters of several of the other important, at least for Jenner's purposes, Guilds and several of the more ambitious or corrupt Sheriffs that he'd been able to seduce with promises of unlimited wealth and power. One of the chairs, however, was conspicuous by its emptiness. "I now call this meeting to order." He announced. "I will remind everyone that, due to the nature of the topics that we'll be discussing, no minutes will be read and the taking of notes is strictly forbidden." Most of the other animals smiled at this; Jenner's Number 1 rule of Criminal activity was: "LEAVE NO EVIDENCE!"

One by one, the various animals stood and gave summaries of their efforts to enrich themselves and their king.

Chapter 47: 46

Justin stared through the small breathing hole that he'd burrowed with his nose and muzzle through the many layers of blankets that held him in their warm embrace. Galen had not been kidding when he'd warned him and Marian that, as long as the hole in the kitchen remained unrepaired, the whole manor-house would be impossible to keep warm during the gradually worsening nights. Even with Marian next to him, it had been an uncomfortably cold while before he'd been able to drift off to sleep.

Only moments ago, he'd struggled up from the depths of his own fatigue of the past several days. Marian had, reluctantly of course, related the events that had occurred after he'd left to find this place. Of all of them, he'd been most concerned about her inability to get an adequate night's sleep. Bad enough that Timothy was still having the occasional nightmare (although his "waking dreams" seem to have ended when Stabb, Heather, Will and Lady Kluck arrived; whether this would last, no one was prepared to say) but poor, dear little Cynthia wasn't doing much better either. They'd tried to place her in the common nursery that Linnette had organized, but she'd raised quite a fuss (Justin could think of at least one choice word that would have better described the tantrum) screaming for her "Mister Bear". It took quite a while before anyone could figure out that it was not a doll that she wanted, but the former Sheriff of Nottingham. At first a bit embarrassed by the nature of this nocturnal disturbance (a Public House brawl he was more than equipped to deal with, but a homesick child?), Brutus gamely met the challenge and, after a few minutes and some consoling words and the heartfelt promise of a repeat performance whenever she felt she needed it and it didn't interfere with his duties, she was asleep in his arms. With a certain mistiness in his eyes, Brutus had then handed the little rabbit over to her mother and fled the room.

Justin, after exchanging an astonished and puzzled glance with Mrs. Brisbee, had followed the bear and found him sitting in a remote alcove, head in his paws, sobbing.

"Brutus, what's wrong? Are you feeling okay?" He'd asked as he took a seat next to the former Sheriff and placed a concerned paw on one of his massive shoulders.

"No." The bear had sobbed, his voice so tiny and choked with emotion that he reminded Justin of nothing so much as a small child.

"Then what's wrong?" Justin had asked again.

Brutus; after wiping his tear-filled, blood-shot eyes with the back of his paws; had looked pleadingly at him. "Every time I look at that beautiful, innocent young child I'm reminded of how I placed her in this dreadful situation by my own slimy, shallow-minded greed!" He'd cried. "I thought that once I'd taken your oath against Jenner and resigned my office, that that would be the end of whatever guilt or dishonor I'd brought upon myself, my Office and my name. But if that's so, why the hell do I feel so bad?" He'd implored.

Justin had shaken his head. "I don't know." He'd answered truthfully. "Duty has ways of reminding us that it's the smallest details that are the most important. A week ago you told me that we're fighting a war and that wars are about killing and destruction. Well maybe that beautiful, innocent young child brought home to you the fact that if we're unsuccessful in our endeavor SHE could end up as one of those casualties."

Brutus had nodded sadly. "Now I understand how you must feel." He whispered. He'd then met Justin's eyes with a desperate, haunted look. "What if she understands my part in her father's death?" He'd asked, shaken by the thought. "I could never forgive myself if that's true!"

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"First of all, even assuming that she DOES understand it; and I've seen no sign that that's the case; she seems not only to have forgiven you, but also seems to want to embrace you as a friend." Justin had told him reassuringly. "If there IS any guilt left," He'd continued, "I think that it's probably something that you need to work on forgiving YOURSELF for. And, while it may take some time, I have the feeling that if a certain beautiful, innocent young child can find it in her heart to forgive the slimy shallow-mindedness of a certain former Sheriff of Nottingham; I certainly think that, someday at least, that former Sheriff will be able to find it in his own heart to forgive himself."

"Perhaps." The bear had said, a wan smile coming to his mouth and a far-away look to his eyes. Brutus had then excused himself to make one last patrol of the Estate grounds before retiring to bed.

Justin smiled to himself under the many layers of blankets. "One morale crisis averted." He thought to himself.

"Good Morning, Sleepyhead." A familiar voice called softly.

"Only my sister calls me that, Marian." Justin said, still smiling. "By the way, what time is it?" He inquired.

"About an hour after sunrise." Mrs. Brisbee answered.

"An hour...!" Justin exclaimed, suddenly struggling to free himself from his cocoon. "The meeting...!"

"Will wait for you." Mrs. Brisbee said patiently. "Your sister and I agreed that you should be given some extra time to sleep because you're going to need a clear head today. So take your time getting bathed and dressed and your breakfast will be brought to you in about a half-an-hour." She explained.

Justin, who now sat upright with the pile of blankets gathered at his waist nodded and Mrs. Brisbee bent over, planted a quick kiss on his forehead and left the room.

Chapter 48: 47

The congregation gathered for the meeting was actually rather small, occupying barely two-thirds of the Grand Dining Hall. (Even taking into account those who preferred to watch from the upper-level railings and Grand Staircase.) On the newly-cleaned Main floor, a large raised platform had been erected to one side of Jonathan Locksley's memorial marker (the moldy, damaged rug had been declared beyond help and had been disposed of) and several chairs and stools had been placed in a rough three-quarter circle on it. To one side of a large; almost opulent, presently empty; wingback chair (rescued at the last moment from a pile of furniture marked to be turned into firewood) sat Mrs. Brisbee and her children (she, Cynthia and Timothy in a smaller chair while Martin and Theresa fidgeted on a pair of stools to either side), and Linnette and Galen; who were dressed, respectively, in an attractive peasant-style costume dress and shawl (rather than her usual plain housedress and apron) and scarlett military Dress-tunic. (With all insignae except decorations and rank removed.)

To the other side sat the former Sheriff (in a chair almost as large as, if much more spartan than, the one in the center), Ezekiel Stabb (who now wore civilian clothing rather than the Guard uniform that Mrs. Brisbee had become used to seeing him in), Clyde Pegg and Dr. Ages.

In the surrounding sea of faces Mrs. Brisbee could see various animals she recognized. A few rows back from the platform Will Scarlet, who wore his acrobat costume, and Heather Kilcannon, resplendent in a blue velvet formal gown borrowed from Wilbur Splitbranch's oldest daughter, sat paw-in-paw engaged in dreamy-eyed conversation; seemingly oblivious to the dull roar of the crowd around them. She caught a glimpse of the two ferrets; Tom Binns and his older brother Robert, whose front paw still lay immobilized in a cast and sling; who had been introduced to her by Dr. Ages after he had arrived with his family late the night before. Almost the whole Grand Staircase and most of a section of the floor below was taken by the Sheriff's former Deputies and their families, including every member of the Waning-Crescent Clan of weasels. Up in the rafters Jeremy sat dozing (or brooding, in the pensive sense of the word), a dark broad-brimmed hat that he'd found somewhere pulled low over his eyes, his black feathers and dark tunic melding with the shadows. Lady Kluck had volunteered to watch the nursery along with a few of the younger mothers and would be apprised of the decisions made at the meeting afterward.

All conversation stopped and the Hall fell silent as a lone figure began to make his way, through a roped-off aisle, down the Grand Staircase. A moment later, from somewhere in the back of the room, someone began applauding. Quickly, other animals began taking up the applause; and by the time Justin reached the platform the crowd was roaring, whistling and clapping its approval.

As soon as he stepped onto it, Justin raised his arms and began to signal the assembly to quiet. He looked much-refreshed after a good night's sleep and hot bath and the light from the candles of the main chandelier glinted off of the just-polished gold of his Guards rank-pin. Also; during the week that he'd been away from the Estate to bring back Mrs. Brisbee and the others, the female contingent of Nottingham had somehow found the time and material to make him a new shirt and uniform vest.

"Thank you. Thank you so much." He said after silence was restored. "I know," He began. "That many of you already know at least a few bits and pieces of the story of what has brought us here to this particular place on this particular day. But for the sake of clarity I believe that a summary of the complete story would do much to give a better picture of both our present situation and the events that have led up to it." He said.

Justin then gave a detailed narration of Jenner's plottings against his adoptive brother, King Nicodemus; his work with his own half-brother and Dr. Ages to keep the Crown and Amulet (all eyes turned their gaze to the

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stone that hung around Mrs. Brisbee's neck at its mention, much to her embarrassment) out of Jenner's grasp; Jenner's murder of King Nicodemus and Sir Jonathan and his own hasty flight from The City with the Chancellor's widow and children; his mourning of the deaths of his Sovereign and best friend (not a few animals cried during his description) and his weeks of effort to stop the worst abuses by Jenner's friends; the arson and attempted murder of himself, Ages, Mrs. Brisbee and her children and Jeremy (He was especially effusive in his praise of Jeremy's near-self-sacrifice in his effort to save Timothy, after which Jeremy took a good-humored bow and tipped his hat); the revelation of his relationship to Sir Jonathan (again eliciting more than a few tears) and his efforts to find his origins; his encounter with Brutus and the meeting and oath against Jenner in the Heath; and finally, his arrival and the news that Sullivan, the actual doer of most of Jenner's dirty work, was now the chief law-enforcement officer of the Shire. (This news, of course, provoked an outcry from the congregation.)

He then had Mrs. Brisbee, Brutus, Ezekiel Stabb and Dr. Ages tell their stories in turn and implored his rapt audience to reflect on the facts that had just been related, after which the meeting was adjourned for lunch.

After getting his bowl of delicious-smelling pepper-bean soup, a plate of bread and a mug of mulled apple-cider; Justin hurried to the circle where the Brisbee's, the Talbot's, Tom Binns and his wife Jennifer (Robert and his nieces and nephews were eating not far away), Dr. Ages, Jeremy, Brutus, Ezekiel Stabb, Will and Heather, and Liam and his wife, Sian, were gathered. After various necessary introductions were made, Justin sat at a spot reserved for him between his adoptive sister and his half-brother's widow.

"I'd say you caught their interest." Brutus commented just before gulping down some of his cider.

Justin shrugged as he broke a slice of his bread. "I should hope so." He said. "These folk need to know just what they're up against. I'd be derelict in my duties as their possible leader if I withheld any of the facts from them."

"Possible' leader?" Jennifer Binns asked. "I was under the impression that you already had that position pretty well nailed down." She said.

Justin smiled politely and shook his head. "No, Ma'am. I'm not like Jenner, come to order you or your husband and sons and daughters into battle from on high for my own glory or; worse yet; to satisfy some desire for revenge on my part." He dipped the piece of bread into his soup and took a bite. After swallowing he continued. "If I'm to be a credible leader to you all, I must be approved by everyone in this building. If I haven't the trust or respect of even one animal who's joined me here, I'm as much a pretender to the leadership of this cause as Jenner is to Britain's Throne."

"But what of your vow?" Linnette asked.

Justin sighed. "I'd still be honor-bound to keep it to the best of my ability." He said, a hint of resignation in his voice. "I'd simply have to try and do so under whoever these folk picked to be their leader."

"Well I, for one, think you'll make a fine leader." Jennifer said. "From what Dr. Ages has told us, you more than deserve our confidence."

Justin smiled again. "Thank you, Ma'am. But I would prefer that everyone here voted their conscience rather than simply try to please me." Justin then became more serious. "If anybody has a better idea of how to avoid a confrontation that will; inevitably, I'm sorry to say; lead to bloodshed, even I would gladly follow him or her. But every action that Jenner has taken thus far leads me to believe that some kind of opposition to his rule is not only warranted, but absolutely necessary." He stated flatly.

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"Here, here!" Brutus said as Galen, Stabb, Tom and Liam nodded their agreement.

A while later, after the lunch had been eaten and all of the dinnerware had been sent to the designated washroom (for use until the repairs to the kitchen were completed), Justin once again called the meeting to order and submitted Brutus and Galen's recommendation that a "Council of Elders" be elected to see to the day-to-day needs of those present and nominated the former Sheriff of Nottingham as its Chairman. With only token debate over a few details (mainly how long the term of such an Office would last, the figure settled on being one year with the next election to be held on that date next; and the number of Council members, nine being the agreed-upon figure) the measure was approved unanimously. Next, nominations for Elders were called for, submitted and eventually voted upon. Elected in short order were Marian Brisbee, Tom Binns, Ezekiel Stabb, Liam Wyclyffe, Wilbur Splitbranch, Dr. Ages and Jonah "Blinkey" Baylor.

Election of the ninth member became problematic when Galen refused the submission of hisname for nomination by several of the farmfolk, explaining with some passion that his duties to his beloved wife precluded all others except advising Justin on military matters and helping to train the Army that would be needed to both defend the Estate and; some day, hopefully; topple Jenner from the Throne. A number of other names were submitted but no agreement could be reached. Out ofgrowing frustration, Justin was about to call a recess when Will Scarlet jumped to his feet.

"Oy nominay' 'Eather Kilcannon f'r th' Counc'!" He shouted.

Heather (along with several others in the crowd) gasped at this breach of parliamentary protocol. She grabbed his wrist and tried to pull him back down. "Will, me love, have ye gone DAFT?" She demanded in an embarrassed half-whisper.

Will gave a wan, equally embarrassed grin and shrugged. His mind froze, as did the answer on his lips.

It was Ezekiel Stabb who came to Will's rescue. "I second the nomination!" He announced proudly. He then turned to Justin. "Captain Locksley. May I please address this meeting and the presently-elected members of this Council?" He asked, his eyes bright with emotion.

Justin smiled, bowed and motioned Stabb to the spot where he was standing. "By all means, Sir." He said, then retreated to his center chair.

Stabb adjusted his clothing, a military-pattern vest and shirt cut from peasant-style cloth, and hesitated a moment, gathering his thoughts. "Fellow Britons," He began. "I know that I'm a recent arrival from the Continent and that you heard my story earlier today. But over these past several months I have developed a deep love and respect for this land and its inhabitants even as they have fallen under the tyranny of a King who would forsake them. But I believe that there is another story that needs to be told. As I was arresting those children of the King's Orphanage, and; sadly; I can think of no more accurate term to use, a crowd of students, who I thought to be nothing more than an irritating rabble at the time, began to gather in protest of the actions that I'd let myself be manipulated into. Little did I know at the time, but the protest had apparently been organized by the young skunk who had taken upon herself the task of guarding the backpack of the young hayseed who so thoroughly kicked my tail and woke me up to the Evil that I was doing to those poor kids.

"Later, after we'd made good our escape from The City, she gave me my first insight; my 'epiphany', if you will; into a gentler side of myself that I never realized I had. She also taught me that, whatever evils might haunt my past, redemption was and is still possible even for a foolish old soldier like me. Her wisdom, a word that I don't use lightly, is far beyond her tender years and her innocence and optimism made our search for

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Captain Locksley not simply bearable but, as I look back upon it, a pleasure that I will remember with a smile until the day that I'm summoned by the spirits."

Stabb then held an inviting paw in the direction of the spot where Will and Heather were seated. "Heather Kilcannon, would you join me on the platform, please?"

Heather shyly stood as the crowd burst into applause and she made her way through the rows of animals. Stabb and Justin met her at the bottom of the platform steps and escorted her to its center. By now, tears were freely flowing down her cheeks and Stabb's eyes were also quite moist. She tightly hugged Stabb. "Thank ye." She said, her voice a whisper that barely carried above the cheers of the audience. Stabb looked into her wide, awe-struck eyes. "No, girl, it's you I have to thank." He said as he felt a tear slide from his own eye and soak into the fur of his cheek. "For giving me back a soul that I thought I'd lost so many years ago." Heather gave Stabb another quick hug and Justin stepped over and lightly and respectfully kissed the silky black fur of the back of her paw. He then signaled the congregation to silence.

"Okay," He said. "A nomination has been made and seconded and an endorsement given. All in favor of electing Miss Heather Kilcannon to the last seat on the 'Council of Elders', although if she IS elected we'll be stretching the definition a bit, (scattered laughter erupted from the crowd at this remark) signify by a show of paws or wing."

The vote was, of course, unanimous.

While the crowd again made known their approval, Justin escorted her not back down the steps but to sit at his center chair. He then, once more, motioned for quiet. "It's now time for probably the most important vote of the day." He stated, a tinge of hesitation readily apparent in his voice. "Until now, you have all followed me simply because I was willing to lead you. This, I suppose, is not in and of itself a bad thing. In times of crisis we often look to someone who is willing to take great responsibilities upon him, or her, self (at this point he traded a significant glance with Mrs. Brisbee) in the belief that this willingness is a sign of strength or wisdom, a word; by the way; that I also don't use lightly, that is given to just a privileged few." He paused a moment to let his words soak into the audience. "Unfortunately, Jenner would seem to be living proof that BEING a leader or a King and an actual TALENT for Leadership are NOT necessarily one in the same.

"If I'm to be your leader, fine, I'll gladly accept that position and whatever burdens or privileges you happen to bestow upon it. But if I'm to function EFFECTIVELY as your leader, I need to know that I have the unanimous support of those I lead or, as I told someone recently, I'm no better than the tyrant that I'm supposed to be leading you all against.

"For myself, the vow that I made a week and a day ago still stands! Even if, by your vote, you decide that I am NOT fit to lead you, I'm still Honor-bound to do all that I can to the best of my ability to rid Britain of the chains of abuse and slavery that Jenner has cruelly placed around the necks of his subjects. To those of you who took up my vow last week, I now release you from it so that you can vote your conscience and not feel unduly obligated to me; the same goes for those who have come to seek shelter from the terror of Jenner's rule. Brutus, would you please call the vote?" Justin asked as he stepped to one side.

Brutus stood and said, "By a show of paws or wing, all in favor of Justin as the leader of this effort to toss Jenner's tail off the Throne of Britain, please signify!"

Almost before he'd completed the phrase, one paw from each and every animal in the hall (plus Jeremy's wing in the rafters) shot up.

"Any opposed?" He asked.

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A tense silence filled the room for a moment as no one dared to even breathe.

"Then by unanimous vote of those present I name Captain Justin Locksley the official leader of this motley rabble of townfolk and farmers!" He declared with a wide grin.

The crowd erupted instantly into giddy applause and Justin had no real choice but to adjourn the meeting as a festival atmosphere swept through the hall. Eventually he managed to corral the members of the Council of Elders, along with Linnette and Galen Talbot and Will Scarlet; who kept firmly arm-in-arm with Heather; and led them to what had once obviously been a sitting room in its better days.

"I apologize for the lack of accommodations," He said, a lopsided grin on his face. "But a large table isn't exactly high on the woodwright's priority list at the moment. Until he decides we're worth the bother, we'll just have to improvise." He then directed the Council members and his guests to form a semi-circle facing the fireplace, which radiated heat from a pile of still-glowing embers. "I'll also try to keep this meeting short so none of us misses too much of the festivities outside." Justin then noticed Wendell Cravenbrook; portable desk, ink bottle, pen and a small sheaf of paper in paw; hovering expectantly just outside the open door. Justin waved the former Deputy in and seated him to one side comfortably close to the heat of the fireplace.

"The first order of business of the first official meeting of this Council," He began. "Should be to determine what we should call 'this motley rabble of townfolk and farmers', as our esteemed Council President so delicately and diplomatically put it."

From somewhere, a "Harrumph!" was heard.

"Someone has a suggestion?" Justin asked with mild amusement.

"More like an objection!" The otter who called himself "Blinkey" replied with a scowl.

"Which is?" Justin asked.

The otter stood. "Why shou'd we have t' call aurselves anythin'?" He asked. "We're just a bunch o' folk who've decided that we won't be pushed aroun' b' tha' idjit King no more! We don' need no name fer tha'!" He declared.

Justin shrugged. "Perhaps you're right." He said. "But tell me, weren't you a sailor before retiring to Nottingham to become a farmer?" He asked, his tone neutral and polite.

The otter rolled his one eye impatiently. "Aye, tha' I was, Boy. Bu' wha's tha' go' t' do wi' anythin'?" He asked.

"Well," Justin began, drawing out his pronunciation of the word. "Correct me if I'm wrong," He said airily. "But didn't the ships that you crewed aboard usually have a name of some sort? You know; an Important Historical Personage, a Mythical Figure, a Captain or Builder's Wife or girlfriend..."

"Aye! So?" The otter asked, clearly irritated.

"So you were loyal to those ships and their names, were you not?" Justin asked.

"I shou'd 'ope so! A crew is loyal t' its ship an' each other! Tha's an unwritten Law o' th' Sea!" Blinkey proudly declared.

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"My point exactly!" Justin exclaimed. "We have to name our effort against Jenner for the same reason that you would name a ship, to instill an unbreakable bond of loyalty between our cause and between each other! If a Ship's Captain dies in mid-voyage, will the crew suddenly, aside from the burial-at-sea, just stop and not do their duties to the ship and for each other?" He asked pointedly.

Blinkey didn't hesitate a moment before answering. "No, Sir." He stated, for the first time a genuine respect in his voice.

Justin pressed on. "Even if, the spirits forbid, I should be killed in my efforts to keep the vow that I've made to you; isn't it reasonable to assume that the rest of you will pick up where I left off?"

A dozen heads solemnly, unhesitatingly, nodded in unison.

"Then this cause, OUR cause, must be looked at as a ship that has just embarked on a most perilous journey." He declared. "If, for whatever reason, I'm unable to complete the voyage then I expect someone to take my place as Ship's Captain and sail on until those who've survived me have reached a peaceful shore."

By now, tears were streaming from Blinkey's good eye and his head was bowed and he held his sea-hat, fidgeting with it like a child waiting to be punished.

Justin cocked his head quizzically to one side. "Have I said something wrong?" He asked, concern evident in his voice.

"No Sir." The otter said in a voice somewhere between a whisper and a sob. "Bu' I realize now," He continued, "Tha' I been showin' you a disr'spec' you ain't been d'servin' o'."

Justin shrugged. "If you mean your skepticism of my leadership abilities, I'm sure that you're far from the only one. I have the feeling that those few that I DO possess are going to be in for a fair amount of testing and questioning in the weeks and months ahead." He sighed and walked to the otter and put a consoling arm around the sailor-turned-farmer's sharply sloping shoulders. "It's inevitable that, over time, someone, at some point, is going to disagree with me over this or that detail; or even just get fed up with me barking out orders all day. It's just something that I've resigned myself to and can't let drive me crazy." He then turned the otter to face him and gazed into his eye. "Please don't EVER feel hesitant to point out any mistakes that you might think I've made. I'm not perfect and I expect to make plenty of them while I'm doing this so I'll need your help and everybody else's to keep me humble. Deal?" He asked, raising his eyebrows and giving the otter a good-natured grin.

Blinkey hesitated for a few moments, but finally matched it with a somewhat broken-toothed smile of his own. (This amazed Galen. The only expression that he'd ever seen on Blinkey was an ever-present scowl.) "Deal!" he said. He then spit into his paw and offered it to the fox.

Without hesitation, Justin spit into his own paw and they both shook to seal their bargain.

The debate over what to call the effort to fight Jenner didn't actually last very long. Several suggestions were made and rejected. But it was, of all things, a side "argument" between Martin and his mother that inspired the name that was eventually chosen. The Brisbee children had been patiently sitting through the meeting until the sounds of the party outside started becoming more prominent. Martin tugged on the well-worn hem of his mother's travelling cape but couldn't seem to get her attention. He then managed to snag one of the leaves of paper and a pencil that Wendell had brought with him and had written something on it and shown it to her. Irritated by the interruption Mrs. Brisbeehad written an answer below, shown it to him and then placed the page back by where the young weasel was scribbling furiously away as

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suggestions were tossed out for consideration. Unconsciously, Wendell reached down and picked up the piece of paper and was about to shove it to the back of his sheaf when he noticed what the mother fox had written. He then handed the paper to Justin; who scanned it quickly as his eyes widened and jaw dropped in amazement.

"Of course! It's so SIMPLE! Why didn't I think of that?" He blurted so quickly that all in the room were taken totally by surprise.

"What? What's so simple?" Asked Linnette, who'd been trying to follow the meeting with little success even with the help of a whispered narrative by her husband.

"We can call our fight 'NO!'" Justin said, joyfully waving the piece of paper over his head.

"But what's that supposed to mean?" Wilbur Splitbranch asked skeptically.

Justin huffed in exasperation. "Isn't it obvious?" He asked. "It means 'NO!' to Jenner's rule, 'NO!' to his enslavement of his subjects, 'NO!' to the Repossession Decree..." He began ticking off points on the fingers of one paw.

"I believe that what my colleague meant was, what will the initials 'N' and 'O' stand for?" Ezekiel Stabb interjected more calmly.

Wilbur nodded. "What he said." The weasel murmured.

"How about 'Nottingham Organization'?" Brutus asked. "It's short and catchy." The bear said. "Even the simplest peasant ought to be able to remember it."

"An excellent idea!" Dr. Ages agreed. "I'll second it!" He exclaimed.

"Marian?" Justin asked. "What about you? It was, after all, your idea."

Mrs. Brisbee shrugged with embarrassment. The piece of paper that Justin held was really nothing more than a request by her eldest son to join the revelry taking place outside and her refusal to let him; not because she wished to deny them a well-earned opportunity for some fun, but because she didn't wish to leave them unsupervised. "I-I guess I have no objection." She stammered.

"Alright then. All in favor?" He asked.

One of everyone's paw shot into the air, including Blinkey's.

"Well, I guess we've all just become members of the 'Nottingham Organization' then." Justin said. "This meeting is adjourned. Now go on out and have yourselves a good time."

After the others had left the room, Stabb showed Justin the plan that he and Galen had spent a good part of the night writing which detailed a way to make contact with Sullivan with minimum risk of capture by the new Sheriff.

"Are you sure this'll work?" Justin asked.

"Frankly, no." Stabb replied flatly. "But it's the best we could come up with from what little information we could get from the Wyclyffe boy. Anyway, you know Sullivan better than any of the rest of us; what d'you

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think?" He asked.

Justin shook his head, anger mixed with sadness as he exclaimed, "I'm not sure WHAT to think! I HATE having so few options! I make one wrong decision and someone's husband, son or brother will probably die because of it."

Stabb nodded his understanding. "Believe me, Captain, I know the feeling well. But war's are about fightin' an' dyin'. Sometimes for somethin' you believe in, most times not. We just gotta make sure that we know which is which an' keep remindin' ourselves why we're fightin' this one." He said sympathetically.

Justin lifted a skeptical eyebrow. "You and Brutus must share the same speechwriter. That's pretty much what he told me about a week ago when we hatched this little plan." He said with a hint of sarcasm.

Stabb smiled a bit, but there was a certain sadness in his voice as he said, "His is a voice of wisdom while mine is one of long experience. You, my friend, seem to be blessed with an ample supply of both. Your problem, however, is that you wish that you could spare all of these folk the pain, suffering and death that lie in wait for them." Stabb's face then darkened and his eyes hardened, as did his voice. "But I can tell you right now that you're gonna have to close your Heart, your eyes an' your ears to the cries of the wounded an' dying once the blood starts to run an' concentrate on the fight directly in front of you or it'll drive you to the depths of despair and our cause, not just the battles we'll have to fight for it, WILL be lost."

Justin was shaken a bit by the vehemence of Stabb's words. "I guess we'll have to chance your plan." He said grimly. Almost as an afterthought he asked, "So who's gonna go into town to speak to Sullivan?"

"Missus Talbot tried to volunteer. Said the Sheriff'd never take a blind person hostage." Stabb said, a mischievous grin coming to his face as Justin's jaw dropped in horror. "Don't worry, Captain." Stabb reassured him. "Colonel Talbot an' I nixed that idea right off. Mrs. Brisbee's friend, that Lady Kluck, has volunteered. Frankly, I think she's our best candidate. Sullivan may or may not recognize her, but I think he might be inclined to treat her as a neutral party for the time being." He said.

Justin again raised a skeptical eyebrow. "I rather doubt that "neutrality" has an entry in his battlefield manual; but you're right, I don't think that he'll perceive her as any kind of threat." He said.

"Then it's a 'go'?" Stabb asked.

Justin nodded. "Yeah." He said quietly, praying to the spirits that he was doing the right thing.

Chapter 49: 48

Jenner was pacing the Courtyard Overlook going over the various reports that he'd heard from the Sheriffs and Guildmasters in his mind. Even the bitter wind and low Sun did not distract him from his gleeful ruminations. His plans for Britain were progressing as well as, and in many cases better than, he could ever have hoped when he'd "appropriated" the crown from his accursed "brother". Brother to Nicodemus. Even at this moment the thought that such a thing had been made him sick to his stomach. Nicodemus had been physically strong, of that there could be no doubt. And he'd even shown a modicum of intellectual accomplishment in a rather diverse number of subjects. What was the term? A mile wide and an inch deep?

But they had all been the WRONG subjects. Science and History instead of Power and Control. Art and Philosophy instead of Money and Manipulation. Nicodemus was forever wasting time and money trying to make his subjects happy and comfortable and trying to improve their lot in life, as if a bunch of relatively worthless animals ever deserved such consideration. No, Nicodemus had been an utter fool. And now it was time to correct his errors.

From behind, Jenner heard a quiet scuffling on the stone floor. He turned and saw the Grandmaster silhouetted against the faint light emanating from the door that opened onto the overlook.

"I would speak with you." The Grandmaster wheezed.

Jenner smiled and nodded. "It would be my honor to hear your words." He said.

With a rhythmic shuffling of hooves and the tap of his cane the old boar joined the lion. They walked to the wall and gazed at the imminent late-Autumn Sunset. After a short silence the Grandmaster asked. "Do you remember a young boar whom you sent to exile some months ago?"

"Yes." Jenner answered disdainfully, wrinkling his nose. "One Eustace Scrubb by name. Why do you ask?"

The Grandmaster regarded Jenner through half-closed eyes. "I was wondering if Your Majesty might possibly consider rescinding the exile order."

Jenner continued to stare impassively at the darkening sky but his voice was as cold as the bitter wind as he asked. "Is he a relative of yours?"

The Grandmaster shook his head, causing his jowls and multiple chins to flap about. "No. His parents have petitioned me on his behalf. I merely convey their appeal for His Majesty's permission that he be allowed to return." The Grandmaster replied.

"Tell me, old friend, did Eustace's parents fully explain to you the circumstances of his exile?" Jenner inquired, no hint of emotion in his voice.

"They told me that he, shall we say, illicitly coerced a number of peasants to carry him in his sedan-chair and was robbed in the process. I assume that had he not been robbed he would not have been caught." The boar offered, choosing his words carefully.

"Indeed." Jenner said, sarcasm dripping from his voice. "And did they bother to inform you as to the, shall we say, 'tool' that he used as his method of coercion?" He asked.

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The Grandmaster raised a suspicious eyebrow. "I'm afraid they never volunteered such information, Your Majesty, nor did I think it important at the time to ask." He said.

Jenner smiled grimly. "You may be forgiven your lack of inquisitiveness, my friend." The smile instantly transformed to an angry scowl. "But Eustace Scrubb CANNOT be forgiven his appalling lack of discretion." Jenner then turned and confronted the Grandmaster eye-to-eye with such intensity as to make the old boar flinch. "That senseless idiot used a WHIP on those peasants!" He hissed. "All that we worked for, all that we planned for was nearly destroyed because that fool wished to save a few Talents; which he could easily have afforded to part with; rather than hire a few convicts from the Sheriff. I had no choice BUT to punish him in the manner that I did! My power as King was not fully consolidated at the time and my hold on the Throne was, at best, tenuous. Had I done nothing, I would no doubt be in exile myself or; worse yet; at eternal rest with my 'dear' brother and his Chancellor

because of some petty peasant uprising." He shivered a bit in the wind of the fast-approaching night, but whether from the cold or; perhaps; the thought of what could have been those many months ago the Grandmaster had no way of knowing. "The supreme irony is that it was my brother's Captain-of-the-Guard who brought Eustace's 'excesses' to my attention." Jenner said somewhat more calmly. "The thought that, to a certain extent, I have him to thank for keeping me on the Throne is, needless to say, a less than comforting one."

The Grandmaster nodded sympathetically. "I can understand why." He said.

"Then you can also understand why I must refuse to lift my Judgement against Eustace. I have no feelings one way or the other for those peasants; but I do have certain standards of good order, common sense and discipline that I expect even my friends to adhere to. Eustace violated those standards, and therefore my trust, and I had no choice but to mete out a just punishment to him, as I would to any other." Jenner stated flatly.

The Grandmaster nodded again. That Jenner could on the one hoof care nothing about the pain that had been inflicted upon his subjects since his ascent to the Throne, but on the other hoof dispense severe punishment for what, in the long run, amounted to nothing more than a simple error in judgement; didn't surprise the Grandmaster in the slightest. In fact, the boar was fairly bursting with pride, among other things, that his favorite student had learned his lessons so well.

The Grandmaster, he'd once had a name, but since his own ascension to his present office it had gone so long unused as to be forgotten, remembered the young, stubborn, arrogant, petulant cub who'd been sent to him to be tutored in the arcana of mercantile economics by his adoptive father. Unlike his well-behaved adoptive brother the Crown Prince, the Prince-Regent had been an utter terror; playing cruel jokes on the household servants, bullying his colleagues' children and once even tearing pages out of an active account book and using them to start his morning fire. But while the young Prince-Regent's brattish behavior had been intolerable to others, The Grandmaster had; at first sight; recognized a yearning, a greed, for power and money and a self-absorption that matched his own and had, over these many years, encouraged and taught the cub how to most effectively use intimidation, manipulation and; yes, when necessary; murder to get whatever his heart, or whatever happened to pass for it, desired. But he'd also added another important ingredient to this volatile mix. Patience. The Grandmaster had painstakingly taught his ever-willing acolyte that there were times in any given situation when the best course of action was simply to wait. And while Jenner had been forced to wait for the Crown for a long time indeed, no thanks to the meddling of a now-deceased Chancellor and a fugitive ex-Captain-of-the-Guard and ex-King's

Physician, he could now enjoy the nearly endless bounty soon to be supplied by his subjects; and the Grandmaster and others would, to use the hoary old expression, feed from the same trough.

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The Grandmaster smiled inwardly at the result of his efforts as the last rays of the setting sun gave way to the twinkling of the stars. "You did what had to be done. I will inform the Scrubbs of your decision." He said. He then added, keeping his tone as neutral as possible, "I must say that you've learned your lessons well."

A bit of a smile...or was it a smirk, replaced the scowl on Jenner's face. "I was taught by a master." He said impassively. Then his eyes narrowed and his head tilted slightly. "Tell me, old friend, would you be adverse to moving your operations to the castle for the time being?" He asked.

The Grandmaster raised a questioning eyebrow. "I suppose not. But for what reason?" He inquired.

Jenner shrugged. "Ever since I imprisoned or discharged my brother's court and the majority of his housekeeping staff I've had no one other than Captain Sykes and, on occasions such as this, you to bounce my ideas off of. I need someone who'll give me a necessary perspective on how best to efficiently maintain my rule. Sullivan was well suited to that task but unfortunately I had needs of his particular talents in Nottinghamshire." He stated. The Grandmaster thought that he heard a hint of uncharacteristic sentiment in Jenner's voice, but decided to let the matter pass.

"I suppose that such a transfer as you mention could do no harm." The Grandmaster said evenly, but his mind had shifted into overdrive. The royal residence was the seat of both governmental and political power over all of Britain. While the Grandmaster was certainly aware that his influence over the royal mind was, to an outsider, staggering; it was by no means, to be truthful, absolute and, considering Jenner's own formidable instincts for manipulation and power-politics, would probably never become as total as the Grandmaster would have wished. But the Grandmaster knew that, at it's most basic, power is a matter of perception. Jenner had power over the animals of Britain because the animals of Britain perceived that he had power over them because he wore the Crown and sat on the Throne that all the previous rulers of Britain had worn and sat on for the past several generations. The animals of Britain, in actuality, could probably overthrow their King if properly motivated, the Grandmaster knew, but the mere perception by them that their King held the power of life and death over them would be more than enough to keep the vast majority frightened into passivity. Also, the Grandmaster realized that his own power, or rather, the power that others perceived him as having, would be substantially increased by his proximity to that of the King's. The Mercantile Guilds on the continent would perceive him as having the direct imprimatur of his King and the Grandmaster would be able to exploit that perception, with Jenner's approval of course, but he rather doubted that this would be a problem, and would be able to negotiate better trade deals on behalf of his own Guilds. "If Your Majesty wishes, his humble teacher and servant could move in this very evening." The Grandmaster said, trying his best to keep his voice from quavering with the almost uncontrollable glee that he felt.

"That would be most desirable." Jenner said. "I'll have the household staff set up a full apartment for you and your servants will be given their own quarters. I'll also make sure that you have full access to the kitchen anytime, day or night. Is this acceptable to you?"

"Absolutely, Your Majesty!" The Grandmaster replied, fairly shivering with ecstatic anticipation.

"Excellent." Jenner said, sweeping a paw toward the castle door. "Come, old friend, I imagine that supper awaits our presence. Let's see if my cook can, for once, make something resembling an edible meal."

As they started across the worn stones, the Grandmaster asked, "If Your Majesty is so unhappy with the quality of his own chef, why do you still retain him?"

Jenner shook his head. "Because no one else will work as cheaply as he." He said bitterly.

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"Need I remind you that you are the King of Britain?" The Grandmaster asked sharply, somewhat surprised by what he'd just heard. "Have I not taught you that as a King you must live as a King and not as an alms-seeker?"

Jenner nodded, somewhat browbeaten by the stridency of his mentor's tone of voice. "Yes, Grandmaster, I suppose you're right. If tonight's meal doesn't meet with your approval I'll discharge the cook tonight and hire someone better suited for the job." He said.

"Perhaps you could hire MY personal chef?" The Grandmaster proposed as they entered the warmth of the castle. "He's never failed to make my meals the most enjoyable experience of my day." The boar tried to laugh, but instead it came out as a series of self-satisfied snorts.

Jenner smiled humorlessly. "Perhaps." He said distantly. "Perhaps."

Chapter 50: 49

Ignatz was at his wit's end. He could deal with Jenner's cruelty no longer. As frightened as he was, he'd made his decision and now he would have to stick to it; for his own sake and that of his family. There would be NO turning back!

He, his wife and his nine children; two with a husband and wife each and children of their own; had waddled, for this was the only truly accurate description of how hedgehogs walked [and running was out of the question] on their short legs, through Londontown's darkest and meanest alleyways in search of the place where they were to meet their only hope of escape from the madness that was quickly descending on Britain.

The note had not been terribly specific about the exact location, let alone the exact time, that the meeting was supposed to take place. It had simply told him that he was to be in one of the alleys off Northminster Circle about two hours after sundown. It had also told him to bring those family members whose lives he valued but nothing more.

The note. He'd been given the day off, this, in itself, was a rarity, so that Jenner could have a private meeting; rumor had it that His Majesty was going to reward those who had aided him in his ascent to the Throne, and found it perched atop the months-old overflow of bureaucratic paper and parchment that littered his desk in the main workroom of the offices of the King's Scribe, where all official documentation pertaining to royal affairs were transcribed or written. Iggy had almost tossed it onto the desk of one of the other scribes but had noticed that his name had been scrawled across the paper by an unfamiliar paw. When he had unfolded the note, a piece of parchment; from His Majesty's own private stock; had fallen out. After he'd nervously unfolded and read what was on the parchment he'd nearly died right then and there of a heart-attack. It was an order for the arrest and execution of himself and as many of his family members as could be found, and it was signed by Jenner himself! He'd had to read the order twice more to convince himself that it could possibly be authentic, but there was simply no mistaking the elegant script of the signature to which he'd become accustomed over these many, too many, to be honest, months. Through the tears of his shock and dismay he'd read the note; written in a separate, also unfamiliar paw; into which the arrest/execution order had been folded and found a seed of hope.

It had been an offer of aid to escape from the City.

As it had instructed, Iggy had memorized the contents of the note and burned it. Also per instructions, he'd placed the arrest/execution order into an unmarked envelope and placed it into his belt-pouch. Then, he'd brazenly waddled through the castle gate that he'd entered just minutes before; telling the slightly bewildered guard-on-duty that his family would have first priority on his time that particular day. He'd then made his way home as quickly as his legs would carry him and showed his family the arrest/execution order, deciding that the possibility of panic among his kin would simply HAVE to be risked, and explained the plan of their unknown benefactor and had then waited until the appointed hour to bring his family to the appointed place. Or at least to as close a proximity as could be determined from the instructions.

"Are you sure that this is where the note told you to bring us?" His wife, Zoe, whispered anxiously.

"It's as close to the description as I can come." Iggy whispered back. "The note was anything BUT specific."

"That's how we intended it." A voice in back of the group intoned.

All the hedgehogs wordlessly froze in stark terror; except for the baby that Zoe held in her arms, which began to cry softly.

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The owner of the voice stepped out of the shadows that had concealed him from view just feet from where the hedgehogs now cowered against a building. He was a wolf, tall and quite handsome. Iggy also saw a distinct resemblance to the Captain of the Third Troop of The King's Guard. "Are-Are you Giles Gisbourne's brother?" Iggy stammered, his curiosity overriding his fear for the moment.

"The wolf nodded. "Geoffrey Gisbourne at your service." He said quietly. "Now if you'll follow me..."

"Waitaminnit!" Iggy exclaimed angrily. "First of all, what the hell is this all about?" He dug out a blank envelope from his belt-pouch.

"I assume that you're referring to the arrest and execution order signed by His Majesty last night." Geoffrey said calmly.

"Damn right I am!" Iggy said, stepping forward defiantly. "I've served the court faithfully for almost twenty years and I simply CANNOT believe that my King would betray me and my family like this!"

Geoffrey regarded the scribe, his eyes narrowing. His brother had described the hedgehog as a shy, weak-willed and downright cowardly type. But the creature that stood recalcitrant before him was obviously less craven than Giles had portrayed. If such were true and the hedgehog's fortitude, and that of his family, were not simply play-acting for his benefit, then perhaps an escape from the City was not such a far-fetched idea as Giles had warned him about after all. "I can assure you that the order," He nodded toward the parchment in Iggy's paw, "Is quite genuine." He said, a small amount of sympathy detectable in his otherwise impassive voice.

"But why?" The hedgehog implored, his voice reflecting the genuine fear and incredulity that was now in his eyes. "I've served His Majesty loyally, even while he's treated me like...like..." Tears now began to flow down Iggy's cheeks as he fell, sobbing, to his knees. His wife, who by now had stopped her child's crying, pushed the bundle into the paws of one of her daughters and began trying to comfort her husband.

Geoffrey began glancing nervously down each direction of the alleyway. "Please, Ma'am; we must leave here as soon as possible. One of Jenner's spies may very well be nearby." He said, urgency and exasperation now in his voice.

She turned on the wolf, her eyes blazing with anger and welling with tears of their own. "Have you no decency? Have you no compassion?" She hissed in indignation. "My husband has been trying to hold this family together in spite of all the abuse that King Jenner has been heaping on him, and now to find out that we've been betrayed like this? I believe that some kind of explanation is the very least that you owe us!" She squeaked in rage.

The wolf stared at them impassively for a few moments. This assignment was definitely NOT going according to plan! These hedgehogs were supposed to follow him out of the City without question, grateful to have escaped with theirskins; if not their actual lives; intact. But his father, font of wisdom that he'd once been, had told him long ago that even the most intelligent souls could act irrationally in situations that were outside of their normal realm of their experience. He mentally shrugged, telling himself that a summary death-sentence from one's own employer probably fit that particular bill. "Alright," He said, "Maybe my father can help you in that regard. But the longer we hang around here, the greater our chances of getting caught."

Geoffrey then led the family of hedgehogs through the dark and now oppressive streets of Londontown, several times doubling back on the route or hiding his charges in a deserted building or alleyway until he was sure that they weren't being followed. When he'd decided that all was safe for the moment he led them to a modest two-story brick house in one of the poorer sections of the City near the Western City Gate. He

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knocked quietly at the door, which was answered by a pretty teenage female wolf.

Clearly confused, she asked, "Geoffery, what are you doing back so soon?"

The older male jerked a thumb back in the direction of the line of hedgehogs waiting fearfully behind him.

The girl's eyes widened with astonishment. "Geez, Geoffrey, you shouldn't have brought THEM here! Dad'll have a stroke!" She exclaimed.

"What's going on out there!" A voice like the lowest notes from an organ demanded.

Geoffrey pointed a clawed finger directly into his sister's face. "You leave dad to me, Gillian!" He said sharply. He then pointed at the hedgehogs. "Get our guests some food and take 'em to the living room while I get him."

Gillian glared angrily at her brother for a moment but then stepped aside and let him and the unexpected visitors in.

A few moments later, Geoffrey had raced up the stairs and was at the door to his father's room. "Dad," He said in his best no-nonsense manner as he knocked on the door, "We've got a MAJOR problem!"

"Well come on in, dammit! What'd you screw up THIS time?" The voice on the other side asked sarcastically.

Geoffrey opened the door and with a sigh and a mixture of melancholy and bitter anger stepped inside. The room was tiny; with only a bed, a chest-of-drawers and a small desk from which a candle-lamp cast a dim and flickering light. On the bed under several layers of quilts lay the ill and wasted form of his father, Gilbert. In his youth he'd been very handsome, a trait quite evidently passed on to the present generation of his family. The elder Gisborne was Master of the Small Business Guild and, at least until Jenner had taken the Throne, a well-respected advisor to the House PenWallace. But over the past several months, ever since the tragic deaths of his friends King Nicodemus and Sir Jonathan Brisbee, his health had rapidly declined until all that was left was the pathetic bed-ridden wreck that was stretched out before his eldest son. But while his physical body was apparently beyond help, or so many of the doctors who had seen him recently had said, his defiant spirit, reflected by the constant, virulent anger in his eyes and his unalloyed contempt for King Jenner, was such that even Death itself seemed to have decided that this was a visit best postponed until a later day.

"Well?" The venerable wolf barked in exasperation.

Geoffrey mentally shook himself out of his reverie. "I didn't screw up anything, dad." He said as calmly as his rapidly frazzling nerves would allow. "The scribe that Giles told you about, the one that Jenner's sentenced to death, has demanded an explanation and I, for one, happen to agree that we owe him at least that much."

Gilbert's jaw dropped in astonishment and he attempted to lift himself to a sitting position with his elbows. "Dammit, boy, are you insane?" He snarled, baring his fangs. "If Jenner's spies find him here, his name's not gonna be the only one on that execution order!"

"Don't worry, dad, I made sure that we weren't followed." Geoffrey stated calmly. "And besides, no one except Jenner, the King's Scribe and; of course; us even knows about the order; thanks to Giles; so we'll still have plenty of time to get him and his family out of the City before it was scheduled to be carried out." He explained.

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Gilbert glowered coldly at his son through diamond-hard eyes. "I hope to hell you're right, boy, or everything we've managed to accomplish up to now is a wasted effort." He grumbled. He then grabbed a robe draped over a bedknob of his headboard and, with great effort, struggled into it, refusing his son's offer of help. Geoffrey then gathered his incapacitated parent and the blankets that covered him into his arms and brought him carefully down to the living room where Gillian had served Iggy and his family some soup and lay him down on a well-worn couch near the just-stoked fire. Gilbert frowned his disapproval at his daughter, but she merely shrugged and indicated with a scowl of her own that she wasn't going to be intimidated by him. "So, Scribe, what's so special about you that you think you have the right to endanger my family by makin' my son bring you here instead o' just lettin' him take you outta the madhouse that this City's becoming?" He sneered as he tried to make himself comfortable.

"Dad!" Geoffrey exclaimed, horrified by his father's bad behavior toward their guests, even if those guests were uninvited.

Iggy held up a paw to silence the younger Gisborne. As afraid as he was for himself and his family, Iggy decided that he wasn't going to play the wolf's game. "Isn't the REAL question: What makes me so special that your son would endanger himself to help my family and me escape at all?" He asked, struggling to keep his voice from breaking. "It must be something extremely important to both of you and," He slipped the blank envelope with Jenner's order out of his belt-pouch, "I think that we," He waved the envelope toward his kin, "deserve to know why Jenner would betray us in this fashion."

Gilbert sniffed disdainfully. "What do I look like, a mind-reader?" He asked. "All I know is that my other boy, Giles, comes to me and asks if Geoff and I would help him smuggle a certain scribe out of here 'cause Jenner wants him dead. I only agreed to help because I'm thinkin' that maybe, just maybe, you might have information that we can use at some later date." His voice then became more sad and resigned. "Now I'm forced to help you simply because you know who we are and our connection to Giles." By now, Gilbert's breathing was becoming labored and his eyes were starting to become unfocused.

Geoffrey got up and adjusted his father's covers. "Don't worry, dad, I'll make sure our secret stays safe." He said gently.

"Damn you, boy." He groaned without emotion. "Just get 'em out of here." The elder wolf then fell into a restless slumber.

Geoffrey then told his sister to stay with their father until he returned from helping the hedgehogs make their escape. Then, by the light of a small lamp he led them in the dark, cold night through the most deserted alleyways of the City and into a graveyard that adjoined the City wall. He stopped at a pair of unmarked graves. "This is where King Nicodemus and Sir Jonathan Brisbee are buried." He said wistfully. "Because this is a 'potter's field', Jenner won't let anyone put a marker or monument up to honor their names." He then set the lantern down between the heads of the graves and had Iggy and his family sit in a circle around them. "I'm afraid that this is as far as I go. I've made it a habit over the past several months to come and pray for Nicodemus and Jonathan's souls, so the guards who patrol here won't pay much attention to the light and we shouldn't have to worry about anyone interrupting us."

"But how do we get out of the City, and where do we go? You're note said not to bring anything with us. How are we supposed to survive?" Iggy asked.

"There's an old gate in the wall hidden behind a stand of bushes a stones-throw Northeast of here. Giles showed it to me last Summer. It's open just enough that you should be able to squeeze through it. I hid several packs with food and a map in each under a pile of leaves just a few hours ago so they should still be there. Once you're out of here head North to Nottinghamshire; Giles says that he's heard rumors that there's a

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resistance group forming to try to stop Jenner. Maybe it's true, maybe it's not; either way you're safer out in the countryside than you'd be if you stayed here because we can, for a while at least, trick him into believing that the execution order," Geoffrey pointed to the hedgehog's belt-pouch, "Has been carried out." He said calmly.

Iggy nodded, then asked. "Why are you doing this? You've put yourself at terrible risk for a family that you don't even know. And I couldn't help but notice how displeased your father was, and it was more than just because you brought us to see him." He said sympathetically.

Geoffrey stared into the dim light cast by the lantern. "Dad and I both oppose Jenner's rule, but we have different reasons and different opinions as to the best methods of achieving our common aim. He's convinced that Jenner somehow poisoned him just before he killed Nicodemus and Jonathan and he wants to see Jenner dead before he himself succumbs to whatever it is that's killing him." He said impassively.

"And you?" Iggy asked.

"I want Jenner dead as well." Geoffrey stated flatly. "But I want to do it in a manner that exposes the lies and deception on which he and those who helped him to kill his brother and his brother's Chancellor built their power and which will humiliate them so badly that they'll be forced to face the Justice that they so richly deserve."

"But what of your brother? He's one of the King's own Guards!" Iggy exclaimed. "He's responsible for PROTECTING Jenner!"

A grim smile crossed the wolf's face, the light from the lantern giving it a slightly demonic cast. "Until recently my naive, idealistic sibling really believed that Nicodemus and Jonathan's sudden demise actually WAS the 'assassination by unknown parties' that Jenner's propaganda has been telling Britain it was; he's even managed to implicate Jonathan's poor, innocent widow and Nicodemus's former Doctor in this supposed 'plot'; but when he found the order for your execution on the King's Scribe's desk he realized Jenner's true nature and brought it to me and we enlisted dad's help in hatching this plan to, hopefully, get you and your loved ones to safety."

Iggy was stunned. He was by no means unaware of all the intrigues and backbiting that went on inside of any large, bureaucratic organization like the King's court; but to be suddenly thrust into the middle of these events with one's own life at stake by mere caprice was utterly incomprehensible. And the question that still haunted him the most had yet to be given a satisfactory answer. "But why ME? What's so important about me that Jenner would want me dead?" He asked desperately.

Geoffrey shook his head sadly and shrugged. "I'm afraid that only Jenner knows the answer to that particular question." He said quietly. He then began ticking off points on his fingers. "Maybe he thinks you know something that you're not supposed to? Maybe he thinks you've been disloyal to him? Hell, maybe he's decided he simply doesn't like you any more! I just don't know." He sighed heavily, then gazed intently into the faces of the hedgehogs with whom he sat. "I just know that I cannot, in good conscience, let an innocent family like yours suffer the way mine is being forced to." He then pointed off into the darkness. "You should get going now. The next patrol will be by soon and I've got to be seen alone or they'll get suspicious." He said.

Zoe placed a comforting paw on his arm. "Thank you so much for helping us." She said softly. "We'll keep you and your family in our prayers from now on."

Geoffrey nodded impassively and the hedgehogs got to their feet and waddled as quickly as possible toward the direction of the gate.

Chapter 51: 50

Linnette took in the enticing, wonderful smell. Following her nose and the system of ropes that her husband had laid out she quietly and carefully traced the exquisite aroma. According to the rough map that she'd drawn in her mind over the past week she was in the second-floor hallway somewhere in the West-end of the manor-house near what used to be the library. Though none of the books remained. She crept down the hall until she heard what might have been the sound of a cup being placed on a saucer in a nearby room. She then made her way to the source of the sound and feeling the familiar lines of a closed door, softly knocked.

"Yes?" A familiar voice answered.

"Marian?" She asked, somewhat surprised.

"Yes, Linnette." The voice said with a detectable edge of weariness. "Come on in, doorknob's on your left."

Linnette quickly found the knob, opened the door and stepped in.

"To your right, along the wall about five paces. Table's just to your left, couch'll be dead ahead of you." Mrs. Brisbee told her.

Linnette followed her instructions and was soon seated next to her. "Thanks for the help." She said warmly.

"Your husband told me earlier that you hadn't yet memorized the layout of Locksley Manor. It's the least I could do." Mrs. Brisbee said. "Would you like some tea?" She asked.

"Please!" Linnette said, not bothering to hide her enthusiasm. "I smelled it a few minutes ago and followed the scent here." She explained.

Mrs. Brisbee frowned. "I'm sorry if I woke you," She said quietly as she poured a second cup and set it and a saucer into Linnette's waiting paws. "But ever since Jonathan's death I haven't been sleeping very well."

Linnette offered a consoling paw and Mrs. Brisbee placed it on her arm. The older vixen felt a familiar smoothness in the material of the robe that she knew the younger one was wearing. "I quite understand." She said, then after a brief pause observed. "I notice you're wearing mom's robe..."

"I'm sorry!" Mrs. Brisbee said hastily. "I'll give it back immediately! I had no right to..."

"It's okay! It's okay!" Linnette reassured her. "I'm guessing that Justin gave it to you and, quite frankly, I can think of no one else that I'd rather have wear it to honor my memories of her."

"Thank you." Mrs. Brisbee said.

They both drank in silence for several minutes until Linnette asked, "Marian, may I make a personal observation?"

"Yes, I suppose." Mrs. Brisbee replied distantly, as if preoccupied by her own thoughts.

"For some reason," She began, "Other animals tend to believe that because I can't see, I'm somehow not aware of my surroundings or what's going on around me. Fortunately for me, though probably not for them if they

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were to experience what I do during an average day, nothing could be further from the truth. While my remaining senses are probably no more or less acute than yours or anybody else's, because I don't have the luxury of taking them for granted I'm probably somewhat more attuned to what they're telling me from one moment to the next." She explained, pausing a moment to gauge how Mrs. Brisbee would react. Sensing nothing, she continued. "Ever since we met I've been perceiving a certain tension from you whenever my brother is nearby." She said, carefully measuring her words. Again she paused and waited.

"Go on." Mrs. Brisbee said after several uneasy seconds.

"Well, I'm just not sure what to make of it." Linnette said cautiously. "The love that I hear in your voice as you speak of him when he's not around is quite obvious. But when he is present, there's something else in your voice..." She thought hard for a moment, searching for the right word. "...a sadness I guess, as if you were about to cry and trying to hold it in."

Linnette was surprised to hear a small sob from where Mrs. Brisbee was sitting. "Marian, are you alright?" She asked, suddenly alarmed. Maybe this hadn't been such a good time to bring this subject up after all, she thought to herself.

"I'm...I'm fine." Mrs. Brisbee said in a choked whisper.

"Are you sure?" Linnette asked with concern. "I didn't mean to offend you or pry into any sensitive matters between you and Justin." She said apologetically.

"No." Mrs. Brisbee said, wiping away a tear. "You're right about Justin and me." She whispered, her voice hollow as if her emotion had suddenly been drained from her.

"If you want to tell me about it, I'm here to listen." Linnette offered, placing her cup and saucer on the table in front of her.

Mrs. Brisbee then took the older vixen's paws in her's. "When Justin helped us escape from the City after Jonathan and King Nicodemus's death," She said, "I wasn't sure what I thought about him; I mean I was grateful that he cared about us enough to risk his life for us, but I don't think that the reality of the situation had sunk in just yet and after a night of crying I thought I had put my feelings about Jonathan into the back of my mind so that I could concentrate on the survival of the children. But while we were taking refuge at Dr. Ages house and I began to realize that Jonathan wasn't coming back to us, I found myself worrying more and more about him as the weeks passed. When he showed up suddenly, only to tell me that he had to leave again, it brought back all those feelings that I thought I'd buried deep inside. And when we discovered his true ancestry and relation to Jonathan, I knew that I did indeed love him with much the same desire that I had loved my dear husband. We even walked to his secret spot in the creek and...and..."

Linnette laid Mrs. Brisbee's head in her lap and began gently stroking the fur of her cheek as the younger vixen was wracked by sobbing. "I believe I understand." She said quietly. "You feel that in a moment of weakness you may have betrayed your husband's memory."

Mrs. Brisbee nodded, gripping part of Linnette's nightgown in one paw.

Linnette helped Mrs. Brisbee back to a sitting position and embraced her in a warm, comforting, sisterly hug. "Marian," She said, "Sharing that moment of intimacy with Justin wasn't a betrayal. You both needed each other at that particular time and in that particular place. Would Jonathan have approved? I can't answer that with a-hundred-percent certainty, but deep down I think that he would, at the very least, have understood how the circumstances of the moment would have led you and Justin to seek that kind of release in each other's

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company. Just because you love Justin now, that doesn't mean that you'll forget what Jonathan still means to you; infact, it'll probably help you treasure both of them even more."

Mrs. Brisbee sniffed back her tears and slumped, exhausted, onto the couch. "Perhaps...perhaps you're right." She whispered softly. "There are times when I think I would have given up on my life months ago if I hadn't had my thoughts of the good times that Jonathan and I shared together, the hope that Justin has instilled within me and the presence of my children who love and need me to get me through the hard times."

"Well now you have me and Galen to help as well. And since Justin looks to my husband as he would an older brother, I see no reason why you shouldn't look to me as you would an older sister." Linnette said happily.

Mrs. Brisbee smiled. "Thank you, Linney. I will." She said warmly.

Linnette then yawned and shivered slightly. "I think we'd better get ourselves to bed." She said. "Until that kitchen wall's fixed we're gonna have plenty more cold nights like this one."

Mrs. Brisbee made known her agreement and, after they quickly finished the dregs of the tea; led Linnette back to the apartment that she and Galen occupied; and then quickly made her way to the room she shared with Justin, extinguished the candle she'd used to light her way, and crawled into his bed, letting their mutual warmth lull her to sleep.

Chapter 52: 51

A light dusting of snow on Autumn's fallen leaves heralded the coming of Winter to Nottinghamshire and Sherwood Forest.

Lady Kluck nervously made her way along the dark, forboding path that led to the recently abandoned town. It had been a little less than an hour since she'd bade farewell to Marian Brisbee and the children of the nursery. But this mission to visit the new Sheriff, and if possible find out what his plans for the townfolk were, was extremely important to the survival of the just-formed Nottingham Organization. The night before, their leader; the dashing young Captain Locksley "Och, were Ah bu' thirty years younger!" She'd thought to herself when she'd first laid eyes on him when he'd appeared at the Frasier house just days before; had tried hard to talk her out of taking on the assignment. For Kluck did indeed remember the ill-mannered young wolf who was now apparently the Law in Nottingham. Not a few times had she caught the young knave skulking about the castle pretending to be on guard-duty or some other such fiction, but when she'd summoned one of his superiors to confirm whatever story he'd tried to foist on her it usually ended with the little trouble-maker either recieving no more than the proverbial slap on-the-wrist or getting away with it scot-free; An ironic phrase whose use she'd never particularly approved of; no doubt because of his close friendship with the then Prince Regent. Would Sullivan remember her? The thought had indeed ocured to her even as she'd spoken those fateful words volunteering to undertake the task on whose path she was presently set. But undertake it she would, for it was much too late to back out now.

So engrossed in her thoughts she'd been that she almost didn't hear the rustle of leaves just behind her. She turned, not too quickly so as not to seem too aggressive to whoever it might be, and found herself face-to-face with a young narrow-eyed lynx. He was a good deal taller than her, but then so was just about every other animal she knew, and wore several bandages on his lithe body, the largest covering a damaged ear. Ominously, He also held a drawn sword. "Och, laddie! Pu' tha' thing away 'fore y' hurts y'urself 'r somebody else!" She commanded indignantly, quickly regaining her voice as well as her courtly bearing.

Nonplussed, the lynx took a step backward; as if forced to do so by the sheer will of Kluck's voice. He then examined her intently for several seconds before asking, "Who are you? And what is your business here?"

Kluck gathered the folds of her cloak about her and stated, in her most regal manner, "I'm Lady Euphigenia Kluck; former Administrator-of-Household to His Majesty, King Nicodemus o' th' House PenWallace; and Ah wish t' speak wi' th' Sheriff o' th' Shire immediately." As a calculated insult, she nonchalantly added, "Y' have my permission to grace him wi' my presence."

The lynx raised a skeptical eyebrow at her as if she'd lost her mind. To his knowledge there WAS no more court, King Jenner having imprisoned the vast majority of the traitors who had conspired against him and his beloved brother and freeing the concubines that they'd enslaved for their pleasure in the late King's name. Obviously the "Lady" was a looney, but since she seemed harmless enough he decided to take this self-deluded old biddy to the Sheriff; even if it was just for a laugh. "Alright," He said as he sheathed his weapon, "Follow me." He then walked past her, not bothering to otherwise acknowledge her presence, and set a brisk pace for the town.

A short while later they arrived at their destination and the lynx took Kluck to the municipal goal, where he led her to Sullivan's office and told her to wait until his return. He then walked to the now-abandoned Public House. Inside, Blackjack had apparently drawn the day's barkeeping duty; as he wore an apron and was drying a stout-glass; and was only half listening as the Sheriff reeled off a tale of his past battlefield prowess. "Um, Sheriff, sir..." The lynx began.

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Sullivan sighed irritably at the interruption. "Yes, Deputy...Sillus?" He asked.

The lynx nodded obediently.

"What can I do for you?" He queried, then noticed the bandaged ear. "I trust you're healing well?"

"Yessir." Sillus replied. "But that's not why I'm here, sir. There's some old hen in your office demanding to speak with you..."

Sullivan waved a dismissive paw. "Tell her to come back later. We don't have the time or personnel to deal with petty crimes at the moment." He sneered.

"I don't think she wants to see you about anything like that." Sillus said, puzzlement evident in his voice. "She said her name was 'Lady' something-or-other...Gluck, or Clunk or..."

"Kluck!" Sullivan whispered with something close to sheer horror in his voice.

"Yessir, that's it." Sillus said. He then noticed the stricken expression on Sullivan's face. "Um, do you know her, sir?" He inquired.

Sullivan visibly shivered as his mind flooded with memories of her, the one member of the royal court he'd never managed to deceive no matter how hard he'd tried; and the spirits knew he'd tried hard enough! It seemed that no matter how long he'd planned something tricky or dishonest or both; whether it was the attempted theft of some Lady-of-the-Court's expensive trinket, or trying to cheat school by breaking into the desk of one of the teachers and trying to copy the answers to one of the more difficult tests so that he would have the advantage over his fellow recruits; she somehow, some-damn-how ALWAYS KNEW what he was up to! At first he'd suspected that little goody-goody twerp Justin of being the snitch who was turning him in and, of course, Justin had suffered more than his share of bruises when the Training Sergeant wasn't around. But even when he'd made sure to keep his bragging tongue still; inevitably, somehow, SHE KNEW!

And now SHE was here in Nottingham.

Sullivan groaned as he felt a massive headache, triggered by the sudden involuntary contraction of the muscular ruff at the back of his neck, spread through his skull.

"Are you all right, sir?" Sillus asked in a concerned voice as the Sheriff of Nottinghamshire slumped against the bar and laid his head on it, covering his face with his arms.

"Yeah, yeah. I'll be fine. Just gimme a minute." Sullivan's muffled voice answered without enthusiasm. A few moments later, he slowly lifted his head and sighed wearily. "C'mon, Deputy," He said. "Let's see what torments the old bird has in store for me today."

Sillus followed as Sullivan less-than-resolutely made his way to the gaol, muttering curses under his breath. When they entered the Sheriff's office, Kluck was seated primly on the chair facing his paper-and-parchment-littered desk, her expression stern but giving nothing away. Sullivan was about to dismiss the Deputy; but decided not to, reasoning that he would more than likely want someone present to restrain him from strangling the old witch when the inevitable verbal fireworks started.

As he entered the room the temperature seemed to drop perceptibly, if such a thing was possible seeing as how there was a roaring fire in the hearth in the office of the Deputy-in-Charge right outside, as Kluck fixed him with a cold, forbidding stare. He sat down at his desk and motioned for Sillus to stand behind him and,

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ignoring his discomfort and trying to sound as polite as possible, he asked, "How may I help you, M'Lady?"

"I'll ge' t' th' point, Sheriff." She said, her voice dripping with sarcasm as she emphasized his title. "I've been asked to represent the townfolk an' farmers o' Nott'n'am..." Sullivan attempted to speak, but Kluck held up a defiant wing to stop him. "They wish t' make knoon their displeasure tha' their lands an' hooms ha' been illegally taken from them by your boss, King Jenner." She stated. "Ah must confess tha' Ah believe they have a good case."

Sullivan shrugged. "His Majesty obviously disagrees. He believes that a single owner, The Crown, can manage and use both the land and what's on it far more efficiently than a patchwork of landholders; who, by the way, often leave lands fallow when they could be used to grow more needed food for those who often have no idea where their next meal is coming from. He only wants to do what he believes is best for his subjects." He explained.

Kluck regarded Sullivan with a look of something between pity and outright contempt. "Coom nouw, laddie. Ah know y' too well t' swallow tha' load o' stale fertilizer. Remember, Ah also knew Jenner when 'e was nothin' bu' a thievin' snotnose brat like yourself..." Sullivan had been growing visibly more angry and flinched at this remark, but said nothing. "...An' Ah know all too well tha' Jenner has nay room in his heart for ennuthun' bu' Jenner; a fact, booy th' way, tha' yoo'd d' well t' remember if yoo've an ounce o' brains in tha' thick skull o' yours." She said.

Sullivan could hold his temper no longer. "Who the HELL d'you think you are?" He exploded, standing and knocking his chair back so violently that his stunned Deputy only barely was able to grab it before it fell to the floor. He then angrily swiped the litter off the desk and leaned over, meeting his old nemesis nose-to-beak. "You have NO right to judge me OR His Majesty!" He screamed.

"Doon't Ah?" The hen squawked back just as loudly and angrily. "Ah can't coont th' noomber o' toims tha' Ah caught one 'r booth o' you makin' some koynd o' mischief in me castle! Luckily Ah was able t' keep a sharp eye out for your tricks before you brought the whole buildin' doon aroond our ears." Kluck then noticed the beginnings of a smile coming to Deputy Sillus's mouth. Apparently Sullivan noticed it too and turned and shot a withering glare at the hapless lynx, who tried with only a small amount of success to assume a more neutral expression.

The wolf angrily snatched his chair from Sillus and resumed his seat. "Look lady," He said in a disgusted tone of voice. "Much as I'm sure you'd just love to keep verbally clubbing me over the head with my past, I'm sure that there's got to be some other reason you've chosen to inflict yourself on me."

"You're royt, laddie, there is." Kluck said, holding him in an icy and unblinking gaze. "The touwn an' farmfolk o' the Shire want t' know if ye intend t' enforce Jenner's Reopossession Decree."

"Of course I do!" Sullivan blurted. "It's the law!"

"Ah thought so." Kluck said matter-of-factly. "Then I'm afraid Ah must inform ye tha' th' good folk o' Nott'n'am are prepared t' stay in th' Forest until Jenner either relinquishes th' Crown 'r he's forced off th' Throne. An' Ah warn ye, laddie, it won't go well fr those who ally themselves wi' him."

Sullivan leaned forward in his chair as his ears pricked up. "You'd better be careful there, sister!" He intoned sharply. "You're no more than a word away from a charge of treason to the Crown!" He then brought the edge of his flattened paw squarely down on the desk. "And that's a crime punishable by death!" He reminded her.

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Kluck met his gaze without the slightest hint of fear. "It's nay more treasonous th'n Jenner's murd'rin' his own brother an' takin' th' Crown." She stated impassively.

Sullivan jumped back in his seat as if slammed there by the weight of her words. He'd known from the beginning of this conversation, to use the term quite loosely, that she probably knew a fair amount about the present political situation. But only he, Jenner and a very few others actually knew for a fact that Jenner had actually plotted and; with the help of those few others, whose movements could be accounted for at all times; perpetrated the deed. Unfortunately, Sullivan had no way of knowing; or even guessing; how Kluck could have known of this or whether, possibly, she was just bluffing him to get him to unwittingly reveal information. Or was there? "I'm sorry," He said innocently, regaining his composure as quickly as possible. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

Kluck narrowed her already suspicious gaze. It was really no trick to figure out when Sullivan was lying through his teeth to her. She'd learned long ago that the wolf, as well as Jenner, were inveterate deceivers and that once you knew what to look for, their subterfuges were utterly transparent and easily detectable. And right now, the air reeked of deception. "Y' c'n lie t' yourself, laddie," She warned him in an ominous half-whisper. "An' y' c'n lie t' your Deputies if ye want, tha's on YOUR head." She then sighed and her voice became heavy with a certain sadness. "Bu' doon't lie t' me an' the folk o' Nott'n'am." She told him.

"Damn, she's good!" Sullivan thought, mentally kicking himself as he fought to keep from averting his eyes from her relentless stare. "Yeah, yeah. Whatever." He said as he shifted uncomfortably in his chair. This conversation was moving to an area that he'd just as soon not go into and he decided that the sooner it ended and the sooner this old witch hopped her broom and lit outta town, the happier he'd be. "Look, lady, I've got a town, such as it is, to run; so if you'll just tell the residents to come on back, we'll forget that this whole thing ever happened and we can all get back to our lives. Whadduya say, huh?" He asked, putting on an air of injured innocence.

Kluck stood and pointed an accusatory wing at him. "You, sir, are either willfully blind 'r just plain stupid; Ah canna decide which." She stated. "Bu' I'll tell y' roight now tha' so long as Jenner wears the Crown an' you represent him ye'll no' see hide nor hair o' th' good folk o' Nott'n'am. An' while this mayn't matter durin' th' present season, come Spring plantin' toim Ah have th' feelin' tha' Jenner's goin' t' be none too happy when his richest plumb's nothin' bu' a dry, dead prune because there's nay'un t' sow an' harvest th' crops." She then turned and resolutely barged out of the Sheriff's office.

Sullivan quickly followed. "Hey, waitaminnit!" He called to her; but she showed no sign that she'd heard him. He caught up with her, closely followed by Deputy Sillus, and grabbed her by one wing.

She stared, thunder-struck, first at his paw on her wing, as if the limb were a sacred thing violated by his unclean touch, then into his black, soulless eyes. "Unpaw me y' rogue," She hissed angrily, "'Fore Ah peck those beady little eyes oot!"

Sullivan hastily complied, not doubting for a moment that the hen was as good as her word. "Before you go," He said sharply, "I wanna know who's responsible for inciting the town and farmfolk to rebellion against His Majesty, since you're obviously nothing more than their mouthpiece."

Kluck fixed the wolf in an irate stare but this changed to a knowing half-smile. "Th' responsibility f'r incitin' rebellion rests squarely on Jenner's head." She said. "Bu' their leader is willin' t' meet wi' y' day-after-'morrow at th' cottage in th' Heath joost Nor' o' here. Bu' be warned, laddie, "She continued, her voice low and menacing, "He knows all your tricks an'll be ready f'r enna traps y' mi' try t' set. Y' c'n bring two unarmed Deputies wi' y', bu' nay more 'r th' meet'n's off. Understand?"

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Sullivan hesitated for several seconds. While he was desperately curious to know who could possibly have enough influence over the animals of Nottingham to make them risk their homes and livelihoods in order to defy their King, he was also, not that he would have admitted it to himself, or anyone else for that matter, scared out of his hide at the thought that what he'd first thought to be a simple rabble might actually turn out to be an organized rebellion. He knew that Jenner would have a fit when he realized that somewhere, someone was making plans to deprive him of his Crown and Throne; and that he, Sullivan, was responsible for making sure that it didn't happen on his watch.

But Sullivan also knew that; somehow, sooner or later; Jenner would have to be removed from the Throne or a civil war was all but inevitable. That his dilemma was an unholy amalgamation of choices and events of his own making as well as events over which he had no control served only to make an already fierce headache even worse; but he was no closer to any kind of workable solution.

"Alright," He growled, rubbing agitatedly at the fur at the back of his neck. "We'll play it by your rules just this once. Me an' two Deputies, alone an' unarmed, at the house in the Heath at sunrise, day-after-tomorrow. Is this acceptable?"

Kluck nodded.

"Fine." Sullivan said dejectedly and pointed toward a stand of trees marking the edge of Sherwood Forest. "Now haul your tailfeathers outta my town before I have you arrested for loitering or whatever other charges I can think of."

Kluck wordlessly turned her back on the Sheriff and his Deputy and was soon out of sight.

"Tough old bird, ain't she." Observed Blackjack, who was just walking up to join his colleagues, a full stout-glass in one paw.

"No kidding." Sullivan growled sarcastically.

The ferret gave the wolf the container. "I thought you might need this after all the guff she was givin' you. I'm in if you want me." He said.

Sullivan drained the glass and wiped his muzzle with the back of his paw. "For the meeting? No," He said, giving the glass back. "I'll take one of the other Deputies." He then stared toward the forest as a humorless smirk came to his lips, his headache fading as a plan started to form in his mind. "I'll need you for a much more important task."

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"Good, Mr. Stabb, now go on to the next one."

"Oh geez, Doc, how much more o' this do I gotta do?"

Dr. Ages pointed to the page of the book that lay open in Ezekiel Stabb's lap. "You'll do as much as it takes until you know how to read and write better than you do now." He said firmly. "You asked me for my help and I'm giving it to you. I can either tutor you privately, or you can attend classes with the children..." Stabb winced in embarrassment. "...and we can then continue when you've reached a proper level of education. Either way, my time is precious and can ill-afford to be wasted."

"Alright, alright." Stabb said glumly. He then began reading a lesson from one of the school primers that the Waning-Crescent Clan weasels had brought with them when they had left Nottingham.

Meanwhile; Justin, Brutus and Jeremy were meeting Justin's office.

"Then you'll go?" Brutus asked.

"Yeah, sure. Why not?" Jeremy replied nonchalantly.

"Just remember," Justin warned the rooster, "This mission is not only very important, it could also be extremely dangerous. We need all the help we can get from others who're willing to help us overthrow Jenner. Your job is to get the word to them about who we are and point them in our direction. The problem's going to be that Jenner pretty much owns the loyalty of most of the other Sheriff's and you could get nabbed for anything from vagrancy to no reason at all."

Jeremy shrugged. "What's the worst that they can do to me?" He asked sarcastically. "Burn me? Toss me into a mudpit?" Brutus winced at this second question but said nothing in his own defense.

"They could torture or KILL you." Justin replied sharply.

Jeremy shrugged again. "They could do that to ANY of us." The rooster stated calmly. "There's just a lot less likelihood of that happening to me because no one can connect me to you or Mrs. B. or to this organization."

Justin nodded. "That's why we're asking. This isn't the sort of thing that I can, in good conscience, order someone who's been through what you've been through to do." He said, his voice somewhat strained.

A mirthless smile came to Jeremy's bill. "Don't worry, Captain," He said with a voice as hard as the look in his eyes. "My injuries healed a long time ago."

"The physical ones, maybe," Justin worriedly thought to himself, "But I can only wonder how bad the emotional ones are." Marian had earlier confided to him her observations about the rooster's rather dramatic change of personality and it had not entirely escaped his notice either. And after the incident with Brutus two days before, Justin was worried that his friend might be coming unglued by this whole affair. So, in secret, He and Brutus had met the night before and decided, and Dr. Ages had reluctantly agreed, that Jeremy needed a "cooling off" period away from the eye of the coming storm. Ages had suggested that Jeremy be sent to his family's care until Jenner was deposed, but Justin knew that the rooster would have balked at such an obvious attempt at coddling him. So he and the other two had worked out the plan that they had just laid out for the

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sometime minstrel. "Alright, would you be willing to leave today?" He asked.

"Sure, no problem." The rooster replied confidently. "Just lemme say a few 'goodbyes' an' I'm outta here."

Justin nodded and Jeremy quickly stepped out the door. A moment later, Justin slumped dejectedly in his chair. "The spirits forgive me for doing that to him, 'cause if he ever discovers the REAL reason we're sending him on this excursion HE sure as Hell won't." He stated sadly.

Brutus maintained a carefully neutral expression and tone as he said, "Believe me, Jeremy O'Dale is perfectly capable of taking care of himself. But his hatred for both Jenner and Sullivan puts us, and most of all him, in danger if he should, at some point, try to kill either of them before the Nottingham Organization is fully prepared to fight. Hopefully, this 'excursion' will give him some time to get a handle on his anger. Also, it'll give him a sense that he's still serving the Organization even as it keeps him out of harm's way."

"And you out of his." Justin said, his tone of voice a bit more sarcastic than was probably called for.

The former Sheriff arched an eyebrow and said, "We had a talk and all is forgiven. I even offered him a job as part of the security contingent, but he says he doesn't want to be tied down." The bear sighed and continued. "He's really not a bad fellow, but I'm afraid that his desire for revenge; and the spirits know he didn't deserve the suffering he went through; will cause both him and us more harm than good, at least in the short run.

"But what makes you think that he won't just go after Sullivan or Jenner the moment he steps off the Estate?" Justin inquired skeptically.

Brutus shrugged his massive shoulders as if he were carrying the weight of the world on them. "I don't know that he won't." He conceded. "But I think that deep down he knows that he'll get his chance at them eventually and I'm willing to trust that he'll do what's best for both himself and the Nottingham Organization, however long it may take." He said.

Justin's eyes narrowed and he opened his mouth to say something but there came a knock at the door. "Come." He said.

The door swung open and in walked Martin Brisbee and Declan Wyclyffe; the former looking hesitant and fidgeting with the hem of his shirt, while the latter had a look of fierce determination in his large, dark eyes.

Justin and Brutus exchanged a quick questioning glance. "Something I can help you two with?" The fox asked in a polite-but-businesslike tone.

The hare stepped forward and, with a somewhat clumsy; to Justin's experienced eyes at least; salute said, "Sir, permission to address the Captain and the Sheriff!"

Martin, clearly embarrassed by his associate's behavior, rolled his eyes and tried hard not to be noticed by his Uncle; a feat at which he knew he was failing quite dismally.

Out of the corner of his eye, Justin could see the very beginnings of a smirk coming to the Brutus's face. He shot a quick "Do-you-mind?" frown at the former Sheriff, then turned his attention to the young boys standing in front of him. "You have OUR permission. You can also relax if you'd like; this isn't a military dictatorship." He said evenly.

The young hare's tension drained somewhat, but not completely, and he remained stiffly at attention; or at least his best facsimile thereof. "Captain Locksley, Sir..." He began.

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"Justin." The fox said.

"Sir?" The hare asked, a bit flustered by the interruption.

An easy smile came to the fox's face. "I don't mind if you call me 'Justin'. In fact, I'd prefer that you do so." He said.

"Um...Okay...Justin." The hare began hesitantly, "I've come to ask for permission to join the Nottingham Organization." He said.

Justin gave him a quizzical look. "But you're already a member." He stated.

"No Sir, Ca...I mean Justin!" The hare corrected himself. "I wish to help fight Jenner by becoming a soldier and taking arms against him." He said.

Justin raised a skeptical eyebrow. "Really? I seem to remember that you didn't fare too well the last time you met up with one of the Sheriff's Deputys." He observed pointedly. "What makes you believe that you'd make decent soldier material?" He challenged.

Declan was shocked by Justin's sudden change of attitude. Just yesterday the fox had made a gloriously inspiring speech that had sent the young hare's blood to a passionate boil. He hated the kind of evil and greed that Jenner had embraced and wanted nothing more in life at the moment than to fight the threat against his family and friends that he felt the disgraced King now represented. "That fake took me by surprise!" He spat contemptuously. "But I gave him scars of his own to remember me by!" His eyes were now blazing with a strange fire somewhere between outright rage and unrestrained joy. "He'll not be so quick to take me on again, I'll wager!" He stated confidently.

Justin was anything but convinced. While he could understand the youngster's enthusiasm in wanting to get rid of Jenner and wishing to be a part of the effort, and even halfway understanding the hare's desire, foolish though it may have been, to be a part of the actual fight; Justin had, after all, heard plenty of stories about the ancient Knights in his own youth and had been drawn to their excitement as well, he was also all-too-keenly aware that this child's, for that's exactly what Declan was, whether he wanted to admit it or not!, safety was HIS personal responsibility and a thing to be guarded at all cost. He sighed and shook his head. "I'm sorry, son. While it's true that we need all the help we can muster, I don't want to be worrying about a youngster like you when I need to be focused on the battles ahead. Maybe when you're older you'll understand why I must refuse your request, but refuse it I must." He said flatly.

Declan would hear none of this. "You LIAR!" He hissed at the fox, tears brimming from his eyes. Martin stepped back, a gasp of horror escaping from his open mouth "How DARE you use all those pretty words to plant a dream in our hearts! But when someone like me comes along of his own will wishing to help, you crush that dream like a flower that's only just begun to bud!" He cried.

Brutus began to rise from his chair, his face a mask of anger and his eyes bright with rage. "Why you little..."

Justin shot a restraining paw toward the bear as his eyes narrowed and focused on Declan; who, unblinking, returned his angry glare.

After an eternity of several moments, a hard, cold smile came to Justin's lips. "Fine." He said bitterly. "You've proved your point, even if it is a very foolish one." He sighed again and turned his attention to his older nephew. "What about you, Martin? Are you here to join and hopefully die a Glorious and Honorable Death as well?" He asked, the sarcastic edge clear in his voice.

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"Martin's not to blame for bringing me here!" The hare protested. "I asked him to bring me because I knew that you'd not see me otherwise!"

A warning glance from Justin silenced the hare's remonstrations.

Martin gulped down his fear. "I-I want to help too, sir, if I can." He stated hesitantly.

Justin cast a stern glance at Declan. "Alright," He finally said. "I'll have a talk with your parents tonight and if, but ONLY if, I get their written permission will I consider creating some sort of youth auxiliary that you can join." To Martin he said, "I'll have a talk with your mother as well and see what she thinks." He then quickly dismissed the two boys, brushing off Declan's attempts to thank him. "Don't thank me just yet!" He warned the hare. "This isn't a done-deal by any means!"

After the two youths had left the office and Justin shut the door, Brutus shook his head in amazement. "The NERVE of that kid!" He exclaimed. "I shoulda taken him over my knee!"

Justin smiled a bit. "Don't think I wasn't tempted, my friend. But somehow I rather doubt that it would have done any good." He then began pacing the floor. "A decade ago and in similar circumstances that would have been me standing there demanding the same thing. Of course," He said ruefully, "I would probably actually have gotten the job because at his age I was already bright, ambitious..."

"Not to mention modest." Brutus interjected sarcastically.

"That too." Justin said without missing a beat. "My point is that I can understand his point of view. Hero worship has an almost magnetic attraction on boys their age. Didn't we all want to rescue some fair damsel in distress or slay an evil dragon?" He asked.

Brutus shrugged. "Sure. But then we grew up and got some sense put into our heads by those who knew better." He said pointedly.

"Exactly." Justin said, freezing in his tracks as a knowing smile crept onto his face. "And I have just the teacher in mind for them! Come with me!" He exclaimed as he threw open his office door and dashed into the hall.

With a flustered Brutus close behind him Justin double-timed to the room that Dr. Ages and Ezekiel Stabb occupied.

He pounded excitedly on the door.

"What IS it?" The perpetually irritated voice of the old badger demanded. "We're trying to study!"

"Open the door you old goat! I need to talk to Mr. Stabb!" Justin shouted, a merry grin on his face.

Several minutes later, after explaining what had just transpired to Stabb and Ages, Justin told Stabb his plan for the hare and his nephew.

With a look of utter perplexion, Stabb shook his head and asked, "Now lemme get this straight. You want ME to teach a couple o' kids the dirty art of mortal combat?"

Justin nodded.

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"Sir, if I may be so bold," Stabb said, looking at the fox as if he'd just been told to jump to his death from a cliff. "I think this 'leader' thing's driven you stark staring insane."

To everyone's surprise, Justin burst out laughing. "Perhaps you're right, Mr. Stabb." He said. Then his face and voice became serious once again. "But those two, especially the young and eager Mr. Wyclyffe, need to be shown that what we're attempting to do here will have some very serious consequences; and since you seem to have both dealt out and been dealt more than your share in the 'consequences' department, I think that it's only right that they be made to benefit from your vast repertoire of experiences both good AND bad." He stated.

Stabb closed his eyes and thought hard for several moments. He remembered his many conversations with Will Scarlet and Heather Kilcannon; about his sordid, mercenary past and how much he wished he could escape it; while they searched for Justin to join his fight against Jenner's tyranny. He'd made the decision, not without a certain sadness, to hang up his sword and instead use his mind as the weapon with which he would help to end Britain's present curse. He opened his eyes again and leveled an almost defiant gaze at Justin. "No Sir. I'm afraid I won't be able t' help you. My fightin' days 're behind me. I'll help you an' Colonel Talbot plot out tactics an' troop positions an' train the army we're gonna need to throw Jenner an' his bunch off th' throne; but I'm not gonna play the bully t' a pair o' kids because you want 'em to learn a lesson th' hard way." He stated quietly.

A flash of anger appeared for the merest instant in Justin's eyes, but disappeared as he said with a nervous laugh, "Bully? Who said anything about bullying anyone?" He paused for a second to gather his thoughts, then continued. "I just want someone with your kind of experience to help them learn that there's no glory in dying when you have your whole life ahead of you, even for a cause as worthy as this one."

Stabb's eyes hardened. "Alright," he said, his voice deliberate and with a chill edge of skepticism. "I guess I'll have to accept that line of reasoning. But I get to teach them MY way an' it'd better not interfere with my lessons."

"Fine. We can work out a schedule later." Justin hastily replied.

Stabb coolly nodded his affirmation and stalked back into the study room.

Ages glared at Justin through narrowed eyes.

Justin noticed this immediately. "What!" He exclaimed, his discomfiture evident.

"Have you no shame? You had no right to try and trick Mr. Stabb into doing your dirty work like that!" Ages scolded him angrily.

"But I wasn't...!" Justin tried to interject.

Ages pointed a warning finger in the fox's face. "Yes--you were!" He stated emphatically. In a milder, almost consoling tone he continued, "Look, I can understand your wanting to keep a pair of lads like Declan and your nephew as far from harm's way as possible. But by simple virtue of their being here they ARE in danger, and nothing you say or do; short of permanently locking them in the nursery or sending them away somewhere, can change that fact. I have no doubt that, in time, young Mr. Wyclyffe will come to see the folly of this lust for glory; but consider too that perhaps he and Martin will also learn a thing or two about such presently under-utilized concepts as Dicipline, Duty and Honor. And wouldn't Jonathan have taught his own sons about such things? As bad as the memories of the first years of Military life probably are for you, punishing Declan and Martin and making Mr. Stabb the fall-guy is hardly the way to instill such lessons." His

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voice then lowered to an angry, accusatory half-whisper. "I'd EXPECT that kind of behavior from the likes of Jenner or Sullivan, but NOT from you! You're BETTER than that!"

Thoroughly chastened, Justin meekly bowed his head as a tear rolled from one eye and down his cheek. "You're right," He whispered hoarsely. "I guess I was trying to put the responsibility for their safety on someone else so I wouldn't have to face it myself. Some "leader" I've turned out to be, huh?" He asked bitterly.

Ages shrugged. "You made a mistake. And, as you so astutely pointed out to Mr. Baylor yesterday, you'll probably make plenty more before this whole sad affair is over with. It's our duty as your friends to, as you yourself said, keep you humble." He stated.

A tight, sad smile came to Justin's lips. "Consider me well-humbled, old friend." He told the badger. He then turned to the bear. "C'mon, Brutus, we'd better leave these two alone and make preparations for the verbal fireworks that Marian and the Wyclyffe's are sure to shower on us when we try to recruit their sons." He said with resignation as they started back to his office.

Meanwhile, Jeremy was walking through the small ersatz village that surrounded Locksley Manor toward one of the paths that led through Sherwood Forest. Slung over his back was Will Scarlet's seabag/knapsack, filled with various provisions, and his crossbow and quiver, stuffed with freshly-fletched bolts.

"Mr. Jeremy!" A distinctive, lilting voice called after him.

Jeremy continued walking, his face set in a determined scowl. He'd said more than his share of goodbyes and shed more than his share of tears, now hidden beneath the brim of his peasant hat, than could reasonably have been expected of someone of his usually jolly nature. But while part of him knew that Justin and Brutus were probably doing what they believed to be the right thing in sending him away; another, angrier, part knew that they wanted him away from the Estate because of the recent significant change in his behavior. He also knew, deep down, that they were quite right to worry. Every time little Timmy or Cynthia had had one of their nightmares, he would secretly cry inside in sympathy because of the awful nightmares that he too was having. It irked him to no end that he was being asked to postpone his revenge on the reasons for those nightmares. Before his involvement with Mrs. Brisbee, her children and Justin and the fire that had almost cost him his life; he'd been care-free and more than a little self-centered. But now he was part of a cause. A small part to be sure, but a part nonetheless. For the Cause, he could wait as patiently as he had to; but his moment of revenge WOULD come.

"Mr. Jeremy, please wait up!" The voice called again, this time slightly breathless with exertion.

Jeremy glanced back a moment. Jogging toward him on the narrow paths between the various tents and shacks being used as housing was young Heather; wearing a beautiful long peasant-style dress, long-sleeved blouse and brocaded jacket. He slowed his pace a bit, but continued on toward the path.

The skunk caught up with him just as he was about to enter the treeline. "Please, Mr. Jeremy, may I speak wi' ye fr but a moment?" She asked.

Jeremy stopped and shrugged. "Alright, but this better not take too long. I'm on a very important assignment for our beloved leader." He sighed, not bothering to hide the resentment in his voice.

If the skunk had detected his simmering anger she gave no indication. "I was wonderin' if ye'd do me a small favor if it dinna take ye too far out o' your way?" She asked.

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He shrugged again, "Yeah, I suppose so." He said unenthusiastically.

Heather tried to give him a pair of parchment envelopes tied together with some string. "Please take these to a weasel named Cecil Stabb. He lives in Tywyn, Wales. It's on the coast." She said.

Jeremy looked dubious. "Wales, huh?"

"Please, Mr. Jeremy." She implored, her eyes brightening with tears. "I've no' been able to tell me father where I am for months! He must be desperately worried! He may even think I'm dead!" She then turned away and began sobbing into her paws.

Jeremy averted his eyes too, remembering how much he had sometimes missed his own family during his life as a wandering minstrel. It was a life he knew he could not live again until he had cast out the demons that haunted his sleep. He swallowed nervously and gently laid a wing on her shoulder. "I'll make sure that those get where they're supposed to go." He said quietly.

Heather gave him the letters and thanked him with a silent, affectionate hug.

Without another word, Jeremy quickly turned and began the errand on which he'd been sent; one last tear falling from his eyes.

Heather stood at the entrance to the forest until the rooster's dark form blended into the dark chaos of bare branches and mostly-melted snow and disappeared. She then turned and walked, her head bowed in sadness, along the edge of the treeline. Even as withdrawn into herself as she was, her thoughts were for animals who, like poor Jeremy, had had their lives ruined or disrupted by this persecution that neither she nor they could even begin to understand. Her own family, while of admittedly modest means, was quite happy in their chosen vocation. What little she knew of the evils of the world beyond Dublintown she'd learned from her grandfather's few rarely-told stories of his service as a Medic in the Plague Camps when he was young, a subject that he'd been understandably reluctant to delve into very often. But this past Summer and Autumn she'd been forced to look Evil square in the eye and it was beginning to take every spare ounce of her increasingly fragile will not to blink. She knew that she needed some kind of contact with her family if she was to have any strength at all for the trials that she knew were to come.

When she was snapped back to reality, Heather realized that she had walked about half the diameter of the Estate's forest border. Approaching from one of the paths leading to the town of Nottingham was Lady Kluck. The hen waved a quick greeting to her but continued toward the manor-house, the grim expression on her face an omen that bad times were fast approaching.

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Along with Lady Kluck's expected bad news, Justin received a piece of good news that day. Galen happily reported that the breach in the kitchen wall was now completely sealed and, once the mortar was dry, would be as strong as when the manor-house had originally been constructed.

"Great!" He exclaimed, "Now I won't wake up with icicles hanging from my nose every morning!"

After he and Brutus had cleared away the day's paperwork, they silently walked to the room to which the Wyclyffe family had been assigned. Justin stopped and raised his paw to knock on the door, but hesitated for a moment.

"Gotta face the music sometime, pal." The bear commented lamely.

Justin chuckled humorlessly. "I can't believe I let that kid talk me into this!" He growled, as much to himself as to Brutus. He then rapped on the heavy door. Inside, a high, female voice was heard; then the sound of feet padding quickly toward the door.

It was opened by a young female hare, whom Justin recognized as one of Declan's many sisters; although he was at a loss to remember her name or her place in the family's chronological pecking order. "Oh! Hi!" She said brightly. She then turned and announced, "Daddy, Captain Locksley an' Sheriff Brutus're here!"

"Well don't just keep them standing there, darling, invite 'em inside!" Liam's amused sounding voice replied.

The young hare then flung the door the rest of the way open. "Daddy says to come on in!" She said. Then, as an afterthought she added, "My name's Gwynnyth, but everybody calls me 'Gwynnie'; except Daddy. He calls me 'Darling'."

Justin smiled and knelt down, placing a reassuring paw on the girl's shoulder. "And it certainly fits you my dear!" He said jauntily.

Somewhat embarrassed, the hare then led Justin and Brutus to an larger adjoining room. Seated on the floor were Liam and Sian, with children of various ages and both genders scattered about the room. Also seated were Marian and her children, Dr. Ages, Mr. Stabb, and Linnette. All except his adoptive sister were eating a Peppered-Cabbage porridge with biscuits and rosehip tea.

It took every bit of effort for Justin to keep from letting his jaw drop in dismay, but his consternation was visible nonetheless.

"Don't worry, Captain," Sian said, a pleasant smile on her face. "Declan told us about the proposition that he made to you," As she spoke, Martin nervously averted his eyes. "And even though my husband is rather reluctant toward our son getting mixed up in this matter, I'm of the belief that his idea has a certain merit and; at the very least; deserves to be heard."

Justin tossed a quick, relieved look Brutus's way, but then remembered another factor in the equation. "What about you, Marian?" He asked. "Do you share her opinion?"

Mrs. Brisbee's face was unreadable; but she nodded, saying nothing. At the same time, Martin was trying his best to be as invisible as possible.

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"And has your son explained in full his "proposition" and the conditions with which we'd both have to agree upon in order for me to fulfill my end of this bargain?" Justin asked pointedly.

"He has." Liam said. "although I have a few conditions of my own that he'll have to meet."

"And where is our eager young volunteer?" Justin asked with a mild edge of sarcasm. "He'll need to know what obligations are going to be placed upon his shoulders if I decide to approve this."

"He's out completing his chores, Captain." Sian answered. "He should return momentarily. Won't you both sit down and eat with us?" She indicated two clear areas on the floor, saying, "I apologize for our lack of seating arrangements. We didn't have much time to pack after Liam resigned his post, and moving a family this large can present certain logistical challenges."

Justin and Brutus gingerly moved toward their places as Linnette said, "Believe me, Mrs. Wyclyffe, Justin and I are quite familiar with the concept of a large family in a small home."

Just then, there came another knock at the door. Gwynnyth, who'd been at the stove installed in the far corner of the room preparing meals for Justin and Brutus, ran to answer it. Another of the Wyclyffe children brought their food to them and then resumed his place on the floor. Declan and his younger sister appeared, each carrying a small bundle of the night's ration of firewood.

"The rest of the family 're okay for the night, I trust?" Liam asked as the two children expertly weaved their way through the various diners, Declan being careful to keep his distance from Justin and Brutus.

"Yes, father." Declan stated, his voice more subdued than when Justin and Brutus had seen him last. Liam quickly explained that several of the oldest children had decided to trade their room for a tent so that a family of weasels with very young children wouldn't have to sleep in the cold. After placing their loads into the woodbox, He and Gwynnyth quickly prepared their own dinners and sat where they could find room.

"Now that everyone is present, Captain, let's discuss this youth auxiliary that my son seems so hellbent on joining." Liam said.

Justin shrugged and swallowed a mouthful of porridge. "There's not much to discuss, really." He said in a low tone. "He seems to have this notion into his head that fighting against Jenner is some sort of ticket to Glory. And while I can, in a way, understand his boyish enthusiasm; I was, after all, recruited into the King's Guard when I was only a few years younger than he is now; it took many years to achieve the proficiency that I needed to rise through the ranks to my former position." He paused a moment in thought, then continued. "In order to fight Jenner, we'll have only the Winter season to prepare the army that will be needed to defeat him. Now that the kitchen wall is repaired, my brother will be concentrating on helping Mr. Stabb and myself to train that army." He then turned to Stabb. "How many have signed up so far?"

Stabb took a piece of paper from his purse and unrolled it. "About four hundred, give or take, including our host. I'm still a bit of a beginner when it comes to numbers." He said; smiling down at Dr. Ages, who sat next to him.

"Given enough time, my boy, I can make a mathematician as well as a philosopher out of you!" The badger stated confidently.

"Yes, well, unfortunately we don't have much time." Justin said grimly. "Lady Kluck informs me that Sullivan intends to enforce Jenner's laws. And knowing him, I suspect that he'll use more than just harsh language to do it." He then turned his attention to Liam. "Brutus tells me that you were once a Sergeant in the Duke of Wales'

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Army."

Liam shrugged nonchalantly. "Compulsory service. I just decided to stay in a little longer than most." He stated. Justin thought he heard more than a little pride in the hare's voice.

Sian smiled and slipped a loving arm around her husband's waist. "Liam was the handsomest soldier in his whole Regiment." She declared warmly.

Liam gave a bemused and lopsided smile. "Who am I to argue?" He asked.

Justin was forced to smile at his host's ability to keep a sense of humor even though they had effectively lost everything that they'd owned when they'd left their home. "Well, consider yourself reactivated with the honorary rank of Sergeant-Major; you too, Mr. Stabb." He then addressed the weasel in a half-whisper. "We need to meet with my brother to make a list of candidates for other training posts first thing tomorrow."

Stabb quickly nodded his agreement and took a small pen and ink bottle out of his purse and proceeded to painstakingly write a reminder at the bottom of the page. Ages, meanwhile, beamed proudly at his student.

Justin then got back to the subject for which everybody was gathered. "So you're willing to let your son train to take arms?" He asked.

"On one condition." Sian replied. "He must attend Lady Kluck's classes."

"Mom!" Declan tried to protest.

"All of your brothers and sisters are to be enrolled first thing tomorrow morning and you will be too." She stated firmly. "You need an education that your father and I have not had the luxury of time to give you. I'll not allow this valuable opportunity to go to waste."

"But I don't NEED..!" He tried to say.

"Listen to your Momma, boy." Stabb said, a sad intensity underlying the gentleness of his tone of voice. He then put down his empty bowl and spoon and a few moments later was sitting nose-to-nose with Declan. He placed his paws on the hare's shoulders and gazed into a pair of alert, nervous eyes. "Believe it or not," He began softly. "I used to be a lot like you. I truly believed that my fellow mercenaries an' I could conquer the world like the Emperors of Ancient Days. But somehow," He continued, his voice taking on a bitter edge, "Things never turned out quite like we'd planned." A tear now appeared at the corner of one eye. "As the years passed an' we fought this 'r that battle fr this 'r that King," He slowly traced the age-faded scar that ran down the side of his face with one clawed finger. "I can't even remember now how many of 'em died or even what they thought they were dyin' for." He sighed as the tear fell from his eye and soaked into the fur of his cheek. He then continued. "Money, I suppose. There's a reason we're called 'Soldiers of Fortune'." He paused again for the briefest moment; bitter, unwanted memories of his past racing through his mind. "But somehow I just never paid enough attention to the 'Fortune' part and I was made to realize, much to my horror," His mouth then twisted into a forlorn smile. "Or my relief, I've never quite been able to figure out which, that the 'Soldier' part is best left in younger, more capable paws than mine." He then pointed to Ages. "The Doc's helped me to see that, even in my own advancing years, an education is far more valuable than all the weapons 'r gold in all th' world because once you have it, no one can ever take it away from you no matter how hard they might try." He concluded.

Declan, who had at first been skeptical of Stabb; expecting to be forced to sit through yet another lecture on why he couldn't help fight the evil King Jenner; now sat in rapt attention, absorbing every word and feeling

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the passions that he'd felt yesterday stirring within him again. "But I still want to help fight Jenner." He whispered.

"No one's sayin' you can't." Stabb said gently. "Alls your parents an' I want is that you should get some schoolin' too."

Declan sat like a statue for a minute as the room stayed silent except for the sounds of breathing. Finally, the young hare's head began to nod. "Alright, sir, I'll go to school." He said simply.

As Justin and Declan's parents each breathed silent sighs of relief, Stabb smiled happily, winked and tousled the fur on top of his head. "Good lad." The weasel said.

Justin then announced, "Let's not forget the matter of another potential recruit. What about it, Martin?" He asked.

Before the rabbit could answer; Mrs. Brisbee spoke, carefully measuring her words. "While I AM concerned for your safety, and expect you to attend classes too, I also realize that you're mature enough now to make your own decision about whether or not to join Declan and Mr. Stabb." She said.

"You can still back out of this." Justin gently reminded him. "And I don't think that any of us would think any less of you if you did."

"I would." Martin whispered as a tear rolled down his cheek.

"Why?" Mrs. Brisbee asked as she wrapped a motherly arm around Martin's shoulders and tenderly pulled him to her so that his head rested on her shoulder.

"I don't wanna fight for Glory 'r anything like that." He said quietly. He then lifted his head until his eyes met his mother's. "I just want to fight for my father." He said, his voice a mixture of sadness and determination.

Mrs. Brisbee gave a sad smile as a tear formed in the corner of her eye and rolled down her muzzle and off the tip of her nose to splash onto the tip of Martin's nose. "I understand." She whispered as she used the ragged hem of her cape to gently wipe the damp spot away. She then told Stabb, "My son will also be part of your class so long as it doesn't interfere with his schoolwork."

Stabb nodded. "I don't think that'll be a problem, Ma'am."

Justin then produced a pair of permission slips and, once they were signed, excused himself and left the ersatz apartment; a feeling of dread filling the pit of his stomach to keep company with the porridge.

Chapter 55: 54

"WHERE IS HE?" Jenner's voice reverberated like thunder through the throneroom.

"We, uh, we don't know, Your Majesty." Zim; a jackal, head of Jenner's network of spies throughout the City; replied nervously. "We had him until early the night-before-last, but then the 'shadow' that I had posted to watch him somehow lost his trail. I'm at a loss to explain how it happened but the matter is being investigated and my 'employee' will be disciplined if necessary." He added reassuringly.

Jenner was less than satisfied. "I don't pay you to investigate your failings!" He growled angrily. "I pay you to instill just enough fear in me among my subjects to keep me in power without causing a civil war! If that means the occasional secret assassination, then I expect your organization to handle it with the necessary discretion!"

The jackal shrugged. "If it is the will of the spirits, Your Majesty." He said with a less than genuine humility.

"Spirits? Bah!" Jenner spat. "These 'spirits' that everyone invokes are nothing more than a way to avoid taking responsibility for their own failures! If at first you don't succeed, blame the spirits. And when you do succeed, claim the credit for your own. THAT'S how it usually goes, isn't it?" He asked sarcastically.

The jackal shrugged again, having no real desire to get caught up in a theological tug-of-war. In all truth Zim was beginning to regret his "association" with this arrogant, bragging twit. He sorely missed the good old days of mere petty thievery, extortion, running protection rackets, smuggling, mercantile espionage and hijacking the occasional caravan for his other main employer, The Grandmaster. His Majesty might be The King of Britain, but he was certainly the stingiest animal that Zim had ever had the misfortune to work for; especially considering that murder was now being added to the mix. And why His Majesty was so upset by the disappearance of a mere scribe to the point of obsession was, to Zim's mind, a puzzlement. The scribe, a simple-minded hedgehog, had done nothing particularly wrong, other than to question his Sovereign's sanity, something that even Zim could understand!, while His Majesty had been in power, as Zim was well aware from the reports of his spy network; but orders were orders and somehow this Ignatz had escaped the fate that had been decreed for him and his family and it was up to Zim and his comrades to find and kill them.

He was about excuse himself from His Majesty's presence when one of the Troop-Captains of the King's Guard walked in. They eyed each other suspiciously. Zim distrusted all of His Majesty's Guard's because they were independent of the Army command structure and, therefore, could not be intimidated by threats of courts-martial and virtually certain imprisonment or Death for Treason to the Crown if there was even a whiff of doubt as to their loyalty. King's Guards, if they WERE ever accused of disloyalty, would have been tried under a special statute by a Grand Jury made up of Sheriff's and presided over by, ironically enough, the King's Chancellor; but so above reproach were they that this system had never been put to the test. He distrusted this one in particular because his father had been a vociferous opponent of both His Majesty and the Grandmaster. And while Giles Gisbourne had so far said or done nothing that would cast doubt on his loyalty to his charge, Zim had made it a priority to have him carefully watched; especially after the incident at the King's Orphanage some months ago.

The wolf brushed by him without a word and knelt in front of the throne. "Your Majesty, I bring you grievous news." He announced.

Jenner scowled. "It can't be any worse than anything I've already heard today." He muttered. "Out with it." He ordered.

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"It is with deep regret that I must inform His Majesty that his scribe, Ignatz, is dead." He said, his voice quavering just noticeably.

Jenner leaned back in his throne, the scowl on his face modifying itself from anger to a combination of intense curiosity and skepticism as he rubbed his beard. "Interesting." He intoned. His eyes narrowed as they focused on the jackal, who was slowly and unobtrusively trying to back, "slink" is the word that Giles would use when describing the incident in the barracks that night, out of the throne room. "Tell me, Spy, were you aware of this?"

Zim was dumbfounded by this turn of events. "Certainly not, Your Majesty!" He said nervously.

Jenner turned his attention back to Gisbourne. "You say the scribe is dead? How? Where's the body?" He demanded.

"Late night-before-last, as I was walking through one of the parks bordering the City wall, I discovered him attempting to leave." The wolf answered sadly. "When he recognized me, he drew a dagger and I was forced to defend myself. I then rushed to his home and found that he'd murdered his own family in their beds." He paused a moment as a tear slid down the fur of his cheek. "I also found a small stash of documents that suggested that he may have been working for one of the Continental Empires. I decided to spare his family the dishonor of a burial in a 'potter's field' by throwing their bodies into the Thames River and burning the documents." He said, his head bowed and his voice now a hoarse whisper. "I imagine that they're at sea by now." He then raised his head and came eye-to-eye with Jenner. "If I was wrong in taking this initiative, I apologize to His Majesty; but I ask no mercy if I'm to be punished." He stated quietly.

Jenner regarded the wolf. "I assume, Troop-Captain, that this was the first time that you've actually killed in the line of duty?" He asked airily.

"Yes it is, Your Majesty." Gisbourne said, his voice now somewhat more composed than a moment ago.

Jenner's lip's curled into something between a sardonic smile and a self-satisfied sneer. "Good." He said. "Your 'first blood', as it were. The truest test of your loyalty to your King. And take it from me," He said with a cruel chuckle, "The best part is that it gets easier the more you do it." That the scribe was dead was, in fact, excellent news. But his curiosity was now aroused. "By the way," He asked, almost as an afterthought, "Did you find anything among those papers that you burned that might have been, shall we say, unusual?"

The wolf thought for a moment, then said, "I did find an execution warrant on the scribe that was clumsily forged in Your Majesty's name; but other than that, no." He stated.

Zim had been listening with a growing unease and dismay to this preposterous charade. That inconsequential, feeble-minded hedgehog; a SPY? "Impossible!" Zim blurted out angrily. He then turned and pointed a bony, accusing finger at Gisbourne. "He's LYING! I'll sell my mother's Soul if he isn't lying, Your Majesty!" The jackal cried indignantly.

"Knowing you I'm sure you already have many times over, and at a handsome profit." Jenner stated sarcastically.

Zim was about to retort, but Gisbourne placed a warning paw on the hilt of his sword. Instead he swallowed his words and gritted his teeth, glaring hatefully at the wolf.

"Tell me, Spy, were you aware of my spiny-yet-spineless scribe's alteration of affections toward his King?" Jenner asked pointedly, again rubbing his beard.

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Zim hesitated for several seconds, trying to keep his growing rage under control.

"Answer His Majesty's question." Gisbourn said calmly, his paw caressing the weapon.

"Of course I wasn't!" Zim finally hissed, barely able to restrain himself from sliding the stiletto he kept handy at the small of his back under his multi-hued robe out of its scabbard and throwing it at the wolf. But he'd seen Gisbourne numerous times on the training field and well knew that the Troop-Captain was an adversary to be reckoned with; both in physical and, as he was just now apparently discovering, mental terms.

Jenner raised an eyebrow. "This is hardly what I'd call a spectacular example of intelligence-gathering." He told Zim in a mocking tone. "And it's certainly not going to look good on your resume." Leaving the jackal to fume, he turned his attention back to Troop-Captain Gisbourne. "Did the papers give you any clue as to which of the Continental Empires might have swayed him to their side?" He asked.

Gisbourne again paused. "Not specifically." He finally answered. "But they mentioned an organization of some sort called 'The Society to Maintain the Rule of the King' that was secretly thwarting all outside efforts to depose Your Majesty from his Throne."

"Impossible!" Zim hissed under his breath. "My operatives have seen no evidence of any such activity!"

"Silence, dolt!" Jenner spat. "You're still alive ONLY because your other employer has the necessary influence to keep you so! Were it MY choice you'd be swinging from a gallows this moment!" He warned. Again

turning his attention back to Gisbourne, he asked, "What about this execution warrant?" Jenner had, of course, signed a genuine execution warrant against the scribe; but the news that someone had created a forgery intrigued him. Could this mysterious "Society to Maintain the Rule of the King" have done so in order to flush out this apparent traitor? He'd wanted the hedgehog and his family dead for no other reason than the fact that Terror, especially of the lethal variety, was, used in small amounts and with a surgical precision, quite probably the easiest, cheapest and most effective way to suppress the vast majority of dissent against one's rule; especially if one was utterly despised by one's own subjects. But had he now an ally that would help to keep him on the Throne? Most intriguing indeed!

"As I said before, Your Majesty, a bad counterfeit." The wolf answered dismissively.

Further discussion was interrupted by the familiar tapping sound, faint but quickly-approaching, of the Grandmaster's cane. Jenner pointed a beringed finger at Zim. "From now on, Spy, you report to Troop-Captain Gisbourne; since he obviously has his head screwed on tighter than you do." Jenner sneered. He then pointed at Giles. "You'll edit his reports and make sure that they're accurate and up-to-date." He ordered.

The jackal gasped with horror as the wolf; with a narrow-eyed, sidelong, and very predatory glance; gave a slight, almost unnoticeable smile.

"I'll leave you two to, shall we say, 'quibble' over the arrangements in this matter." Jenner said slyly, giving a dismissive wave of the paw. He knew that whatever enmity had existed between his Guards and Zim's spy network before was sure to heat up a great deal after this; but he didn't actually trust either group completely with his safety and wanted them both not only suspicious of each other, but vying against one another as well to show who would take their loyalty to him to the greatest extreme.

After prefunctory bows the wolf and the jackal made their exit from the throneroom but weren't even out of earshot before a nasty-sounding argument broke out between them, fading into the distance. A moment later,

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The Grandmaster appeared. "I trust Your Majesty is having a good morning?" He asked.

"I suppose." Jenner sighed with a hint of irritation. "Even surrounded as I am by idiots." He said as he motioned the boar to a large, splendidly decorated chair to the right of the raised platform on which was mounted the Throne of Britain. The chair that had originally occupied that particular space had been of a much plainer and far more dignified design. But the previous occupant, the King's Chancellor, had; along with his Sovreign; been assassinated and the position abolished.

The Grandmaster settled his ample hind-end into the over-stuffed cushion, giving Jenner a gimlet-eyed look. "Am I to assume that you're dissatisfied with the services of my Intelligence operative?" He asked.

"Intelligence? Hardly the word I'd use!" Jenner snorted derisively. He then explained Zim's failure to kill the scribe Ignatz, and Giles Gisbourne's discovery that he'd apparently been working undercover for one of the Continental Empires.

The Grandmaster's jaw dropped in astonishment and alarm. "Pardon, Your Majesty, but doesn't it seem rather too convenient that this Troop-Captain has disposed of so much evidence? And is His Majesty aware of who the Troop-Captain's father is?" He asked sharply.

Jenner rolled his eyes and huffed in exasperation. "Frankly, no, I can't say that it does!" He replied. "And as for Gilbert Gisbourne, I think your penchant for seeing a plot around every corner and a conspiracy behind every closed door is getting the better of you! As I hear it, and with any luck, that broken-down old geezer should be kicking off at any moment." He sneered.

The Grandmaster then rapped the metal tip of his cane on the cold, gray stone of the floor; the cannon-like report echoing through the throneroom. "But Gilbert is NOT dead!" He wheezed emphatically. "And haven't I always taught you that plots and conspiracies exist most especially when they CANNOT easily be seen?"

Jenner nodded reluctantly. "Yes, yes." He replied. "'For such is the nature of conspiracy that it must be hidden by it's plotters from the intended victim until the Moment of Truth; unto Death, if necessary.' No, Grandmaster, I've not forgotten your words." He then pushed himself agitatedly away from his Throne and began to pace back and forth as if trapped in an invisible cage. "But Gisbourne? Why, assuming you're correct, would he lie about the deaths of a simple scribe and his family?" He asked.

The old boar chuckled as an evil smile came to his lips. "Perhaps," He said, "We might get a satisfactory explanation if the young Troop-Captain were, shall we say, properly motivated to give it to us."

Jenner turned and eyed his mentor in astonishment. He could tell from the expression on the boar's face and malign glee in his voice what the Grandmaster was thinking. "Are you seriously suggesting that I arrest one of my own Troop-Captains?" He asked. "Ordering the death of a stupid scribe is one thing; after all, who's going to miss an insignificant idiot like him? But to accuse one of my guards of disloyalty? I would not only have a civil war to deal with, but quite probably a mutiny as well!" He cried in growing alarm.

"This sudden squeamishness certainly does not become Your Majesty." The boar said sternly. "Remember, YOU are the Sovreign King of Britain! YOU are answerable to no one! Your subjects and your Guards are YOURS to command, NOT the other way around!"

Jenner, mesmerized by the boar's words, vigorously nodded his agreement. "Yes. Yes, you're absolutely right!" He said. "I'll have the Troop-Captain seized immediately!"

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The Grandmaster giggled, waving a dismissive hoof. "Tempting as that sounds, Your Majesty, it would merely be a waste of valuable time." He said. "No," He continued, "We must be more subtle in our methods." The Grandmaster then lifted his girth from his chair and began tapping his way toward the door. "I'll need," He wheezed, "Warrants for the arrest of Gilbert, Geoffrey and Gillian Gisbourne."

Jenner's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "On what charge?" He asked.

The boar shrugged as he swept by. "High Treason against the Crown, I suppose. It doesn't really matter." He replied. He kept walking until he was framed in the arch of the doorway and turned to face his pupil, who wore an uneasy scowl. "Do not fret, Your Majesty. If young Gisbourne speaks the truth, then his family should be returned to their present obscurity." He said.

"And if he is lying?" Jenner asked.

The sadistic anticipation returned to the boar's face. "Then obviously, Your Majesty, they must be made to suffer the consequences."

Chapter 56: 55

"LEFT-two-three-four, LEFT-two-three-four. Col-lumn HALT!"

Under a bright winter noontime sun, the ragged line of animals halted their forced march in a small clearing somewhere inside Sherwood Forest.

"Alright, you idiots, take ten and get those lunches down your miserable gullets!" Liam Wyclyffe shouted. As one, the line collapsed and each of them began digging into whatever rucksack, pack or bag they'd brought along. As they began eating, Liam; pacing down the column, continued. "Last night I was given the unfortunate duty of whipping your sorry tails into an Army so that we can kick Jenner's tail off of the throne! Little did I realize that our beloved Leader, in his infinite wisdom, has, from the look of this utterly pathetic bunch of sissies and low-lives seated before me, given me what has to be the most impossible damn job in my entire career as a soldier! It is, in fact, the height of personal embarrassment that the ONLY animal I've seen today who has anything close to decent prospects toward becoming a fighter worthy of the name is a friggin' GIRL!" At this, a number of the weary recruits glanced down the line at Heather Kilcannon; who was quietly nibbling at a piece of dried fruit, tears of exhaustion staining her cheeks. Liam had been nothing less than astonished when the young skunk had shown up just before dawn that morning and begged to be signed up as a recruit. Try as he might to dissuade her; she'd insisted, telling him, "I've nay duties other than th' Council. Others, like yourself, 're servin' an' sacrificin' by takin' on more than one task, an' I don't think tha' I should be th' only exception." And so, very reluctantly, he'd signed her into his own Troop. "But," He'd warned her sternly, "You'll be treated just like any other recruit without regard to your status as an Elder. I can't have the other recruits questioning my authority because they believe that I'm bein' soft on you."

Heather had instantly agreed and, so far as Liam could tell, was willingly tolerating the abuses, both verbal and physical, that were being heaped on her and the Troop. "Alright ya bunch o' lollygaggers!" He bellowed into the cold air, "On your feet!"

Instantly, Heather was standing at a reasonable facsimile of attention and a few of the other recruits reluctantly followed her example; but most of the other animals remained seated. "Up your's! We just sat down!" A sullen and indignant voice replied.

"Who said that!" Liam demanded.

"I did." The offender replied, his voice now both a taunt and a challenge.

Liam quickly found the source; A young weasel, seated near the middle of the column, gnawing leisurely on the end of a carrot. Liam half-smiled to himself in grim amusement. He'd learned long ago that there was always at least one young buck who thought that, for whatever reason; whether it was a desire to show off and impress his buddies, intimidate the instructor in order to prove his malehood, or a simple lack of respect for the authority that Liam represented; the rules of Military decorum didn't apply to them. He made his way to where the intransigent recruit sat, now spooning some crushed fruit from a small jar into a bowl, and planted himself at parade-rest right in front of the malefactor. "What's your name, son?" He asked with a not-quite-friendly smile.

"Go 'way, Long Ears," The weasel replied dismissively, "Can't you see I'm eatin'?"

With the speed of a flashing sword-point, Liam slapped the bowl and spoon out of the animal's paws and sent them flying into the grass a stones-throw away. "Lunch is over. Now that I have your undivided attention, I'll repeat the question. What's your name?" Liam was still smiling, but his dark eyes were now narrowed and

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completely focused on the transgressor.

The weasel shot to a standing position, his own eyes smouldering with rage. "Hey!" He cried. He was at least half-a-head taller than Liam, and quite muscular for a weasel; but the hare calmly stood his ground.

"I'll not be askin' ya a third time, boy." Liam said, his voice barely above a whisper.

With a yell the young recruit tried to rake his claws across Liam's face. Without so much as a flicker of emotion the hare parried the attack; grabbing the weasel's wrist and sending him reeling into a pair of other recruits who'd stopped eating in anticipation of a rousing fight, toppling them like tenpins. Liam, meanwhile, decided that this stupidity was best turned into a learning experience. "You'll notice," He commented to no one in particular, "That I was able to use the recruit's own speed and turn it against him." After a moment's disorientation, the weasel disentangled himself from the other two and tried to attack again. And again, the hare expertly dodged; this time putting the weasel down onto the grass with a painful blow to the back of his neck. "You'll notice also that the angrier he gets, the easier he is to fight..." Once more Liam eluded the weasel's assault; this time landing a hard punch to his lower ribcage and knocking the wind out of him, curling him up like a ball as he gasped for breath. By now, a number of the other recruits were gathered around to witness the spectacle. But Liam also noticed out of the corner of his eye that Heather still stood resolutely at attention even as tears flowed down her cheeks. He quickly returned his attention to the more pressing matter that still lay in front of him and was now struggling to get to his feet. "We can keep this up the rest of the day if you'd like." He said casually, "Though weaponless combat was supposed to come a bit later in the curriculum."

The weasel painfully raised a warding paw. "No more!" He gasped. "I'm Oliver... Brownleaf...of the...Waning-Crescent Clan."

Liam now regarded the weasel with a more benign expression. "Very good, Trooper Brownleaf. Take your place in the column." He ordered.

Brownleaf wordlessly stumbled to the spot he'd been assigned that morning.

Liam then ordered the rest of the animals to pack their lunches and, moments later, called the Troop to attention. As one and without a word the column snapped into a roughly military line, with the exception of one panting, hunched-over figure. Satisfied that this was probably the best that he could expect on a first day of training, he called, "Right Face!" Then, "Forward March!" In unison, several dozen pairs of feet began beating a steady cadence on the Forest floor. As the line passed him, he let himself smile just a bit. Maybe, just maybe, he could whip some of these tails into something resembling an Army after all.

Chapter 57: 56

Gillian Gisbourne was so depressed she wanted to cry. Only two days had passed since Geoffrey had helped the little scribe and his family escape from the City. Thus far there had been no word of their capture and every hour that passed meant that much more of a margin of safety...if Giles' alibi held up. The tension of wondering was bad enough, although in a remote and abstract way. But what was most responsible for her immediate state of mind was the fact that King Jenner had just decreed that the last royally-subsidized hospital would lose its funding, effective immediately. This tragic piece of news did not actually affect her directly; she volunteered after school at the City's only charity hospital in hopes of one day being eligible for a Scholarship from the Nursing Guild to attend it's Academy.

Ever since the deaths of King Nicodemus and Sir Jonathan Brisbee; Jenner had been shutting down almost the entire social welfare mechanism of his government, leaving only the private charities to take up the slack of caring for the poor, the physically disabled and the unemployed. Unfortunately this was proving more and more difficult as more and more animals who had once depended on the Crown to keep them clothed, fed and off the streets seeking alms; or, worse yet, turning to crime to keep themselves or their families fed; were now desperately looking to those same charities for support. But most of the various guilds and businesses that had once given generously to their favorite charities were now, inexplicably, refusing even to acknowledge solicitors when they came seeking donations.

One of the few exceptions was, of course, the Guild of Small Businesses; of which her brother, Geoffrey, was acting as master until their father either recovered from his inexplicable illness or died. But the guild was in dire straits of it's own. Founded by Gillian's grandfather, Gareth, the GSB was, as were all the guilds, supposed to act as the representative voice for it's member's before the Crown in matters of worker safety, old-age pensions, pay equity, workmanship standards, including training standards for the various craft and professional guilds, and fair treatment in taxation and other legal issues. But membership, which had always been problematic; pushcart vendors, mom-and-pop store owners and the like tended to be fiercely independent; rarely seeing their colleagues as anything other than competitors fighting for an ever-shrinking slice of an ever-smaller economic pie, was now dwindling ever lower as members either were evicted from their shops by Jenner's Land Repossession Decree, bought out by non-member competitors or were foreclosed on by their suppliers and creditors. Worse yet; ever since Jenner's ascension to the Throne the attitude of the majority of the other, larger, guilds, especially the Mercantile Guilds; while never particularly congenial due to an intense personal animosity between her father and the Grandmaster of those guilds; had gone from merely cold but respectful to outright hostile toward the GSB, those few small and independent guilds who chose to remain allied with it, and the Gisbourne family in particular.

While Gillian would have been unable to point to any real, physical, evidence of a conspiracy on any grand scale, she was astute enough to pick up on the small items: unsent invitations to this or that birthday party or guild function, even by friends or colleagues who's relationships with the family went back generations; longtime friends of her father, often using the lamest of pretenses, refusing to visit him during his illness; refusals by businesses to honor Gisbourne family credit accounts or checks, usually without explanation or apology. These and a thousand other small clues each day, she knew, were warning her that somewhere, someone very powerful was; for whatever reason; plotting the isolation and probably the eventual destruction of both the GSB AND the Gisbourne family. The saddest part of this was that she had tried to share her fears with Geoffrey, she knew she didn't DARE tell Giles, as loyal as he was to the King; but her brother had merely laughed off her concerns, telling her to "quit being such a worry-wart" and pointing out that Jenner was turning Britain's economy into such a shambles with his wrong-headed policies that cancellation of credit and demands for cash-only transactions were all but inevitable. When she'd tried to point out the recent behavior of their friends, colleagues and acquaintances; he'd bitterly denounced them as "traitors deserting their posts!", and promised dire consequences for their conduct in the future. But she knew, as had her late

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mother, that the male contingent of the Gisbourne family tended to be idealistic about whatever cause, Gareth, Gilbert and Geoffrey the GSB; Giles the King's Guard; they embraced, sometimes blinding themselves to the reality of their situation to the point of refusal to compromise. In the past, her mother had usually been able to smooth things over and make her father and brothers see reason when necessary; but since her death after a long illness two years ago, Gillian had found herself unable to fill that particular void in the family dynamic. If anything, Gilbert, Geoffrey and Giles were becoming even more intractable; driving each other further apart by their respective uncompromising stances. Her brothers had very nearly come to blows over the issue of whether to help the poor scribe until Giles discovered the execution warrant and was forced by Geoffrey, and probably his own conscience, thank the spirits that Jenner hadn't destroyed THAT part of him yet!, to admit that Jenner was capable of outright murder and aid in saving the little hedgehog and his kin.

But now, bereft of their mother's moderating influence, the family seemed on the verge of falling apart; other than a barely acknowledged greeting for breakfast, the only meal that their busy schedules permitted them to eat together, not a word had been spoken among them since aiding the scribe's escape.

She was just about to turn the corner and step out onto the street on which her house was located when she heard a familiar voice angrily shout, "What's this about? You have no right to do this!" Instinctively she stopped and put her back to the wall of the building that hid her from the view of whoever it was that Geoffrey had vented his protest against and ventured a quick peek. To her horror; she saw her brother in chains and shackles and her father, shackled at his wrists, on an improvised stretcher surrounded by a large detail of the King's Guard. Ominously the Grandmaster, wearing a crimson skullcap and almost engulfed in a gayly brocaded velvet hooded-cape of the same color, was also there. As she was barely more than spitting distance from the scene, she could clearly hear and occasionally see what was going on.

"As a matter of fact, my young friend, I have EVERY right to do this; for the safety of Britain, her subjects and her King." The boar said benignly.

"Are we under arrest?" Her father snarled contemptuously, "Or is that stupid little whelp whose chain you're pullin' now in the habit of takin' old enemies from their home and bringin' 'em to the castle to watch 'em die?"

"Under arrest?" The Grandmaster asked, with what Gillian was sure was an exaggerated mock-graciousness. "Why, certainly not!" He exclaimed, in a horror that she was certain was; again; more mocking than genuine. He then dug into the folds of the cape and produced a folded piece of parchment. "But," He continued pleasantly, "You are being, shall we say, 'indefinitely detained' on the rather serious charge of Treason to the Crown."

"WHAT?! That's a damned..." Geoffrey started to say. But his father raised his head and one paw as far as his shackles would let him.

"Shut up, son." He said, his voice like flint on steel. "No use wastin' yer breath on this lard-ass. He's apparently callin' the shots an' wants t' get his 'jollys' in at the same time." He then lay his head back down and lay the paw on his emaciated stomach. To the Grandmaster he said, sounding utterly exhausted, "Just take us to whatever hole you're gonna dump us into an be quick about it."

"Don't worry, your accommodations will be somewhat better than that..." The Grandmaster said; then paused a moment before adding, with a sadistic chuckle that came out as more of a grunt, "But not by much." He then tapped his bejeweled cane on the cobblestoned street. "Sergeant, take them to the castle and put them in the 'Special Quarters' that I've arranged." He ordered.

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"Yessir." The Sergeant answered.

As soon as Gillian's father and brother and their guards were gone, an unfamiliar animal stepped out of the Grandmaster's sedan chair and joined him.

"Where is the daughter?" The boar asked ominously, otherwise not acknowledging the new player's presence.

The animal; who wore a decorous, multi-colored robe and an unusual, low, round, flat-topped cap; shrugged. "She should have been here, the spirits willing." He said apologetically.

Quicker than Gillian would have given him credit for, the Grandmaster whirled and struck the strange animal across the side of his head with his cane; sending the little hat flying toward the corner, where it rolled to a stop at her feet; and knocking the now bleeding creature into the gutter. "IDIOT!" The Grandmaster screamed. "This is the second error you've made this week!"

"My humblest apologies, Excellency," The animal said as he tried to stanch the flow. "But I was unaware that you wished her imprisoned as well; otherwise I would have assigned a shadow to trail her as well." He explained, still dazed from the blow.

"Damn your excuses, you miserable cur!" The Grandmaster screamed again, raising the stick to inflict another stroke. "So long as the Troop-Captain believes even ONE of his family is safe from my grasp, he represents a danger to us all!" He cried in frustration. He then lowered the cane and pointed the tip at the cowering animal's nose. "You were nothing more than a lice-ridden little sneak-thief when I took you out of the gutters of your native land and turned you into the best spy that money," With his other hoof he thumped his barrel-wide chest for emphasis. "MY MONEY, could buy! But you disappoint me again, you brainless twit, and I'll send you to a place where those gutters compare favorably with the abode of the spirits! Have I made myself clear?" He asked, his rage unabated.

The other animal nodded wearily. "As the waters of a virgin oasis, Excellency." He sighed.

Without another word, the Grandmaster turned and stalked toward his waiting sedan chair. The other animal began looking around for his hat and quickly spotted it peeking around the corner of a nearby building.

Gillian, terrified at the thought of being made a captive by such a sadistic and evil monster, suppressed the cry of desperation that tried to escape from her throat and fled for her life the way she had come.

Zim made his way; a bit unsteadily, perhaps; to the corner where his hat lay. With the paw that was not soaked with his blood, he reached down to retrieve it; but something made him hesitate. Something, instinct most likely, made him look up to see what might have been the tip of a tail disappear around the far corner of the alley. He shook his head to clear the cobwebs and peered through the one eye not obscured by now-clotting blood.

"I'm waiting!" Said the impatient voice from inside the Grandmaster's silk-curtained conveyance.

"Coming, Excellency." The jackal called. He again shrugged and picked up the hat. "Most probably nothing more than a child at play, the spirits willing." He thought to himself as he tottered toward his employer.

Chapter 58: 57

The line of animals proceeded along the narrow forest path as the chill early-morning air enveloped them; the occasional falling snowflake sticking to fur, clothing or ground, only to melt into oblivion seconds later. In the lead was a quiet and subdued Justin. In the nursery the night before, little Timothy had awakened; crying and in a cold sweat. A concerned Lady Kluck had fetched him, Mrs. Brisbee and Dr. Ages, afraid that the child had caught another bout of pneumonia. Ages had quickly examined the young rabbit and pronounced him to be quite healthy. But what had awakened his nephew was another one of those awful prophetic nightmares. When asked to describe it, Timothy told them that he'd been dreaming of someone, a young female wolf, who was running from the half-lion, half-fox demon-creature who; until now at least, had pretty much faded from memory. He'd told them that while she was in some danger from the demon-creature, it was three males; though Timothy could not tell what their exact relation to her was; who were in more immediate peril. Justin could only shrug helplessly, telling Timothy that he had an idea of who fit this particular description, but that he had no way of rendering aid to them at that particular moment. The rabbit had nodded his understanding, a sadness in his tired eyes. He'd then asked if he might be allowed to speak privately to his Uncle. With a collective odd look; his mother, Ages and Kluck had excused themselves, leaving them to talk by the dim light of a small lamp, surrounded only by the sound of soft breathing or snoring of other sleeping children.

"I'm listening." Justin had said.

A strange, haunted look had now come to his nephew's face; making his eyes seem even sadder, if such a thing were possible. "I dreamt that someone, someone very close to you, is going to die." The rabbit had said very matter-of-factly. "I don't know who or when," He'd continued, "But the spirits have chosen to bring the soul of one of us to their realm."

Justin had been quite taken aback by this pronouncement from such a young child. While he'd grown more than a little skeptical over the years since his childhood when it came to his beliefs about the spirit world and affairs of the supernatural, Timothy's prediction of the fire and their narrow escape from Dr. Ages house had served to cast a shadow of doubt on the certainty of that skepticism. And now to have his younger nephew tell him that one of their number, and a close acquaintance at that, was somehow predestined to die and there was nothing that could be done to alter upcoming events, it was as if all of the strengths that had been serving him so well up until now; his leadership abilities, his training, his will to see Justice prevail and his vulpine survival instinct, the "wiliness" for which his species was so well known and admired; were being mocked by a force over which he had no control. And it both bothered and scared the hell out of him. Needless to say he'd gotten very little sleep that night; especially since he'd had to awaken long before dawn to start this journey if he, Ezekiel Stabb, Liam Wyclyffe, Brutus, Dr. Ages and Galen Talbot were to make it to the Heath in time to make the necessary preparations for their meeting with Sullivan.

A few paces to his rear, Stabb and Wyclyffe were comparing notes on their first day of training their respective charges.

"Your boy certainly makes up in enthusiasm what he lacks in discipline." Stabb told the hare matter-of-factly.

Liam shrugged. "I think he gets it from my side of the family." He confessed, a mixture of pride and embarrassment in his voice. "We Wyclyffe's tend to be a querulous lot."

"So I've heard." Stabb chuckled with amusement. His voice then became slightly more serious. "He seems to have all of the physical qualifications for being a soldier; excellent reflexes, sharp eyes an' the

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like; but he doesn't seem to understand the concept that a soldier depends on his Troop, and vice-versa, to fight and survive. He seems to have this notion in his head that, with a little bit of help from the Nottingham Organization, he'll be the one to save Britain from the clutches of her evil Tyrant-King."

The hare shook his head in resignation. "I'm afraid he's always been like that." He said. "All through his childhood, all he ever talked about was someday becomin' a Soldier 'r a Deputy...r even a Sheriff..."

"He can HAVE the job; that is, if he can talk the present occupant out of it!" Brutus commented caustically from his place further back in line.

"And what of Martin?" Justin asked quietly, not looking back.

"A fine young lad." The weasel stated. "Does what he's told, when he's told to do it, without the slightest hesitation or complaint. I don't yet know how much of the Warrior is in 'im, but he seems motivated enough."

There was an uneasy silence while they waited for Justin to answer or comment. But when none was forthcoming, Stabb asked Liam, "An' how'd your first full day of training go, Sergeant-Major?"

Liam shrugged. "About as well as I could have expected." He answered, his voice hardening a bit. "I did have a small dust-up with one of the Waning-Crescent weasels, but I think my charges'll stay in line from now on."

"I KNOW they will!" The bear once again interjected. "O!' Wilbur reamed that poor kid out, but good, last night! Made it clear that if any other member of their clan does something that stupid again, he'll personally prosecute them at any Council meeting convened to decide punishment!"

"Miss Kilcannon," The hare continued, "Joined my Troop yesterday morning too."

At this, Stabb's ears pricked up with interest.

"Like you said about Martin: Does what she's told, when she's told to do it; without hesitation 'r complaint. Whether 'r not she's got the Warrior spirit in her as well, only time an' training'll determine." He stated matter-of-factly.

At this; Justin raised his right paw in a fist, signalling the others to stop. As soon as Dr. Ages and Galen, who had been lagging a bit behind the main group due to the effect of the cold weather on Ages now-healed-but-still-sensitive leg, caught up, Justin gathered them in a huddle. To Stabb and Liam he said, "Remember, Sullivan's NOT one to play by the rules, especially if they were made by someone other than him! So your job is to find whoever he plans to have kill the rest of us and neutralize them. Clear?"

The weasel and the hare looked at each other for the briefest moment and nodded. Seconds later, they'd silently disappeared in opposite directions into the Forest.

Justin, Brutus, Galen and Ages now proceeded; also silently; toward their destination.

Chapter 59: 58

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Chapter 60: 59

It was just before mid-morning when they arrived at the Heath. The now-deserted Talbot cottage stood dark and forlorn among the moss-covered trees and the ground-clutter of dead leaves and fallen branches. While Justin and Brutus did a quick patrol of the immediate area, Galen stared longingly and sadly at what had once been the home that he'd shared with his loving wife; but had been forced to abandon, however temporarily, by the circumstances that were to be played out in this very place just a few moments from now.

"Don't worry, brother, you and Linney will be able to move back here someday; that's a promise!" Justin said as he came to stand side-by-side with the older fox.

"I certainly hope so." Galen sighed. "Not that we don't appreciate the hospitality that you've shown us so far," He continued, his tone becoming more acid, "But Linney and I had plans for our sunset years, and living in what amounts to a tent-city with no privacy sure as hell wasn't among them."

Dr. Ages, who was now seated on a log in front of a small fire gingerly massaging his sore knee, emphatically nodded his agreement. "You'll get no argument from me on that issue. I haven't had a truly private moment since Sullivan burned down my own home and left me with this permanent reminder." He said, indicating the deep and ugly pinkish-gray scar that stood well out from the surrounding white fur.

Just then a distant rustling of leaves, quite distinct from the crackling of the wood being consumed in the fire, alerted the group that the moment of truth was close at paw. They quickly and quietly gathered to one side of the fire, their backs to the cottage.

Three figures emerged from the gray half-darkness of the surrounding forest and stopped barely a stones-throw away. In the lead, of course, was Sullivan. A step back and to either side were his Deputies. One, a young lynx, wore a small bandage on one ear. The other was a raccoon, though apparently not related to any of the peasants that Justin had rescued from the whip of that boar those many months ago, the fox noted with a certain amount of regret. If this degenerated into a fight, and ANYTHING could go wrong in the next few minutes, he knew, one or several of either group; innocent or not; were certain to end up as corpses.

The Sheriff of Nottingham regarded them with a look that could have been interpreted as anything from simple anger to pure astonishment. "YOU!" He finally managed to sneer as he pointed an incriminating finger at his one-time "colleague". "I should've known you're the one behind all this 'Power to the Peasants!' crap!"

Justin's eyes narrowed as a slight smile came to his lips. "Still blaming your problems on me; eh, Sullivan?" He asked bitterly. Then, to Ages, he said, "At least we know that SOME things will never change." In disgust, Ages nodded his agreement.

With a dismissive wave of his paw, Sullivan brushed off Justin's insult. "The words of a traitor and criminal have no meaning to me or to King Jenner. I would remind you that a reward is still on your head." He stated, pointing at the fox. He then levelled his stern gaze at Dr. Ages. "And you, Quack, are still wanted for conspiracy in connection with the murder of his late Majesty, King Nicodemus, and planning to murder our present King..."

"I'm not even going to dignify THAT particular charge!" Ages snapped back, not bothering to pause in his efforts to keep his knee warm.

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The wolf shot the old badger a dirty look, which was ignored, and set his sights on the previous holder of the office he now occupied. "Brutus!" He said, his voice now a plea. "Why have you done this to yourself? You could have had so much! Jenner was gonna give you money and land...!"

"And what could the animals of Nottingham expect in return?" The bear retorted angrily. "Slavery? Poverty? Starvation? A lifetime of back-breaking labor with nothing to show for it while Jenner and his friends become richer and more corrupt, if that's even possible?" Brutus vehemently shook his head. "I should have stopped this nightmare the moment I realized what Jenner was up to! Well DAMN my hide for being so greedy and not doing so, and damn YOURS for carrying on this pathetic charade!" He shouted. "At least I have the guts to admit MY error and try to set it right! Can YOU say the same?"

But Sullivan had lost all interest in Brutus and was now sizing up Galen. "An' what about you, Old-timer? Why's a decent farmer like you associating with treasonous scum like this?" He asked, shaking his head; his voice taking a tone of something vaguely resembling sympathy.

The elder fox returned the wolf's narrow-eyed gaze with one of his own, drawing himself to his full height. "Justin is my brother-in-law." He said, the usual gentleness of his voice now gone; replaced by a tone of deep anger at this idiot's arrogance. "And, quite frankly, I'm proud to stand with him in his efforts to oppose you and Jenner and what you both represent."

"Ah, so you're the owner of this lovely home!" Sullivan suddenly commented, nodding his understanding. "I'm also told that you're influential with most of the other local farmers!" He said. He then pointed past them toward the cottage. "What if I told you that you and your fair wife could move back into it without fear of confiscation under His Majesty's Repossession Decree? I can talk him into making an exception in your case, but you gotta show me some good faith by talkin' the rest of the animals of Nottingham out of ruining their lives because of some fool's half-baked idealism and into returning to their homes." He said enthusiastically.

Galen rolled his eyes in exasperation. To Justin he said, with ill-concealed contempt, "I can see why you loathe this moron so much! Had he been a member of my Regiment, he'd have spent his career digging latrines!" He then turned his attention to Sullivan. "To listen to the likes of you insult both my brother AND my intelligence goes well beyond stupidity and into the realm of absurdity!" He told the Sheriff without heed to the anger and disbelief that were now on the wolf's face. "While it's true that I very much want to resume the life that my wife and I were so happily living, before you and your King so rudely and brutally deprived us of that particular pleasure; the price, the betrayal that you demand, is more than my conscience or my very Soul are willing to bear! I cannot, I will not, use whatever influence you may believe me to possess to deceive my neighbors!" He declared.

"Then so be it! Consider yourselves under arrest! The charge is Treason to the Crown!" Sullivan angrily told his one-time colleague-turned-adversary. He then yelled, seemingly to no one in particular, "Blackjack, fire!" After a few seconds, during which the Sheriff and his Deputies began glancing nervously about, the door to the cottage burst open and out marched an almost jet-black ferret, wrists tied in front of him, immediately followed by Ezekiel Stabb, who casually shouldered, if a weasel could be said to shoulder anything, a bow, a quiver of arrows and four sheathed swords.

Justin sadly and knowingly shook his head as the weasel gave his reluctant captive a shove in the direction of his nonplussed colleagues. "Saw 'im in the lower branches of a nearby tree. It was quite a trick sneakin' up an' takin' 'im without makin' a peep." Stabb said breezily.

Sullivan glared disgustedly at the ferret, who shrugged with embarrassment, for a few moments, then asked Stabb, "And you've decided to turn Traitor as well, I suppose?"

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The weasel's eyes narrowed as a strange, sardonic smile crept onto his face. "That's a laugh; comin' from the likes of a liar, arsonist an' murderer like you. I prefer to think of myself as a convert to a somewhat more enlightened cause." He said.

"Be that as it may," Sullivan said with growing irritation, "You're all in a heap o' trouble as of now. If you'll come along peaceably, I can promise all of you fair trials an' fine hangin's..."

"Really?" Justin asked as a bemused smile appeared on his face, although his eyes remained tense and alert. "Fortunately; or unfortunately, depending on one's point of view; I'm well aquatinted with your idea of "fair" and I believe that my friends here will agree with me when I say that we want no part of whatever plans you and Jenner have for Nottinghamshire. I've informed them that their new Sheriff is not to be trusted under any circumstances, as evidenced by your unwillingness to play by the rules and obey the simple condition that Lady Kluck gave you. So, as a "fair" warning to you and your so-called "Deputies", I'd advise you not to venture too far from the towns or villages because from this day forward Sherwood Forest belongs to those of us who will no longer tolerate what's being done to Britain." He said.

"Is that a threat?" Sullivan demanded, his face contorting into an angry sneer.

"You can take it any way you want." Justin told him impassively. "But from now on, the Nottingham Organization is the sworn enemy of Jenner, his friends and those who serve them." With that, the fox motioned to his friends and began determinedly walking toward the path by which they had come. Silently Brutus, Galen and Ages; who had by now doused the fire and scattered the dead ash with the tip of his crutch; followed.

"You're making a serious mistake!" Sullivan yelled after them with what might have been a hint of desperation in his voice. "This isn't a battle that you can win!"

Justin stopped, seemed to hesitate a few moments, then turned to face the wolf. "I don't doubt that we'll lose a battle or two along the way," He said, his voice sad and tired. "But we'll eventually win this war because you and Jenner have made it abundantly clear that we have nothing to lose by fighting it." He again turned and headed for the path.

Stabb stood guard for several minutes, until the rest of the group had disappeared into the forest, then began moving away to join them.

"Hey!" The wolf shouted. There was almost a tone of petulance in his voice. "What about my weapons?"

The weasel stopped, turned around, drew the most elaborately decorated sword from it's equally elaborate scabbard, and began making a show of inspecting it. "Sorry, Sheriff," He taunted a few moments later. "But our 'smith's a bit short of scrap at the moment. He'll appreciate your contribution, though." With that the weasel rendered a mocking salute, resheathed the blade, and began jogging away.

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"DAMN, YOU IDIOT! HOW COULD YOU BE SO INCOMPETENT?" Sullivan screamed as Deputy Sillus gnawed at the rope that bound Blackjack's wrists.

"It's not MY fault, Boss!" The ferret retorted in anger and embarrassment. "That weasel's as good as anyone I've EVER seen! Hell, isn't that why you an' the King hired 'im in the first place?" He asked.

Sullivan waved a dismissive paw. "Yeah, yeah. But how were we supposed to know that he'd turn on us an' join the enemy?" He asked rhetorically. Just then, with an audible snap, the rope around Blackjack's wrists broke and the binding fell to the ground. The wolf then wordlessly stomped off toward the path leading to Nottingham; the others quietly trailing a safe distance behind, not daring to disturb whatever dark thoughts of revenge their superior was probably contemplating against the former residents of the town and a certain former Captain-of-the-Guard.

At about the same time, in another part of the forest, Liam Wyclyffe rejoined his comrades as they hiked back toward their headquarters. "Any of them attempting to follow us?" Justin asked.

"Not that I could see." The hare replied. "They were all headed back for town, last I left 'em."

"Sullivan may be a lazy coward, but he's NOT stupid." Observed Justin. "He won't risk his skin unless he knows the odds of success are stacked squarely in his favor. On the other side of that coin is the fact that; even with you," He nodded toward Brutus. "Your former Deputies," He then indicated Liam. "And a few gracious volunteers;" He nodded at Stabb. "We have precious few options for defending the Estate when Sullivan's attack comes, and I speak with utmost confidence and from no small amount of experience when I say that an attack WILL come. The problem is that I have no way of predicting WHEN it will come." He added glumly.

"What about your nephew, Timothy?" Stabb asked. "After all, he did predict that fire and our coming to help you."

"No." Justin said with an emphatic shake of his head. "His 'gift' may be useful to us in its own way at times, but I'd be a fool to stake our success in this venture solely on that basis."

"It's gonna take a while to train enough troops to make the Estate truly defensible." Liam observed. "After all, we've only just started training in earnest and it'll be at least another couple weeks until any of the recruits are ready for actual weapons training."

Justin gave a resigned shrug. "We'll simply have to step up the night-watches and accelerate the training schedules as best we can. I know it's a hardship, especially to those with families, but we have to be ready for anything that Sullivan might be planning to throw at us." He said grimly.

"I suppose I could re-write the training schedule," Galen offered. "Make weapons training a higher priority."

"An' I can always reschedule the watches." Brutus said to Liam. "That'll take some of the burden off those with training assignments."

"Thanks," Said Liam. "That'll help a lot."

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The rest of the long walk to the Locksley Estate was made in thoughtful silence; other than the tap of Dr. Ages crutch against the hard, cold ground; as each pondered the implications, for better or worse, of what they had just been a party to.

It was near-dusk by the time they stepped out of the now-rather-oppressive gray cloak of the forest that would be their only sanctuary for who-knew-how-long. To the West, a half-orb of Sun reflected its waning yellow-orange-pink off of an approaching line of cumulus and cirrus clouds that was growing along the tree-combed horizon. To the East, the darkness was pierced by the light of the first evening stars. In the cleared portion of the Estate enclosing the manor-house and its surrounding tent-city a small group of animals, mostly children, was gathered in a circle watching and applauding Will Scarlett; who was entertaining them with an impromptu acrobatics display.

While Liam and Galen stayed to watch the last few minutes of the performance; Brutus, Ages and Stabb went to see what was for dinner. Justin made straight for his office, where he found Mrs. Brisbee waiting.

"How did the meeting go?" She asked, though her expression told him that the question was purely rhetorical.

"Meeting' is hardly the word I'd use, Marian." He said as he sank wearily into his chair. "'Confrontation' would be a far more accurate assessment of our encounter." He then closed his eyes and began gently rubbing the fur around their sockets. "Hell, I may as well have been screaming at one of these walls for all the good it did us! Sullivan wasn't exactly receptive to anything that I had to say." He growled sharply.

"Then why bother to go at all? Why not have just stuck a knife with an ultimatum or a list of demands attached to it into his front door in the dead of night?" She asked, raising a questioning eyebrow.

Justin hauled himself out of his chair and began pacing restlessly. "A knife in the door would have told him that someone was unhappy with the current situation, but he wouldn't necessarily have taken it seriously. In Sullivan's, and by extension Jenner's, mind a few rebellious peasants are nothing more than a minor irritant to be ignored, avoided, or bought off if possible or; if they get too out-of-control; destroyed. Forgive me for sounding self-important, but my showing up changes that. Now he knows that he's up against more than just a bunch of dirt-poor, uneducated and untrained farmers and villagers." He said pointedly.

Mrs. Brisbee cocked her head questioningly to one side. "I'm no soldier, so I probably don't have your grasp of Military tactics and strategy; but haven't you sacrificed whatever element of surprise we may have had against him by revealing yourself as Leader?" She asked.

"Probably." Justin replied. He then stopped his pacing as a sly half-smile crept across his face. "But I also know that he has to report our 'conversation', such as it was, to Jenner. And I'd also be willing to wager a cart-full of Crowns that he's shaking in his fur at the thought of having to inform His Infernal Majesty that his late, unlamented brother's ex-Captain-of-the-Guard is leading what could become a serious challenge to his already shaky rule. That alone may be worth whatever surprise has been lost." He said.

The vixen's brow furrowed with skepticism but she simply shrugged. "If you say so." She said, her tone distant.

Justin went to her and, kneeling down in front of her, took her paws in his own and gazed into her eyes; the look in them as distant as her voice had been. "Marian," He said. "I realize that I've taken a huge risk today. Everyone here has taken a huge risk with their own lives and those of their families. And while I'd be an idiot if I tried to lie to you and tell you outright that everything was going to be okay, I have to believe that we can win this fight. But, like it or not, in order to win I'm probably going to have to take many more like the one I did today. On occasion I'm going to be forced to trade one perceived advantage for another, hoping that I

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haven't needlessly traded innocent lives in the process."

For several seconds Mrs. Brisbee sat unmoving, staring into space as if in a trance.

"Marian?" Justin asked worriedly, reaching up to gently stroke the fur of one side of her face with the back of his fingers.

Mrs. Brisbee blinked and jumped in her seat a bit, as if startled. "I'm-I'm sorry." She apologized softly, a bit embarrassed.

Justin smiled. "No problem. It's not as if I got a full night's sleep either." He said sympathetically. At that moment there came a knock at the door. "It's open." Justin called out. Gwynnyth Wyclyffe peeked inside.

"Mama sent me to tell you that dinner's ready." The young hare, who had obviously been working in the kitchen, as could be seen from the food stains on her dress and apron, informed them breathlessly.

"We'll be down in a moment." Justin told her.

The child nodded and quickly left, closing the door behind her.

"Tell you what," Justin said as he stood and helped Mrs. Brisbee from her seat, "Why don't we just call it a day right after dinner? You know, just eat and go straight to bed. How does that sound?" He asked.

"Sounds great." Admitted Mrs. Brisbee, "But I've got to supervise the clean-up..."

"Let someone else do it." Justin said.

"But it's my job." She said.

"Why not let Linney supervise for once?" He asked. "After all, that's what assistants are for. One of the things that they taught me in Officer training was: 'Know when to delegate responsibilities'." He said.

Mrs. Brisbee thought hard for a few moments, but finally nodded her assent. "Okay," She said, "I guess I can ask her. And I'll have Klucky see that the children are put to bed."

"Great!" Justin exclaimed, his enthusiasm momentarily overcoming his fatigue. He waved an inviting paw toward the door. "Would Madam do me the honor of accompanying me to dinner?" He asked, his eyes sparkling with a merriment they hadn't shown for far too long.

Mrs. Brisbee smiled, genuinely happy for the first time in many weeks. "It would be my pleasure!" She exclaimed, taking his arm in hers.

Chapter 62: 61

It was about two days before Gillian Gisbourne dared venture out from the crude shelter that shed found in Londontowns most run-down area, in shock over her father and brother's arrest, apparently with the full knowledge and consent of the King himself!, by one of their family's oldest and most implacable adversaries; The Grandmaster of the Mercantile Guilds. But the one thought that had kept haunting her was the image of the crimson-garbed boar viciously striking the small fox-like animal, although she knew perfectly well that it really wasn't, having known plenty of foxes in her lifetime, for no apparent reason other than simply the enjoyment of inflicting pain on another animal. The thought which presently troubled her mind was that of the torments her brother Geoffrey might even now be suffering as a victim of the Grandmaster's rage.

Needless to say, she was also quite hungry and tired and her bones aching and cramped from two cold and restless nights curled in a broken crate in the basement of an abandoned building. She gathered up what courage she could find and crawled out of a street-level window of the derelict structure. Fortunately the day was warmer than was normal for the season and this particular street was, at least for the moment, deserted. But what to do now? With her father and one brother prisoners of the Crown, and her other brother loyal to the King who held them; she was at an utter loss for ideas on what her next move should be. The thought of going to the Hospital flashed into her mind, but she dismissed it out of paw. The Grandmaster would no doubt have it under sharp-eyed surveillance so as not to make the same mistake twice. It occurred to her to seek refuge among her fathers guild-partners or friends, but their number was dwindling rapidly and they would either turn her away or; more likely; turn her over to the Grandmaster in exchange for whatever reward that foul monster might deign to favor them with. No, as much as the thought pained her; she realized that she was now totally alone. Worse yet, she was also burdened by the status of being a wanted criminal of the worst sort: a traitor to the King! Who in their right mind would help one so accused?

Cautiously she began making her way through the streets and alleyways of the City, furtively glancing back every few moments to make sure that she wasn't being followed. Her once-clean dress was now gray-brown with dust and her usually-well-groomed fur, which shed always taken a certain amount of pride in, was also probably more of a mess than she cared to think about; but she realized, with no small amount of irony, that this might actually be working to her advantage because, to anyone other than a close acquaintance, she probably looked like just another street-waif or alms-seeker and would be studiously ignored.

It was around mid-afternoon when she spotted a familiar face as she was walking aimlessly through a small, bedraggled-looking park in one of the many lower-class neighborhoods that were scattered throughout the City. He was a badger, just approaching middle-age, named Silas Poorbutton. Before Jenner came to power hed been a Professor at one of Britain's most prestigious universities and her father had also hired him several years back as a consultant on Guild affairs. But instead of the usual stately Robe, suit-coat and cap that would have served to identify his Academic background; he wore an old, faded, stained and many-times-patched collarless shirt and a pair of overalls in roughly similar condition. But even this state of dress could in no way conceal the nobility with which he carried himself, even as he maneuvered a wheelbarrow full of dirt.

She slowly approached him and cleared her throat, which was beginning to feel like sandpaper after two days without water.

He gave her barely a glance as he shoveled some soil into a small hole. "Im sorry, my dear, but I have no alms for you. You'll have to look elsewhere." He said; his voice, while bitter in tone, still conveying a great deal of patience and intelligence.

"It's not necessarily alms that I seek," She replied. "Some water would be welcome though."

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The badger stiffened instantly and sharply turned his head to face her. "Who...Who are you?" he asked, a hint of fear in his voice.

"My name is Gillian Gisbourne." She said calmly.

The badger dug the blade of his shovel into the pile of dirt at his feet and then, with a finger, motioned for her to turn around; as a school-master would inspect a student on the first day of class. Gillian complied, although she was momentarily confused as to the badger's intentions. Finally, after she'd turned two complete circles, the badger nodded his satisfaction. "You'll have to forgive my skepticism; but the last time I saw you, you were still in your mother's arms." He said, the relief in his voice mixed with no small amount of joy. He then stepped over to her and took both of her paws in his own. "My condolences on her death, but I see that at least her beauty hasn't completely disappeared from a world that so little appreciates that particular concept at the moment." He whispered sadly. He then turned and, still holding one of her paws, led her away from where he'd been working. "Come now, my child, let's see what we can do about that drink of water."

A few minutes later, Gillian was drinking thirstily as the badger worked a small well-pump. "What happened to you?" She asked him between gulps.

"I assume that you're referring to my present state of dress and employment." Poorbutton stated with bitter amusement. Gillian paused for a moment and nodded. "I'm afraid I have His Majesty to thank for my present state of affairs." He said sourly, motioning to her to keep drinking. "You see," He continued, "When His late Majesty King Nicodemus was murdered, he' along with Sir Jonathan Brisbee and a number of concerned citizens, your father and I among them; was working on a new law which would have substantially curtailed certain enforcement powers of Britain's Sheriffs which, we felt, were being sorely abused. Unfortunately Jenner, by virtue of his position as Prince Regent, was party to the plan and no doubt convinced the Sheriffs to join him in his little palace coup by promising them that such a measure could never pass if its writer were no longer in power. After killing his elder brother, he had most of us arrested and either imprisoned and stripped of lands and Title or, in my own case, stripped of my Academic credentials; without which I could make no living inside of university circles." He then sighed wistfully and continued. "Thus dishonored among my colleagues I discovered, much to my horror, that without my degrees I couldn't even so much as get a job teaching at any of the Orphanage or Prison schools. I was then forced to leave my home when it was confiscated under the Repossession Decree and spent several months as a vagrant until I found my present position as a groundskeeper for the City's Parks Commission." The badger smiled a bit, but it could not hide the sadness in his eyes. "I don't make much and it's only day-to-day, but it pays for my doss and a daily meal."

None of this, except perhaps the revelation of her father's participation, was particularly surprising to Gillian. Her father had spoken cryptically of new freedoms for the animals of Britain in the weeks preceding King Nicodemus' death, but he had never been specific enough that she'd paid any real attention.

"I heard about what happened to Gil and Geoffrey." Silas remarked. "I kind of wondered when the Grandmaster would get around to using his influence over Jenner to round up his own business and political enemies."

Gillian paused in her libations and looked sharply up at the badger. "You knew that this was going to happen? Why didn't you tell father or Geoffrey?" She angrily demanded.

Silas stopped pumping, frowned for a moment, opened his mouth to say something, then thought better of it. Instead, he again took her by a paw and ushered her to a nearby bench. "Look, Gillian," He began as they sat down, "I know that your father never included you in affairs of the Guild to the extent that he did Geoffrey or Giles. Your mother always wanted to keep you unsullied by the sometimes dirty politics involved in leading

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it. She believed, rightly or not, that you were meant to be innocent and above the petty corruption that running the Guild sometimes entailed. Unfortunately it was in the nature of his occupation that your father would make enemies, powerful enemies, like the Grandmaster. Did I know that the Grandmaster would come to take your father and brother at that particular time and on that particular day? No. But I'd told him; more times, in fact, than I care to remember; that the Grandmaster is a scheming, greedy and hate-filled opportunist. Hell, Jenner and the Grandmaster see each other as ideological soul-mates; The King on the political side and the Master Merchant; on the financial. That each would wreak revenge on their respective enemies, real or not, once each had achieved their own particular brand of absolute power was all but inevitable." He explained.

Suddenly, many parts to a puzzle whose pieces had been floating in Gillian's mind for almost a year were now coming together and forming a more complete and horrifying picture of her family's present situation. "Would the Grandmaster actually go so far as to have father and Geoffrey executed as traitors?" She asked fearfully.

The badger shrugged and shook his head. "That would depend entirely on Jenner." He stated uneasily. "I suppose that if the Grandmaster could trump up enough of a circumstantial case against them, Jenner would be more than willing to give such an order; and considering how closely Gil and King Nicodemus worked together, Jenner probably hates your family at least as much as he hated his adoptive brother."

Gillian thought hard about the desperate situation that she was in, weighing and discarding numerous options. She would not, under ANY circumstances, leave the City while her father and brother were in Jenner's custody. But to remain meant eventual capture at the hands of the Grandmaster, who had apparently been charged or, more likely, charged himself, with the "removal" of all "subversive", at least as defined by him, elements that might threaten Jenner's iron-clawed rule. It was no small surprise, then, when an idea began to form in the back of her mind. "Smirk." She said quietly.

"Excuse me?" The badger uttered, looking at her strangely; as if she'd just crossed her eyes and stuck her tongue out at him.

"The Society to Maintain the Rule of the King. S-M-R-K. Smirk." She stated. "Dad created it just after Jenner was crowned in order to explore ways to lawfully remove him from the Throne. But after he became ill, Geoffrey took it over." She said.

Poorbutton's eyes widened and his jaw dropped in amazement. An actual plot to remove Jenner from the throne? That such a plan might originate from the Aristocracy wouldn't have surprised him in the least; after all, Jenner had wasted no time in depriving them of their property and titles once he had assumed the Throne. But such a risky initiative from among the usually conservative commercial sector? And led by the Master of the smallest of the Guilds, no less! Obviously, he had either sorely underestimated Gilbert's influence among the other Guildmasters; or they were more frightened of Jenner, and, he assumed, the Grandmaster, than even the Aristocracy had been. "So what happened?" Poorbutton asked.

"For some reason, they couldn't seem to agree on a way to remove Jenner. Soon everything just sort of fell apart." She explained. "Geoffrey then began trying to take matters into his own paws by trying to turn Giles against Jenner." Gillian then shook her head sadly. "I can only assume that, somehow, the Grandmaster got wind of Geoffrey's plan and convinced Jenner to issue the warrants to arrest him and Dad for treason."

Poorbutton nodded pensively. "Makes sense to me." He agreed, "But I don't see how it helps your situation." He added gloomily.

But Gillian was no longer listening to the badger. In her mind she was examining a single, last option; one that was so dangerous, so utterly daring, that, with a lot of work and persuasion and a certain amount of luck, it just MIGHT actually work. "Never mind me." She said, a new strength of purpose and authority in her

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voice. "When do you get off work?" She asked.

Using as his reference the position of the sun in the partially-cloudy late-afternoon sky, the badger made a few quick calculations. "About another two hours or so, why?" He asked, more than a little surprised by the rather sudden change in her demeanor.

"Because I have an organization to put back together." She said, her golden-yellow eyes hard-set with grim determination. The badger opened his mouth to ask what she meant, but Gillian stopped him with an uplifted paw and sprang from her seat with renewed vigor. "I'll be at the home of Guildmaster Truart about an hour after sunset to explain everything." She called to him over her shoulder as she set off at a brisk walk. And in mere moments she was out of sight.

After finishing his work in the park and collecting the days wages, Silas went and paid his nights doss; but instead of heading for the local public house where he normally ate, he made his way as unobtrusively as possible to the residence that Gillian had specified.

Leonidas Truart was the Master of the Guild of Stonecutters and Masons, Britains oldest recognized labor guild. While not related to the late King Nicodemus, he was every inch the lion that Nicodemus had been. In fact, the Truart family had historically been staunch allies of the House PenWallace and had even; until relatively recently; contributed several generations of Truart males to distinguished service in either the Military or Civil branches of Britain's Government. It was a measure of the power of the Truart name that while hed been stripped of his Titles, Jenner hadn't tried to arrest him or confiscate his vast land holdings under the infamous Repossession Decree even though he'd played no small role in King Nicodemuss attempt to reform British law enforcement.

The Truart home was an ancient and surprisingly modest, for the particular neighborhood in which it was located, anyway, stone building set in a comparatively small, unfenced plot of land. It did not escape Silas's expert eye that, by way of contrast, all of the other residences in the area were large manor-houses surrounded by high, sturdy iron fences and accessible only through well-secured gates.

With a certain amount of trepidation Silas made his way to the door and used a large, rusty iron knocker to announce his presence to the occupants. Moments later a ferret; wearing the standard Butlers uniform of a black swallow-tailed suitcoat, starched white high-collared shirt and striped ribbon bow-tie in the colors of his local Servants Guild; opened the door and eyed him with undisguised disdain. "I'm quite sorry, sir," The ferret began, not bothering to hide the irritation in his voice. "I'm afraid we have no more servant positions available at the moment. If you'll leave an address where you may be reached, I'll contact you when one becomes vacant." He then took a small card from a tablestand next to the door and pressed it into Silas paw. "Here," The ferret continued. "This voucher entitles you to a free lunch at the Mason Guildhall." The ferret then picked up a piece of paper and dipped a pen into a small bottle of ink as if preparing to write.

"Im much obliged, sir, but I actually came to speak to Master Truart." Silas said apologetically.

"Oh really?" The ferret asked with more than a hint of sarcasm in his voice. "And who should I tell him..?"

Just then a deep, angry voice barked, "Bentleigh! Is that another peddler?" From somewhere inside and upstairs.

Quite suddenly, the ferret cringed in fear; dropping his pen on the floor and leaving a small spatter of ink on the varnished wood. "I dont believe so, Master Leonidas; at least he isn't dressed like one!" He called out nervously.

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"Well then give him a voucher and send him away!" The voice barked again.

With something approaching desperation now in his voice, instead of the original haughtiness, the ferret, without thinking, quickly swiped another card from the tablestand and again pressed it into Silas; paw and shrugged, telling him, "Well, you heard him! I'm afraid that whatever business you have with him will have to wait for another day! Please come back soon! Good-bye!"

But Silas kept his wits about him and refused to budge. "I'm sorry, sir, but I must see Master Truart as soon as possible." He stated, politely but firmly. "It may be a matter of life and death!"

"BENTLEIGH! WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON DOWN THERE?" The voice now roared, like the explosion of a newly active volcano.

The ferret struggled with Silas for a few seconds more but, finally realizing that it was a waste of energy, gave up and, with a defeated shrug, gestured to the badger to follow him. "I'm bringing the fellow up, sir!" He almost squeaked, such was his unease. "He says he wishes to discuss a matter of utmost urgency!" He led Silas to the upstairs study where, in an overstuffed chair facing the door the pale yellow light of a reading lamp shined on a sight that Silas thought he would never witness. Where once sat a strong, proud Aristocrat was now an old, hollow-eyed near-invalid. Even though he wore a robe and was covered to his chest in blankets and there was a roaring fire in the hearth, the lion visibly shivered. His once sleek fur was now largely gone; replaced by great patches of dry, gray, peeling skin; and his long mane, prized among his species as a sign of leonine virility, was reduced to a few stringy tufts that stuck out of his bony visage.

The horror and pity that was in Silas heart must have been readily apparent on his face as well, for the lion grinned a bit and said, "Don't worry, my boy; I actually feel somewhat better than I look at the moment." He then shifted his gaze toward the ferret. "Well, Bentleigh, where are your manners?" The ferret gave Truart a confused, blank stare. Truart rolled his eyes and gave an exasperated sigh. "Introductions, Bentleigh, introductions!" He said, a small bit of humor mixing with the impatience in his voice.

"Oh yes, sir, so sorry about that!" Bentleigh quickly said. Once again his voice assumed the imperious, butlerly air that he had used when answering the door. "Master Leonidas, may I present..., uh, may I present..." Nonplussed, Bentleigh quickly realized that, in all the commotion, he'd never thought to ASK this badger what his name was.

Silas came to the Butler's rescue and introduced himself. "I was an advisor to Master Gilbert Gisbourne of the Guild of Small Businesses." He added by way of explanation.

The lion invited Silas to seat himself at a smaller, but no less comfortable, chair set at an angle that faced his own and, once his guest was at ease, gazed intently at him for a moment and then nodded. "Yes," He said slowly, "I do seem to remember a badger that Old Gil used to bring with him, always preaching gloom and doom about how the Sheriffs needed to be kept in check or they'd eventually usurp the power of the King."

Silas gave an embarrassed nod and chuckle as the memory of those meetings flooded back into his mind. "Yes sir, that was me; sorry to say." He replied.

The lion's gaze narrowed. "Well don't be." He said acidly. Then a sadness came to his eyes and he suddenly looked very tired. "You and Gil were, as can be seen from the events of the past several months, absolutely right about the need for legal reform. And Old Gil was most especially correct in his warnings to dear King Nicodemus about Britain's fate if that greedy little whelp Jenner ever got his paws on the Crown." He then sighed dejectedly. "But then, he seems to be the one having the last laugh nowadays doesn't he." He said caustically.

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"Actually, that's one of the reasons that I'm here." Silas said. He then gave a quick narrative of his fall into disfavor after his arrest by Jenner and his meeting with Gillian Gisbourne.

After hearing Silas account of the elder Gisbourne's, and his youngest son's, arrest by the Grandmaster for treason, Truart became livid. "How DARE he!" The lion screamed. "I'll roast that damned pigs liver on a spit while he watches if its the last thing I ever do!" He vowed. Silas knew that Truart hated the Grandmaster almost as much as Gilbert Gisbourne had because Truart had for years suspected that the Grandmaster was hijacking goods, such as; among other things; expensive stoneworking tools, from his own transportation routes and, after collecting the insurance on the "stolen" items, selling them at an immense profit to black-marketeers. Sometimes the criminals would even get caught with the goods, but the Grandmaster always protested that he was just as much a victim as those who had contracted him to get their goods to market. And there was always the implied threat that none of the transportation Guilds, which the Mercantile Guilds all but owned, would accept cargo from anyone who complained too loudly about this particular state of affairs.

A heavy clang of iron on wood roused Silas from his thoughts as Bentleigh quickly excused himself from their presence to go and answer the door.

"You'll have to forgive Bentleigh, Mr. Poorbutton." Truart said in a low voice. "Ever since my illness began he's become very protective toward me." He sighed and, giving the badger a weak smile, motioned him closer. Silas leaned toward the lion. "I only yell at him because it lets him think that I need him more than I actually do." Truart stage-whispered, a spark of humor in his eyes.

Silas returned the smile and nodded his understanding just as Bentleigh and the new arrival could be heard climbing the last of the stairs. Moments later the Butler escorted the guest into the room and, with orders from Truart to prepare and bring up a meal, immediately left; closing the door behind him.

Without formality, Truart began. "Miss Gisbourne, I see that you're looking well." And indeed, Gillian had somehow cleaned and brushed her fur; although her clothes were still somewhat the worse for wear. "My condolences on the death of your dear Mother and the current situation which has befallen your family." He continued, his voice carefully neutral. "What, if I may ask, is the purpose of this visit?"

"The Society to Maintain the Rule of the King. I wish to claim leadership of it by right of succession." She said simply.

Truarts eyes narrowed as a frown darkened his face. The room seemed to grow dark as well. "I don't know what youre talking about." He hissed through clenched teeth.

"Oh really?" Gillian asked with a bitterness matching Truart's. "I did a bit of searching at Dads offices, luckily I happen to know the place a lot better than the Grandmasters spies, and found the minutes of all your Å Smirk; meetings in his little hideaway safe where all the REAL Guild records are kept. I doubt that Jenner OR the Grandmaster would be in a very forgiving mood if even a single page of those meetings made its way to them." She said, her hard eyes boring into his.

Silas couldnt believe his ears! The young, pretty; even if she did look rather like a street-waif; daughter of Gilbert Gisbourne actually blackmailing one of her fathers best friends by threatening to expose both him AND her own family to genuine charges of treason against the Crown? The word "mad" wouldve been a serious underestimation of the situation. But then something even stranger, if such was at all possible, happened. The look of stark terror that Truart wore became first a look of realization, then a sly smile, then the lion broke into a relatively hearty laugh.

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"Hah, Young lady! By the spirits, you most certainly ARE your father's daughter!" He cried ecstatically.

Silas exhaled in relief and began shaking his head. "For a moment, you had even me going; I'm glad it was all just a bluff!" He said.

Truart gave him a searing look. "For one supposedly so well educated," He said scathingly, "You certainly are a naive dunce!"

"I-I don't understand!" The badger stammered.

Truart rolled his eyes in exasperation. "You idiot!" He exclaimed. "I have no doubt that such minutes to our meetings DO exist! It's exactly the kind of thing that Old Gil would have done to make sure that none of us would betray our cause...and his." A note of admiration now crept into his voice. "He's a Survivor, that one. And I certainly don't doubt for a moment that our young Miss Gisbourne would go to any length to try to rescue her family, even if it meant scaring the wits out of a bunch of silly, complacent old fools more intent on cutting their losses than preventing the destruction of their own Nation." With an anguished groan, he then tried to pull himself more upright onto his chair. After Silas helped him with this apparently painful chore, the lion continued. "Please forgive me, my child!" He pleaded. "Even in my present condition I should have done everything in my power to help your father and young Geoffrey in their efforts to rid us all of that worthless twit pretending to be our King!"

"Then why did you leave the group? You attended all of the meetings while Dad was in charge, but only the first few after Geoffrey took over." She asked, her tone now one of curiosity rather than anger.

Truart slumped back into his chair as if suddenly drained of all will. "When your father started Smirk, as you call it, it was our original purpose merely to dethrone Jenner by lawful, non-violent means. He picked the name precisely because it sounded so misleading; if he ever happened to get wind of its existence, Jenner would, hopefully, believe that the rule meant to be maintained was his own when in reality it was that of the late Nicodemus we were hoping to preserve." He explained. "We got an offer of help from the former Captain of Nicodemus's Royal Guard, but he never showed up for his meeting with us. Then your father suddenly fell ill and young Geoffrey took over. But he was such a hot-blooded lad! He kept going on about how Jenner had somehow poisoned Old Gil and how it was too late to rid Britain of her tyranny by any means other than violence. Then Geoffrey, somehow, actually managed to recruit Jenner's own Captain-of-the-Guard and promised him the Chancellorship and a Titlement if he would aid us in our plot; even if only to stand by and not stop us while we did the actual dirty work. Regrettably, such a chance never did manifest itself. Worse yet, the Sheriff of Nottingham resigned his office to go join some paltry backwoods militia and Jenner; in a cruel irony; sent his Captain-of-the-Guard to fill the post. It was at this point that I and most of the other members of the group decided we'd had our fill of plots and counter-plots and we resigned in order to get on with our lives and try to survive this hideous Dark Age as best we knew how."

Gillian nodded knowingly. "And that's when Geoff decided to take things into his own paws." She sighed.

Truart shrugged helplessly. "I tried to warn him that he was going to be playing a very dangerous game by the Grandmaster's rules, but he absolutely refused to listen." He said, a genuine sorrow in his voice.

"That's my family all right." She stated ruefully. "Mom always said our stubbornness would be our downfall."

"There, there, my child." Truart said sympathetically. He scooted himself over slightly and patted the resultant empty space, indicating that she should have a seat with him on the chair. After a moments slight hesitation, she joined him and he took one of his blankets and wrapped it around her shoulders. "Your father and brother's hearts are in the right place," He told her soothingly. "They wished only to try to stop the coming

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madness that none of us could see before it started. It is to their credit that they persisted so long against such overwhelming odds, just as it is my shame; and that of my colleagues; that we became so willfully blind and deaf to the evil that has consumed us all in one way or another."

Gillian turned and gave him a hopeful smile, what must have been her first since her ordeal began. "Then you'll help me?" She asked.

"Of course, my child. I would be remiss to do otherwise." He said without hesitation.

A moment later there came a knock at the door and Bentleigh entered carrying a portable serving table with four bowls of barley soup, a loaf of walnut sweetbread, a large carafe of fruit juice, four small glasses and a few other delicacies which he placed between Truart and Silas Poorbutton's chairs. From a small compartment he removed four small, ornate silver trays and; placing a bowl of the soup, a slice of the sweetbread and a glass which he filled with the juice on it; gave one to each of the room's occupants, leaving his own on the serving table. He then went to a far corner of the room and brought a chair for himself, setting it so that he could eat from his own tray and serve his employer and the guests at the same time.

After a while, when their trays were empty and their stomachs full, Poorbutton politely wiped his mouth with his napkin and, thanking his host for the wonderful meal, took his leave, explaining that he needed to get back to his rented room before the landlady locked the doors for the night.

"Nonsense!" The lion declared. "I have an even better idea." He then smiled cannily. "How would you like a job?" He asked.

Poorbutton raised a questioning brow. "Mr. Bentleigh tells me that all of your servant positions are filled." He then pointed to his filthy clothing. "Unless, that is, you happen to need a well-educated gardener." He said ironically.

Truart started to laugh heartily at the badgers little joke, but it turned into a fit of coughing. Bentleigh quickly grabbed the carafe and had his employer down some of the juice. After a few moments, Truart managed to clear his throat and said, "No, my boy, I have something less physically and more mentally demanding in mind; something that would put your education and experience in governmental and commercial affairs to far better use than they are at present."

"Go on." Poorbutton prompted.

"I should like to retain you in the same capacity you worked for Old Gil," Truart began. "Only you'll be advising Gillian and me on how best to rid Britain of her present ruler; and this time, dear boy," He said with a sparkle in his eyes. "I can state with absolute certainty that you'll have only the most receptive congregation for whatever gloom and doom you might need to preach."

Poorbutton was taken aback by Truarts offer. Certainly it had far more to offer than the paw-to-mouth existence that he was being forced to endure at present. His supervisor had informed him when hed taken the job that it would last only until the first major snowfall; after which, according to rumor, the Parks Commission was to be dissolved and its lands confiscated by the Crown and, again according to rumor, auctioned off to certain of Jenner's more loyal supporters. After that, he had no idea what the future held. But to accept the position meant that he, Truart and his ex-employer's daughter would secretly be committing treason against the Crown, a crime which; should it be uncovered; would most certainly condemn them all to the gallows. But the more he thought about it, the more he knew that he had no real choice BUT to accept Truarts proposal. The fate that had befallen his former employer was no doubt only the first of what would most likely turn into a long, sad string of such arrests. History and simple logic dictated that it was only a

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matter of time before Jenner and the Grandmaster's naked desire for absolute power would begin to feed into their already rampant paranoia. Once real enemies or opponents were safely locked up; or better yet, in their depraved minds, dead; they would inevitably begin to see treason in even the smallest slights, real or imagined, against them by even their staunchest supporters. Eventually no one would be safe from the horrors that they would, with an increasing blood-lust, begin to inflict on others; using the security of the Kingdom as their pretext and the power of the Crown as their weapon and shield. An invisible shiver ran down Poorbutton's spine to the tip of his tail as he nodded and said, "I accept." Then asked, "But do you know what you're getting YOUR self into?"

The lion's eyes narrowed. "My boy," He intoned in a voice that left no doubt of the steel that still remained within his ailing body. "Jenner and the Grandmaster are, for their own perverse pleasure, conspiring to bring my beloved Britain, a Kingdom that my family has faithfully served in one capacity or another for many generations, to a slow and agonizing ruin. Should I lose my lands, my last crown, or even my life; I absolutely WILL NOT dishonor my last moment on this world by averting my eyes for the sake of mere expediency. From now on I shall use whatever means are at my disposal, regardless of personal cost or risk, to assist young Miss Gisbourne and yourself in ridding Britain of this unspeakable corruption that now afflicts us all." He then turned and addressed Gillian. "As for you, dear lady, as far as the outside world is concerned you are now Jill;; a new home-nurse and secretary whom I've hired to see me through my present illness." He then grinned. "Of course, I expect no actual work from you and will assist you in every possible way in your efforts to claim your fathers organization." He explained.

"But I've been volunteering at the Public Hospital in order to get a Guild scholarship to become a nurse and I'd really like to help in order to keep up my studies." She told him. Truart accepted her offer and promised to use his influence to see what arrangements he could make with the Nurses Guild so that she wouldn't lose her eligibility.

He then turned to the ferret. "Bentleigh," He said, "Please show Miss Gisbourne to her room and then draw her bath." The ferret helped Gillian out of Truart's chair and as they began to leave the room, Truart added as an afterthought; "I'm sure that we must have clothing her size somewhere around here, so you may burn those rags," He indicated her somewhat tattered dress with a wave of his scrawny paw, not bothering to hide the disdain in his voice. "At your earliest convenience."

Bentleigh nodded hearty approval of his employers order and quickly escorted Gillian to her waiting quarters.

Truart now turned his attention to his other guest and, with an only half-humorous grin, said, "Now, Mr. Poorbutton, lets get down to business; we have an insurrection to plan..."

Chapter 63: 62

Deputy Sillus could barely contain his glee as he peered out between the trees from his location just inside the forest. Before him lay a vast clearing, still covered in a layer of new-fallen snow, the center of which was dominated by a huge stone edifice. Around this was sprawled a motley collection of tents in varying stages of dilapidation with the odd and equally dilapidated wooden shack thrown up, or at least it certainly looked that way!, among them at random intervals. So THIS was where the traitor Justin was hiding!

The Deputy's keen eyes could make out numerous animals on the field. Most were just marching in what looked to be standard military-style formation; but a smaller number were obviously engaged in a close-quarters weapons drill, for he could clearly hear the harsh multiple clacking of wood-on-wood rather than the clear, lethal ring of steel-upon-steel. "No matter," He thought to himself, "These rebel scum will get whats coming to them soon enough."

Suddenly, he caught sight of three figures strolling out to a position just beyond the edge of the tent-area on the far side of the clearing. As quickly as possible, and careful to stay in the trees and avoid any too-sudden movements that might alert anyone on the field or in the upper stories of the building to his presence, he made his way toward them using his own more-or-less parallel course along the forest's edge. As he got closer to them, he had no difficulty recognizing the two tallest animals. One was that smart-ass weasel who'd so utterly humiliated Blackjack a few days before at the meeting in the Heath. The other was that stupid little hare that he'd captured a few weeks ago, but had been forced to give up by Sheriff Sullivan. Almost without thinking he brought a paw to his ear. It had healed enough by now so that it no longer needed a bandage, but there was a small hole where the two sides of the wound had not cleanly met. Sometime last night while he was asleep, some prankster had placed a gold loop-earring into it. Upon first discovering the bauble, he'd been livid with rage; loudly demanding that Sullivan or Blackjack find and punish the perpetrator. But the Sheriff had invited him to his office and in a calm and fatherly tone said, "Look, Deputy, its no big deal. If it were me, I'd wear it as a badge of Honor. You were injured in a fair fight an; now you've got your first battle-scar." After thinking it over for a few moments, he'd decided that the Sheriff was right; a battle-scar, especially one made so prominent, would give him a bragging-right that none of the other Deputies could yet claim. But that still didn't let the long-eared brat off the hook, not by a long shot! The hare owed him big-time, and Sillus was going to make damn sure that the price he paid was as high as it came! The smallest of them was just some rabbit that hed never seen before and was therefore not worth more than cursory attention.

He watched the trio for a few minutes longer; but when it became clear that they were going to do nothing more than practice their own weapons drills, the weasel and hare using regular-sized practice swords while the rabbit used an almost comically small version, he slipped quietly away, back toward Nottingham. Yes, now that he knew where they were, Sullivan would deal with them all soon enough.

Chapter 64: 63

Geoffrey Gisbourne stared down at the still-blank page of his "journal", tapping the end of his pen impatiently on the side of his head just below his ear. The problem was not that he didn't want to write, the problem was that a week in captivity had left him pretty much bereft of subjects about which to write. Finally, in frustration, he once again took in the drab grayness of the now all-too-familiar "cell" that must once have been a storeroom in one of the upper floors of the Castle. To his right, deep in the perpetual shadow of a small adjoining alcove, his father lay on an old, shabby mattress; covered only by a few rough, threadbare blankets; quietly wheezing in a troubled sleep. Geoffrey himself was seated at a tiny, decrepit desk in which he had found some water-stained paper, a pen, and a small bottle of ink. During the first few days he had used these to write a detailed narrative of their arrest and imprisonment by the Grandmaster; with the idea of getting it smuggled out by one of the members of the house-keeping staff who brought them food and who had sometimes smuggled messages to and from the former Captain-of-the-Guard, before he was promoted and sent off to the hinterlands of Nottinghamshire. Unfortunately their server always arrived under armed escort, so the chances that their plight would become public knowledge anytime soon were about nil. Unless...

His sister, Gillian, had not been home at the time of their arrest; presumably on her way back from her day as a volunteer at the City's only remaining public Hospital. He knew that the Grandmaster probably didn't have her because he had not yet come to gloat about it. Could she be aware of their predicament? She had, after all, warned him that many of their father's friends and Guild associates were beginning to abandon them; he thought to himself sarcastically. She had seen obvious signs that he, much to his growing sorrow and rage, had stupidly and stubbornly ignored. But even if the Grandmaster didn't have her, where was she? And was she safe? Or even still alive? He shuddered at the thought of her alone, struggling to try to survive on the cruel streets of Londontown during a soon-to-be-harsh Winter...

His thoughts were interrupted by the growing tap-step, tap-step of an approaching cane and hooves. He quickly put away his writing materials, the spirits only knew what would happen if the Grandmaster should discover them!, and got up and began pacing a diagonal path on the rough, bare granite floor.

A few seconds later the old boar, dressed in; to Geoffrey's eyes, at least; a bizarre parody of a costume usually worn at Royal dress functions and flanked by a pair of halberd-wielding King's Guards, stopped at the steel open-barred cell door. "And how are my guests enjoying their accommodations? Quite cozy, I should hope?" He taunted.

Geoffrey, who was facing away from him on his way to the corner opposite the alcove, stopped his pacing but did not turn. "Come on in for a few minutes and I'll give you a quick once-over." He answered sarcastically.

The boar caught the meaning of the wolf's double-entendre immediately. "I think not." He chuckled. "The reason that I've deigned to; uh," He continued, feigning effort to find the right choice of words, "Shall we say; Grace; you with my presence, is that His Majesty, in his eternal wisdom, has just done me the delightful honor of officially appointing me to the Office of King's Chancellor." He then let out a childish giggle. "Isn't that simply the most exciting news?" He asked, with what Geoffrey knew to be a mocking enthusiasm.

"Oh, yippie. One more crappy idea in the long, sad history of crappy ideas." Geoffrey deadpanned. Then, crossing his arms, he turned to face the Grandmaster-cum-Chancellor, his yellow-green eyes almost glowing with defiance as he said, "What do you expect me to do, bow down and worship you? Hell, you don't even have the Amulet! Apparently Nicodemus; Captain-of-the-Guard managed to snatch it away before either Jenner OR you could get your filthy paws or hooves on it! You may have the office, but you'll never, EVER get any of the respect that your predecessors; ESPECIALLY Jonathan Brisbee; so richly deserved. You'd better bask in your victory now, Pig, because I have a strong feeling that your Chancellorship going to be a

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very short and bitter one!"

The Grandmaster now glared at this impertinent cub, his eyes narrowing as a calculating frown replaced the jubilant smile. "Very well, boy." He said, his voice now a malevolent half-whisper. "It's no secret that your family has considered me their blood-enemy for so many years. Actually, I've always rather enjoyed the challenge of outwitting and outmaneuvering you at every turn. True, I've been forced to endure the occasional, shall we say, setback;; but eventually..." He now stepped forward and leaned dangerously close to the cell door; placing a breathy, conspiratorial emphasis on his next four words, "I have ALWAYS prevailed!"

Much as Geoffrey was tempted to run to the cell door, attempt to reach through the bars, grab the Grandmaster, Geoffry doubted that he could EVER come to think of the old boar as "Chancellor"!, by his frilly neckerchief and make a stab at wringing his multi-chinned neck; he decided that the poor odds of success made restraint on his part the better part of valor, at least for the time being. Instead, he sauntered back to the desk and sat down; his back to the small, hostile audience; and said, darkly, "Well see, Pig, well just see."

Seething in anger, the boar brought the steel tip of his cane down hard onto the stone floor; the sound of the impact ringing and echoing down the hall. "Don't turn your back on me, BOY!" He shouted indignantly. "I hold your very LIFE in my hooves! On my word alone, His Majesty would; without the slightest hesitation; send your entire family to the gallows! The executions would, of course," He added sardonically, "Be conducted in secret. No use getting the peasants excited, is there?"

Geoffrey turned in his chair to face the Grandmaster/Chancellor; a hard, sarcastic grimace in his eyes. "Your threats have no credibility, Pig! There's no way you'd be able to keep my brothers execution a secret from his comrades, and I don't think that even Jenner is stupid enough to risk a mutiny by killing one of his most loyal and respected Guards no matter WHAT you tried to pin on him! And I KNOW that you don't have Gillian because if you did, you'd have come bragging about it LONG before now! And even if you DO manage to kill me and Dad, SO WHAT? Someday, when the animals of Britain decide that they're sick and tired of all the crap that you and Jenner are dishin' on em, you;ll both end up dangling from ropes too! The only difference is that it'll take a few more of those excited peasants to lift you off the ground than it will soldiers to walk me to the platform." He sneered.

By now the old boar was literally quivering with rage; but quite suddenly, the Grandmaster/Chancellor stopped shaking as a malicious smile brightened his face. "Tell me, boy, why is your father bedridden?" The boar asked.

Geoffrey frowned and raised an eyebrow, curious as to the reason for the abrupt change of subject. "I...I don't know." He answered hesitantly, but decided that it wasn't something that the Grandmaster/Chancellor couldn't find out about eventually. "The doctors couldn't give us a diagnosis. He believes, and I've come to agree, that Jenner somehow poisoned him in order to weaken our influence with the other Guilds."

"Actually, you're only half right." The Grandmaster/Chancellor chortled knowingly.

"What're you talking about?" Geoffrey demanded, his attention so focused on the boar that he didn't notice the pathetic, shivering, blanket-wrapped figure standing, though barely able to do so, in the doorway of the alcove.

Now the boar seemed to be positively glowing with an almost childish delight. "Oh, come now; my boy! You and I both know that my young acolyte can be patient when necessary, but he's rarely; if ever; subtle! After all, look at the means by which he disposed of his beloved brother! Ingenious? Certainly! Effective? Unquestionably! But hardly what one could call refined!" Now a satisfied smirk began to twist his snout as

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the wolf's jaw dropped in horror and realization. "But the use of poisons is an Art unto itself, one that takes years; even decades, to master..."

Geoffrey had crashed into the door in a split second; his paws straining, reaching through the bars; grabbing in utter futility for even the slightest hold on the boar's overlegant clothing. "YOU HEARTLESS, SLIMY BASTARD!" He screamed through bared fangs, his instinctive hate for this Monster driving away all rational thought. "I'll kill you! Do you hear me? I'LL KILL YOU!" The two guards had lowered their weapons and were poised to strike, but the Grandmaster/Chancellor angrily waved them off.

It was now the boar's turn to sneer. "I very much doubt it." He hissed. And with one swift movement he slammed the tip of his cane down hard and square on top of Geoffrey's muzzle. The blow stunned the wolf and sent him reeling back to lie face-up on the floor, the blood first spurting from his nostrils and covering his face and the front of his shirt and jerkin, then becoming a slow, steady flow. As quickly as he could, Gilbert slid down the wall that he'd been leaning on for support to all fours and crawled painfully to the aid of his son. The elder wolf carefully bent himself into a cross-legged sitting position and, as tenderly as was possible, maneuvered his youngest son's bruised head onto his lap; turning it to one side so that he would not choke on his own blood; and with the corner of one of his blankets began delicately wiping away what was still flowing.

"Oh how nice," The boar observed caustically. "Now Daddy comes to the rescue."

"At least my boy actually has someone who will take care of him." Gilbert countered wearily. "Can you say the same? Would Jenner help you in a similar situation?" The wolf shook his head sadly in answer to his own question. "I doubt it." He stated quietly, too exhausted to summon anything more than pity for his adversary.

"Oh please!" The Grandmaster/Chancellor scoffed, "Spare me your mawkish sentimentality! You're just as corrupt and manipulative as I am! It's the nature of our business, pure and simple!"

"Except that I didn't conspire to help murder my King and his Chancellor, nor do I condemn my business adversaries to a slow death by poisoning. And as to certain admitted lapses in ethics where the Guild is concerned, at least I tried to do everything within my power to insulate my children from those affairs until such time as I felt that they were mature enough to deal with the moral cesspool that I'd inherited." The wolf pointed out, his voice heavy with sad irony.

"That's because you are WEAK!" The boar spat contemptuously, once again loudly smiting the floor with his cane. "Unlike me, you have not yet learned that life and business are inseparable and that there is no room in either for feelings like love or affection!" He said, emphasizing the last three words with a mocking disdain. "No, you misguided fool, they are about two things only: POWER AND CONTROL!" Again the harsh sound of steel on rock reverberated through the air. "His Majesty is the King of Britain because he is strong and rules with absolute power and unyielding control! Nicodemus is dead because he was weak and would have squandered his power and let others take control! And for whatever reason, you stupidly chose to ally yourself with that imbecile; whereas I clearly saw the potential in His Majesty's insatiable greed, his unwavering lust for absolute power and the utter ruthlessness with which he would indulge that lust, even to the point of murdering his adoptive brother, and carefully cultivated them to our mutual benefit! With me at his side, Britain has a King worthy of the title!" He declared proudly.

"Oh shut up, Pig. You're givin' me a damn headache." Geoffrey's weak, labored voice demanded. The younger wolf's eyes then fluttered open and, when he realized that the face staring down at him was that of his father smiling with relief, he returned it with a rather more feeble one of his own.

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The old boar again began shaking in impotent rage, knowing that mere words would have no effect against the familial unity of father and son. "So be it!" He snorted derisively. "I strongly suggest that you two enjoy what little time you still have together because I'm going to swear out a complaint of Treason to the Crown against you and, by hook or by crook, I'll see you both hang in the City Square!" He then turned and imperiously strutted back down the hall, his guards following close behind.

"Well son, I think that could've gone better." Gilbert wryly observed when he was sure that the Grandmaster/Chancellor was out of earshot.

Geoffrey took one of his fathers paws into his own and gave it a gentle squeeze. "That sick piece of scum can hang me if he wants to; but he'll never defeat me as long as I know I have you on my side, Dad." He said, trying to choke back the growing turmoil inside of him.

"You know I am, son." The elder wolf replied, as a tear slid out of the corner of his eye and dripped onto the collar

of Geoffreys blood-soaked shirt. "And at least we have the benefit of knowing who really poisoned me; not, of course, that it does us much good at present." He added.

"Don't...Don't worry, Dad," The younger wolf said as he pulled himself up woozily and crawled to seat himself; back to the wall, his eyes involuntarily blinking to counter some residual nausea. "Justice will eventually catch up with him. And if I have to, I'll rise from my grave and visit it upon him myself! That's a promise." He swore.

Gilbert crawled to the wall as well, joining his son. "I dunno, son. At the moment neither of us is in much shape to be wreaking vengeance on the wicked." He sighed wearily. "Frankly, I'll be damn surprised if I can even muster enough strength to crawl back to bed." Geoffrey cracked a wan, bitter smile. "You don't hear me bitchin' an moanin', do you?" He asked. He then slipped a paw under one of his fathers arms and, using the wall behind them for leverage, struggled to lift them both to their feet. It took every ounce of effort on both their parts; but they eventually made it into the alcove, where they collapsed onto their ersatz bed and almost immediately fell into an exhausted, nightmare-ridden sleep.

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