

King's Revenge

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Chapter 1.

King Wulf shivered and wished he was somewhere else.

High on the upper reaches of the mountain, flurries of snow whistled around the King and his men as they climbed the narrow icy path and wished they were somewhere else. The biting wind cut through them like a knife. Heavy grey clouds covered the sky, like an oppressive blanket, making the midday seem like dusk.

The King pushed on along the path, leading his men, who were weighed down with gifts for the Seer. The wind drove snow onto their heavy winter cloaks and pushed the cold air through their clothing, chilling them to the bone and making their footsteps sluggish. As they neared the summit, they saw an oil lamp flickering weakly from a cave entrance.

The King and his followers climbed the final set of rough-hewn stone steps, treading carefully where the steps were made treacherous by the snow and ice. Gasping for breath, they started towards the cave entrance. The light was welcoming after the climb, a haven from the buffeting wind and the noise of the storm. Reaching the entrance, their path was blocked by a boy dressed in a fur cloak, who demanded that they wait.

“My master is prophesying,” said the boy in a piercing voice that carried above the wind. “You will wait here.”

“You do not keep your King waiting, boy!” Exclaimed one of King Wulf’s men, pushing forward. “He is not accustomed to waiting on the orders of anyone, especially servants!”

“But all must take their turn if they wish to see my Master, regardless of their station in life,” replied the boy. “My master was clear in his instructions.”

Then, without waiting for a reply, he ducked behind the heavy curtain that shielded the cave entrance from the elements, and left the King and his men shivering in the half-light of the storm.

Wulf and his men stood there for a few seconds, temporarily nonplussed and shivering in the cold. Then Wulf broke the silence, shouting above the noise of the wind.

“I’ll not wait!” He shouted and he thrust back the heavy leather curtain that shielded the cave entrance.

Inside the narrow passageway of the cave, a series of curtains hung down. Behind each curtain, King Wulf found the air was warmer and the fabric of the next curtain more fine. The last curtain was made of silk and was covered with a rich embroidery portraying entwined sea serpents in a deadly embrace. Beyond the cloth, he could hear the murmurings of an old man. Wulf threw back the curtain and stormed in.

“Why do you make me, the King of this mountain and all the lands around, wait for an audience?” Wulf shouted angrily as his eyes took in scene before him.

The cave was covered in fine tapestries that covered the rock walls. All around lay glittering shields, weapons and decorative metalwork, all stacked carelessly against the walls. A strong smell of incense filled the cave like perfume. In the centre of the room sat two men; one was obviously a farmer, dressed in tattered clothing and spattered with the mud from the fields. The other man seemed very old, with long white hair tied into a pony tail and heavily wrinkled skin. His scrawny arms protruded from a simple brown cloak and were tattooed heavily with the ancient runic pattern that marked him as a Seer; a man with the gift of second sight.

As King Wulf stormed into the cave, the farmer jumped and, crawling away, tried to hide in a corner of the cave.

The old man sat still, gazing at the tapestry opposite him, apparently oblivious to the intrusion. He waited for Wulf to break the silence.

“Why do you make me, your King, wait?” shouted Wulf, his anger boiling over. “Do you see me as a lesser man than this... peasant!. God's teeth! I should have your head! You had better answer me well.”

At the mention of the King, the farmer redoubled his efforts to hide, shivering against the rock face, as if praying for the solid granite to open up and devour him. The old man rose slowly to his feet and addressed King Wulf in a thin but clear voice.

“What treasure have you brought for me so that I might look into the mists of the future for you? I would compare them with the farmer's gift.”

“Gold, Silver, Rubies and the finest cloths and silks that can be found in this land,” replied King Wulf forcefully. “You instruct those who need advice to bring such gifts that suit their

station in life. I have brought you the most Kingly gifts that exist in the whole of the Western land.”

“I see,” replied the Seer. “This farmer, of whom you are so full of contempt, has brought a gift of a healthy chicken; a fitting gift for a farmer to bring. He is a poor man. He has twelve chickens, one of which he has brought in exchange for my advice. Tell me, do you value my advice as highly as this farmer does? Have you brought me a twelfth of your entire wealth? This man's life and that of his family depends on my advice and I will not cast him out before my work is done. Now, please leave and I will look into the future for you in good time. Leave us.”

King Wulf seethed at the Seer's unexpected dismissal and he stood there, dithering between action and acquiescence. He swayed on his heels and decided that he needed advice. The Mountain Seer was the oldest of all the soothsayers in the land and was reputed to be the most reliable. The King stood there considering his position, then decided; perhaps it was better not to ruin his chances of receiving a glimpse into what the future held.

“Very well, deal with the farmer,” said Wulf, seething inwardly. “But know this, if either of you mention a word of this, I swear on my Father's tomb that I will have you both flayed alive.”

King Wulf swept out of the room, his dignity bruised, and pushed through the curtains back into the cold. He hadn't felt like this since his father had sent him home from a hunting expedition when he was ten and the feeling of humiliation swept over him like warm air from a fire.

The noise of the storm seemed louder to Wulf after being inside the cave. He looked at his men, who were huddled close to the ground, trying to avoid the wind and driving snow. Crouching down over one of his men he spoke to him, shouting over the noise of the storm. The man listened, nodded and then rose and walked back down the path they had climbed. A moment later, the boy returned to the outer curtain and beckoned the King.

“My master invites you to enter out of the cold, please wait between the first two curtains in the cave entrance,” called the boy, holding the heavy leather curtain aside.

Wulf and his men shuffled to the cave entrance and flopped down behind the leather curtain. The boy disappeared and came back with a tray bearing an earthenware pitcher full of a hot liquid and some goblets. He poured the brown liquid from the pitcher and the cave filled with a strong herbal smell. He handed goblets to the King and his men and instructed them to drink.

“It will warm you from within, Your Majesty,” he said to King Wulf. “My Master is nearly ready to advise you. Please finish your drink and come through. You may bring one other with you.”

King Wulf and Earl Wengar, one of the King’s trusted advisers, drank the sweet herb-laden mixture and followed the boy through the curtains. The herbal drink gave them a feeling of warmth that flooded through them as they walked into the inner cave. As they entered, the old man rose and greeted them as if this was the first time he had met Wulf and beckoned them to sit down on two large blue cushions in the centre of the cave. A slight smell of incense greeted the two men as they sat down and unbuckled their heavy winter cloaks. They unhitched their sword belts and placed them on the thick fur rug that covered the smooth cave floor.

“You wish to know what the future holds. Whether your path is wise or foolhardy, whether you will succeed or fail,” said the Seer as he settled down cross-legged opposite the King and the Earl.

King Wulf confirmed that he wished to know what the omens foretold for his Kingdom. He felt unusually anxious, knowing that his plans rested on this moment.

The Seer opened the lid of a wooden box. The box was heavily decorated with the same entwined serpents that were embroidered on the entrance curtains and the tapestries that covered the cave walls. He pulled out a silver bowl covered with engravings and placed the bowl between them. King Wulf and Earl Wengar peered into the bowl and saw that the inside was engraved with symbols and a complicated system of interlocking lines. In the centre of the bowl was a simple star-burst pattern that glittered in the candlelight light that illuminated the cave. The old man pulled a thin-bladed needle-sharp knife from the box and placed it next to the bowl where it glittered in the flame light.

The Seer rolled up his sleeve to reveal a heavily scarred arm. Taking the knife he pulled it across his flesh in a fluid movement and stretched his arm over the bowl as blood welled up through the damaged skin and dripped down, flecking against the silver and running over the starburst pattern.

The Seer bound his arm, in a practised movement, stopping the bleeding with a stained rag and, leant over the bowl. Then he spat hard into the centre of the star burst pattern. His spittle splashed the blood over the engravings and symbols, jumping some lines and intersecting others. Then the Seer peered into the bloody mess examining the patterns.

After a minute of intent scrutiny, the Seer appeared to go into a trance and rocked back and forth on his haunches as he made a low humming sound. Then he fell silent, sitting so motionless that Wulf wondered if he'd lost consciousness. After some minutes of silence, he looked up and gazed deep into King Wulf's eyes.

“I have looked into the mists of time. It seems that your plans will have greater success than the adventures of your father and you will truly achieve things that your father did not. You must be careful to rule your instincts as, too easily, your instincts can rule you. You are impetuous and this can be your undoing. You must be wary of confusing caution for weakness or boldness for strength. Know your path, be sure of your path, stick to your path; for what you choose will affect you forever and your Kingdom for many years to come. That is all that the ghosts of the future choose to tell me. I can give you no more help.”

Saying this, the old man climbed stiffly to his feet and walked over to a wooden cupboard on the far side of the cave. Opening a carved door, he reached inside and pulled out an apple, biting into it with a loud crunch. King Wulf and Earl Wengar stood up and, realising that their audience was at an end, buckled on their swords, fastened their cloaks and walked awkwardly towards the curtains.

As they left, the old man looked up from his apple and called after King Wulf.

“Your assassin will freeze to death on the mountain if you do not change his orders. Tell him to cease his watch. I have sent the farmer from the mountain by a less treacherous path where

he will be safer from both the ravages of the storm and from the deeds of men. You should not worry about your reputation, he will not say a word of what he saw tonight to anyone.”

With the old man’s words ringing in their heads the two men left the cave and were soon engulfed by the snowstorm that howled across the mountainside.

Chapter 2.

The arrow sped towards the target and struck home with a satisfying thud. The tail feathers quivered as the sharp point buried its head into the closely matted straw just four inches from the centre of the golden inner circle.

“You’ll never beat that,” shouted Will triumphantly, a huge grin spreading all over his freckled face. “I beat you again!”

“You beat me again,” agreed Simon, shaking his head.

Will always beat Simon at archery practice and had done so since he could draw a bow. Simon had never really enjoyed archery, never achieving the consistency that would allow him confidence in his aim. However, the law said that all men over the age of thirteen had to practice archery on Sundays, so he had no choice.

The law had been made after the war, but while all the men dutifully turned out onto green, there was never much interest in archery. While the younger boys held competitions amongst themselves, the older men tended to stand around in groups gossiping and joking, enjoying the chance to relax and swap stories after the week’s work.

The archery butts lay in the shelter of the castle's southern wall, away from the busier thoroughfares so that stray arrows were less likely to hit anyone. The castle had been built just after the war to protect the new border and stood at the westernmost point of the kingdom, straddling the old invasion routes. At first, the farmers who had been encouraged to settle the newly conquered lands, settled close to the castle's protection, unwilling to believe that the new fertile lands were as inviting as they appeared. The village had grown around the castle later on, trading upon the needs of the castle garrison for food and clothing.

No matter how hard he concentrated, Simon never seemed to be able to get an arrow to land closer to the bull’s-eye than the second ring. He was nearly fifteen years old with jet-black hair and a tanned face that generally wore a serious expression. He was taller and broader than his younger friend, Will, who was thirteen. Will had fair hair, an infectious grin, and a mass of freckles that made him look like he was covered in splashes of brown wood stain.

The two boys worked in the castle kitchens, receiving their board, lodgings and a rudimentary education in exchange for their hard work. Both Simon and Will were orphans, having lost their parents during the great famine that had swept across the land after the war. They had been brought up by an order of monks until they were seven years old and then entered into service in the castle kitchens, fetching, carrying and cleaning. The work was hard but there was often excitement in the castle to make it bearable, especially with the prospect of the King's visit in the offing.

"I saw another cart full of spices and dried fruits come up to the castle yesterday," said Will. "There's so much food in the cellars at the moment, I've never seen them so full. The smell of it all is amazing!"

"It is exciting," agreed Simon. "We are going to be really busy once the guests start arriving. Imagine, the King coming here."

Will nodded and grinned again. It was unusual for the King to leave the capital these days and, in the normal humdrum of castle life, this was a huge event. Rumour had it that the King wanted to see the lands he had won in the war one more time and had decided to take a tour of his kingdom, like he used to do when he was a younger man.

"I'm really glad the King's coming here," said Will. "It would be a shame to miss out on the Royal procession. They say his bodyguard will be a thousand knights strong!"

"The guards will be more for show than anything," said Simon wisely, who prided himself on knowing more about what was going on. "There hasn't been any trouble around here for years. Prince John is too powerful to let anything bad happen."

One of the older men chipped in.

"He may be powerful, but he's none too clever. I heard he got on his horse the wrong way around the other day!"

The men burst out laughing at the mental image.

"You can't talk about Prince John like that. He's a great man," said Simon, as he felt himself blushing. Prince John had kept the peace ever since he had inherited the surrounding lands and had helped the land to prosper.

“Prince?” laughed the older man. “I’m afraid that your ‘Prince’ is nothing special. If only he was more like his father, the Earl. Now he was a great man.”

“That’s right,” said one of the other men. “Earl Robert cared about how the ordinary people lived. John's just a spoilt child. He’s too busy spending our taxes on making himself look great rather than on things that matter.”

“Well, I don’t think he's as bad as you make out,” said Will, siding with his friend out of loyalty as he often did. “He's declared a holiday on the day of the King’s arrival!”

“You've never known any other ruler than John,” said the older man. “You are sure to think he is alright. Life was better here before Earl Robert died, believe me.”

After a while, the bell rang, signifying the end of archery practice. Soon it would be time for the boys to go around the castle checking that there was enough firewood in the baskets beside the fireplaces in all the rooms. The men on the village green dispersed and the boys walked back to the castle.

“Do you think that what the older men said was true?” said Simon, breaking the silence. He had been taken aback by the strength of the reaction from the older men and it had troubled him.

“No, I reckon they are just complaining about things, like they always do,” said Will with a grin on his face. “Things were always better in the olden days if you believe anyone older than us. I just reckon Prince John is too young for the older folk. And one day we’ll be old and will talk about the olden days too.”

“I suppose so,” said Simon, thoughtfully. “Anyway, we had better hurry or we will be late, I don’t fancy another beating from Cook.”

The two boys ran towards the kitchens and, dodging the horse dung as they crossed the courtyard, disappeared into the kitchens.

Chapter 3.

The sun shone through the stained glass windows set high in the wall. Dust drifted gently through the shafts of light that lanced across the great hall. The hall was full of people, but they did not move or talk. Most were dressed in rich flowing robes, but here and there the odd person stood out in simpler, more fashionable clothes. All the courtiers stood facing towards the eastern wall where a pair of double doors were guarded by two ceremonial guards, standing proud in their red and blue uniforms.

The two guards each wore a peacock feather, tucked into in their velvet caps; a proud emblem hearkening back to the Battle of Fiveways where two hundred men held out against a much greater force for two days until relieved. Those who were entitled to wear the peacock emblem were becoming fewer and fewer as the years went by, but those who remained were still proud of their deeds.

In the arches above the main hall, trumpets burst into a fanfare, heralding the arrival of the King. The guards leaned forward and pulled the doors open, revealing the King and his entourage. King Harald entered the room and walked to his throne, which was positioned to the right of the doors. As the King and his group of advisers and bodyguards passed, the ceremonial guards bent to one knee whilst grasping the hilt of their swords. Some of the younger courtiers smiled quietly to themselves; popular rumour had it that the swords were firmly rusted into their hilts after such a long time without use. The King stood before his throne and, as the assembled throng bowed, sat down and was served a glass of wine.

King Harald was fifty four years old and had ruled the people of the Eastern kingdom for twenty seven years. After the death of his father, the much-loved King Stephen, Harald had become king, taking precedence over his elder brother who had been born a cripple, unable to walk or speak. Harald had shown himself quick to learn and, as a result, there was very little disagreement over the disruption to the normal laws of succession. Harald, it seemed, had been aware from an early age that it was only an accident of fate that had brought him to power and that it would only take another accident to remove him from the throne. As a result, he had been

careful over the decisions he took, anxious not to err from the path his father would have taken in similar situations.

As the King sat upon the throne, he waved his right arm towards the assembled throng of courtiers, signalling that they might relax. Immediately, the hall was full of the hubbub of voices. King Harald leant to one side and talked to one of his many advisers.

“What judgements have you for our attention today?” asked King Harald.

“Only two today, Your Majesty,” said the King’s adviser as he leant forward in a conspiratorial manner. “The most important case is the dispute between the Duke of South Almby and the Abbot of the Monastery of Stoke-Norbury. It appears that they both lay claim to a hill near to the Monastery on which an excellent vineyard grows. The land is traditionally tilled by the Duke’s estate, but no formal deeds exist and the church has laid claim, having discovered some correspondence between the first bishop and the heathen warlord whose castle topped the hill. It seems the Bishop offered him immortal life in exchange for the land.”

“I see. I suppose it will be difficult to prove if the Bishop kept his word as he no doubt meant life in heaven. Which of them has the lawful claim?” asked the King. He loathed these cases and the way in which their pettiness cheapened the law.

“It seems as if the Duke has the stronger claim, his forefathers having tilled the land since records began,” replied the adviser. “However, according to the statute agreed by your grandfather with the Duke’s ancestors, we currently gain no revenue from his estate. However, if the church took control of the vineyard it would fall out of the statute. We could raise the normal levy on the sale of all liqueurs and wines and bring some other activities into the reckoning.”

The adviser’s sentence trailed off as he calculated the revenue on the wine that could be produced by the disputed land.

“So, you think the rightful stake could give way to the fruitful grape in this matter,” smiled the King from behind his beard. “I trust you have the evidence supporting the claim of the Church.”

“Of course, Your Majesty. I have it here,” said the adviser holding up a scroll.

King Harald lifted his arm and the noise in the great hall subsided. The two complainants in the case were ushered forward and the respective claims were read. King Harald listened intently to the respective claims and then gave his judgement;

“The Holy Order of St Stephen shall have use of the land in perpetuity for whatever purposes they see fit.”

At this pronouncement, the Abbot smiled and bowed deeply before the throne.

“However,” continued the King, “I proclaim the Duke of Almby as guardian of the land. He will provide protection to the Holy Order’s claim, will maintain the boundaries of the land and, in exchange for his efforts, will receive a yearly tithe of one third of the revenue forthcoming from the land and all endeavours based upon it.”

The Duke and the Abbott bowed before the throne, both wearing a fixed expression of approval for the King’s judgement; proof that a good compromise pleases no one. They backed away from the throne while the next case, a criminal matter, was explained. King Harald quickly made his judgement and signalled the end of the hearings. Harald rose and left the room, his advisers trailing behind him as they picked up their papers, cloaks and hats.

Once outside the great hall, Harald waved the majority of his retinue away and went into a smaller adjoining room. There was a log fire roaring in the hearth and a large oak table set in the centre of the room. King Harald sat at the head of the table and invited his advisers to sit.

“A plague on these petty cases that I must dispense judgement upon,” sighed the King. “Why are my courts unable to take even the simplest of decisions without referring the case for my approval? I am supposed to be the guardian of my people not their nurse! I must prepare for misfortune and guide my subjects, not decide the outcome of their petty squabbles.”

“Your Majesty, The Lord Almighty has blessed us with such an enduring peace that your people have no thought of misfortune,” said the pious Bishop Westland. “It is the nature of the Evil One, when he has no greater disaster to foment, to promote such festering quarrels amongst the people of your realm. You can only call upon the Lord to show your subjects the true path of harmony.”

The other advisers nodded at the words of the Bishop. They could always rely on the representative of the Holy Church to see the works of the Evil One in the events of the day. While not everyone agreed with the Bishop on all subjects, it was always easier to acknowledge his wisdom than to call the teachings of the Church into question.

“Undoubtedly, we have been blessed,” agreed Earl Edmund. “Our vigilance must not fail us, lest we lose all that we have prayed and fought for.”

King Harald waved his arm and a servant leant over the table and unrolled a large map of the Eastern Kingdom. A small bronze paperweight was placed on each corner of the map to prevent the map rolling itself up again. King Harald stood and cast his hand over the map of his realm.

“What are the threats to the peace that my subjects enjoy?” asked the King. “What enemies threaten us? What disasters may befall us?”

The advisers were used to these questions. Every month, throughout the entire length of his reign, the King held an audience of his closest advisers, to predict and plan for possible events and their effect on his Kingdom. Each of the six advisers present had responsibility for determining the possible course of events in the near future and if necessary how to influence them to the advantage of the Eastern Kingdom. Each adviser specialised in a particular element of the Kingdom’s business. The Bishop spoke first, as he tended to. The other advisers leant forward expectantly; Bishop Westland always put on a good show, as his religious zeal tended to overrule his sense of occasion.

“The spiritual well being of the Kingdom is in grave danger as the Evil One redoubles his efforts to divert Your Majesty’s subjects from the true path! The Church fights valiantly to reverse the schemes of the Dark One but, as the prophets predicted, the people are distracted and liable towards heresy. Already, the heresy of the Talliettes has entrapped many of Your Majesty’s subjects, as the filth of their teachings issues forth from the Southern Islands. The Lord Almighty calls forth the armies of Your Majesty...”

“Quite,” interrupted the King, halting the Bishop in full flow. Sometimes he would indulge the Bishop but today he was feeling impatient. He always felt impatient when he ruled on

civil matters. “We appreciate the threat from the heretics and resolve to investigate more fully the power they exert over our subjects. Earl Edmund what is your view of the situation facing us?”

The Bishop looked temporarily crestfallen as Earl Edmund leant forward.

Earl Edmund was an elderly man who had stood alongside King Harald throughout his reign. As one of King Harald's most trusted friends, Edmund could be relied on to give a clearer analysis than the excitable Bishop Westland, who was sulking over his dismissal by the King and was glaring venomously at a small heretic-infested island on his side of the map.

“Your Majesty, since our last discussion of these matters very little has changed,” announced Edmund. “There has been a slight increase in crimes of piracy in the Northern Sea but not enough to affect the passage of trade or Your Majesty’s authority. We do not know who is perpetrating these attacks at present.

I have also been informed of a single case of wrecking. The wreckers were caught and hung three days ago in Westport. There are no other significant threats to the sea lanes and coastal routes within Your Majesty’s dominion. Perhaps Conway could give his assessment of the internal situation.”

The Duke of Conway was well known within court circles as King Harald’s eyes and ears in the land beyond the capital. He was rumoured to maintain a network of spies and informants and dealt with any distasteful tasks that it would not be seemly for the King to be involved with. What as more certain was that the Duke was a widower of many years, his wife having died giving birth to his son, Robert. His unmarried status was a source of considerable interest and continuing disappointment to the unmarried women about court and a few of the married ladies as well.

“Your Majesty will be unsurprised to learn that the usual rituals, calling for revenge upon your majesty, were performed by the elders of the mountain clans,” said the Duke. “As usual, they denounced Your Majesty’s rule in the presence of their clansmen whilst ensuring that their tributes to the Treasury were paid in full. I feel that there is little chance of any uprising from that bunch of old mountain goats. Only the direst of circumstances affecting Your Majesty’s reign would entice them to attempt the uprising they dream about. I have no indications of any other

major discontent within the realm. The only matter that concerns me is Your Majesty's travel arrangements. I exhort Your Majesty to remain in the capital for safety."

The assembled advisers nodded in agreement. A long journey could be dangerous and also meant leaving the comfort of the city for the cultural backwaters of the land for several weeks.

"Nonsense," said the King. He had expected this and had decided not to waver. "You have just reassured me that there is little threat to my Kingdom but now you advise me not to travel through it for safety's sake. Have you told me the truth? Is law and order crumbling beyond the city gates? Would I really be in danger? I think not. Besides, I'm looking forward to seeing my Kingdom again. I've been cooped up in this castle for too long and am determined to go. As for the Borderlands, they are as safe as anywhere, John will make a good King when I am gone, he shows he is comfortable with power and, when constrained by my reforms and plans for a parliament, the Kingdom will be safe from tyranny in the future. The constraint of individual power is my last great gift to the Kingdom."

"Prince John certainly shows the instincts necessary to rule," agreed the Duke cautiously. "But I am not sure he is ready for the responsibility at this stage, he is too impetuous."

Prince John's claim to the throne was through his wife's connections to the throne, a loose link that interwove with Harald's blood line and had been tested in the law. A number of the noblemen were sceptical about Prince John's abilities, considering him too young and lacking in experience. It was a rare day that went by without Harald's senior advisors wishing that Harald's only son had survived into manhood.

"He should visit the capital more often to learn from Your Majesty and benefit from the experience of your advisers," stated the Lord Chancellor.

King Harald looked at the Chancellor and burst out laughing.

"You pompous bunch of old fools! Do you think you have the monopoly on wisdom and experience? My mind is made up. And the trip to the Borderlands will do you good!"

Saying this, King Harald rose to his feet and walked from the room, chuckling under his breath at the caution prescribed by his trusted friends.

As he walked, he considered his plans for the constitution of the Kingdom. No longer would all power rest in the hands of a single man; he planned to institute a regular parliament, decreed by law to represent the noblemen and church. The parliament would have tax raising powers that would constrain the King's ability to raise money without the consent of the representatives in the parliament. At the same time as changing the source of revenue, he intended to reduce the royal estates so that subsequent rulers would have to approach the parliament for major sources of income.

The lesson that Harald felt he had learned from his years on the throne was that the problem with rulers with unfettered powers was that you never knew if you were going to get a good one. He felt the familiar bitter-sweet feeling of loss for his son, whom he had expected to take his place and paused, grateful that it still hurt. It was for him that he would make these changes. If his son couldn't take over the throne, the least he could do was ensure that his successor would be bound to continue his style. Harald was proud of the years of peace that he had given his people and knew that his plans would help to preserve the peace from the grave.

This would be his legacy.

This was, he thought to himself, worth living for.

Chapter 4.

Raucous laughter filled the hall. The banquet had been underway for most the evening and showed no signs of dying down. King Wulf sat back in his throne and surveyed the scene with grin on his face; his men deserved a good drink after spending the last couple of weeks shivering in the swamps.

The people of the wetlands had destroyed a number of grain stores and dykes as a protest against plans to drain some of the swamps, creating valuable and much-needed farms. A punitive expedition into the swamps had soon brought them into line. It was surprising how fast the villages on stilts would burn if one put one's mind to the task, mused Wulf. How those wretched people could live in the swamps was beyond him; they had been eaten alive by the mosquitoes that swarmed over them the moment they stood still. How good it felt to be dry and warm again.

All around the hall the noblemen of the Western Kingdom were enjoying themselves in time-honoured tradition. Around the tables that flanked the High Table, groups of noblemen were gathered in groups and were eating and drinking as if tomorrow was their last day alive. A juggler pranced about in front of the High Table, keeping four burning brands aloft at once, whilst at the back of the hall a bear and a number of wild looking hounds were being prepared for a baiting session.

There was a crash as a table was overturned, smashing earthenware jugs into smithereens, beer and wine spilling onto the sawdust-covered wooden floor. Two younger men were wrestling with more enthusiasm than skill, demolishing furniture wherever they fell. One of the men sitting on the high table leant over and spoke to King Wulf.

"Everybody seems to be enjoying themselves, Your Majesty," he said. "I think we deserved a bit of a rest after hanging around in those bloody swamps crushing their pathetic rebellion."

"True, but it took too long to put down. What if it had been a hostile castle out there rather than wooden villages? We would still be out there now," mused the King, swilling his wine thoughtfully. As always, he was painfully aware of the limitations of his reign; the constraints that lurked just out of reach always threatening his ability to act.

“But your noblemen are loyal, Your Majesty,” blustered the King’s friend.

“Just like Robert of Borsham? I didn’t notice his loyalty when he was insulting me from within his keep,” retorted Wulf. He twisted his ring around nervously as he recalled Borsham’s defiance. “The only thing he was loyal to was gold. My kingdom is held together only because I force it together. If I relaxed my grip, the kingdom would disintegrate in a matter of months. My father knew this before me and now I must continue his work. I must impose my will on both the loyal and the treacherous.”

King Wulf gestured vaguely at his noblemen, his eyes flitting from face to face. Then he appeared to make a decision.

“I’m leaving now, tell my good-for-nothing advisers not to drink any more, I will see them in my chambers in the morning.”

Wulf stood up and walked unsteadily through a door behind the throne. As he walked to his bed chambers the sound from the hall subsided. He opened the curtains to his bed and admired the girl’s sleeping form. He considered waking her. Then he fell onto the bed, fully clothed, and slept.

The next morning King Wulf and his closest advisers gathered in the royal bed-chamber. It was apparent that some of those present had not heeded the King’s order to stop drinking. Everyone present looked tired and pale and the pitchers of water on the table were repeatedly passed around and then refilled by a servant. All agreed that last night had been a great feast. King Wulf rose from his seat at the head of the table and spoke.

“We all deserved a celebration after dealing with the swamp rebellion, but the fact is that we are spending too much revenue on putting down rebellions. If my bloody father hadn’t gone and got himself ransomed by the accursed East we wouldn’t have these troubles now. That ransom was my birthright and the borderlands were our prosperity. And now my people are poor and resent my taxes; the very taxes I need to prevent rebellion. Rebellions that happen because my people are poor and resent my taxes! I cannot ease the burden and risk the destruction of my father’s kingdom and yet I risk the kingdom by maintaining taxes. One more uprising this winter and there won’t be enough revenue to put it down. Then it will be obvious that we are powerless

and there will be a danger that the kingdom will fragment. I want Robert of Borsham publicly disembowelled and his body paraded around the land as a warning to others. Everything he and his family own is forfeited to the treasury.”

The Noblemen present nodded their heads wisely, apart from those with very bad headaches who just concentrated on looking wise. They knew where this was leading, every year King Harald got a bit older, and with him went Wulf’s chances of being proclaimed the great King who avenged the defeat of his father. The war had deprived the West of the fertile borderlands and the contents of much of her treasury. King Wulf’s rule had been hamstrung by his father’s defeat and, try as he might, he had yet to find a way to reverse the decline.

King Wulf’s attempts to rebuild the Kingdom in the wake of the defeat had become trapped in a vicious circle where it was impossible to increase revenue and where each year his power waned. Periodically, Wulf railed against the circumstances that castrated his rule. Every few months he would enthuse over a plan that would solve his problems and then lose interest when it failed to produce the miracle he so desired. The noblemen knew that given time these ideas would fade and life would continue as usual. The important thing was not to cross King Wulf when he was in one of his moods.

“This season we must solve the problems of the last years,” continued Wulf, his voice growing louder as he warmed to his theme. “This year we will invade the Borderlands and recapture that which is rightfully ours. The omens of Mountain Seer speak favourably of such a venture and King Harald is growing old and complacent. We must fight this year, or we will fade away like a sick donkey. We will avenge the honour of the West and the memory of my father. We must recapture the Borders and their revenue or we will face the slow insidious death of internal uprising and the cancer of civil war. We will succeed this season and will rebuild our Kingdom until it is greater than in my father’s day and woe betide any man who stands in my way!”

The Kings advisors looked up. This sounded serious.

Chapter 5.

The children gazed up at the storyteller, as he sat on a rough-hewn tree trunk. He was an old man with a large smile, a thick beard and rough brown clothing. He travelled from village to village arriving once a week on their market days. As well as an economic necessity, the market was a great social event and all the farm workers gathered to trade gossip and as well as any surplus produce.

In exchange for entertaining the children, the storyteller would receive food, a roof over his head and as much gossip as he desired. In the evening he would be expected to tell the gossip that he had learnt in other villages during the last week. Then, next morning he would set off for the next town. In this way he became a messenger for the commoners and a valued source of information. The old man enjoyed being at the centre of attention but grew tired of being pumped for information by the merchants about the intrigues of their competitors in the next village. He loved storytelling for the village children because he knew they liked him simply because he was the storyteller.

“Today, I think we will have a story of things your father’s will remember,” said the storyteller, with a smile. “I have told you too many stories about the dragons and heroes that used to roam this land. Today I will tell you about the things that happened when your parents were younger.”

He paused and waited until the children were all looking at him and then begun.

“The lands where we live have not always been ruled by King Harald. Twenty-two years ago a warlike King called Raynor the Proud ruled the Western Kingdom. He was a great warrior who had fought all the tribes of the Western lands and forced them to call him king. The last great tribe that he fought lived in these lands in which you now live. They had grown rich by producing food on the good farmland here and trading with both the east and the west, but Raynor the Proud found a way to beat them. When King Raynor finally defeated them, the new border of the Western Kingdom touched the edge of King Harald’s Kingdom.

The Eastern Kingdom was ruled over by King Harald, who is still our King to this day. He saw that King Raynor was a great warrior with a thirst for power and knew that the Western and

Eastern Kingdoms could not be friends. He saw that King Raynor would not be satisfied until he had defeated the East, and he had become the most powerful King. When he realised this, King Harald sent spies against King Raynor to warn him if an invasion was planned. One day, that warning came and King Raynor's army swept into the Eastern Kingdom but, forewarned, King Harald was ready and had his own army ready. King Harald's army was smaller than King Raynor's but was reinforced by many mercenaries that King Harald hired."

The storyteller paused and explained what a mercenary was to the puzzled children.

"The two armies met in a mighty battle and fought bitterly for three days. Many men were killed and many wounded but, in the end, King Harald's army prevailed. At the end of the third day, King Raynor saw that King Harald's mercenaries had tipped the balance and knew that he had been defeated. Raynor ordered the retreat but had found his escape route blocked by King Harald's men, who, guessing that Raynor would retreat, had circled around them during the night. Desperately, the Western army tried to escape and many managed to fight their way free. But King Raynor and many of the Western noblemen were captured as they tried to find a route home through the great forest."

The storyteller looked around at the children. He smiled at their excited faces. Remembering the day of the battle, he continued.

"That day I was lucky to take a Western nobleman hostage. They wore so much armour that all you had to do was knock them over and sit on them so they couldn't move! The King gave us a bounty of five gold crowns for the captured nobles. That was a good day for many of the poor farmers who had been made to join the army. Of course, the King got his money back and some more besides I don't doubt, when he ransomed the noblemen back to their families in the West. King Harald made sure that the West paid so much in ransom money that they wouldn't be able to raise another big army even if they wanted to. King Harald demanded fifty thousand gold crowns for the safe return of King Raynor, but the West weren't able to raise enough money. Instead, all the lands around here were handed over to King Harald to pay the ransom. All people loyal to King Raynor were moved and those eastern farmers and soldiers who had fought in the great battle were given the fertile lands as a reward for their great victory."

“Was my Daddy one of those farmers?” asked a small girl who sat near the storyteller.

“I would say that nearly all your fathers fought on that great day and moved into these lands soon after the treaty was signed,” explained the Storyteller. “Earl Robert, the father of our Prince John, was entrusted with these lands and the construction of the castle that surveys the border. He was to guard against the West ever invading again and it was because he was a kindly man and trusted by the people that so many farmers built their farms on the newly won land.”

“What happened to the farmers who lived here before we did?” asked one of the older boys.

“Well, they all fled the land when King Raynor was forced to give it to King Harald. Nobody really knows where they went to, except to say that they lost one of the best places for farming in the whole of the West. Now the Western Kingdom is smaller and poorer than it was, and is ruled by King Wulf, King Raynor’s son. We are told that King Wulf is a cruel man and rules his land through fear, a far cry from the love we show to our King Harald.”

The storyteller looked at the sky and then turned back to the children.

“Now, the sun is beginning to sink in the sky and your fathers will soon return from the market place, you must run along home now as there will be work to be done. That is the end of my story. Next market day I shall tell you about Grimbald the Troll and how he fought the Lord of the Isles, to see who would marry the most beautiful woman in the world.”

The storyteller rose awkwardly to his feet and told the children to go home and walked off into the village to collect his reward.

Chapter 6.

Brendan looked up from the digging. He looked across the horizon, his eyes taking in the scenery and stretched his aching back. Springtime was always a busy time for the farmers. The time to plant seeds after the hard frosts of the winter. Time to repair fences and move flocks of sheep from their winter homes, out of the sheds and barns and into the meadows. Brendan wiped his brow, dampening his sleeve where his sweat soaked in. Driving his shovel into the earth he stood back and surveyed the ditch he had been digging for the best part of the day.

The ditch was a part of a much larger irrigation system that was maintained by all the local farmers. Soon the weather would be warming up and then the waters of the local rivers would be siphoned off to provide moisture for the thirsty crops. The other farmers were at the market for the day, leaving Brendan alone in the fields. Brendan had little use for a day at the market having sent a friend on his behalf to trade some pelts and bring back some grain. Besides, he liked simple work, preferring it to the ordeal of haggling in the market. This was honest work and he knew when he'd done it well; whenever he went to market, he came home uncertain if he'd negotiated well or if he'd been cheated. Better to trust a friend to deal for him than go through that himself.

He enjoyed the feeling of cutting the ditch through the weather toughened crust of earth, into the softer soil below. He enjoyed his ability to mould nature in order to feed him and his family and felt satisfied at the progress he'd made. Seeing that the sun was beginning to set, Brendan gathered up his tools and bag and headed towards home, his tall frame casting a long shadow over the path that lead to his cottage. As he walked he could feel the sun's scant warmth trying to warm the back of his head through his tousled, straw coloured hair.

As Brendan approached his cottage he looked forward to settling down by the fire and eating some of the broth that his wife, Sarah, was bound to have ready, piping hot from the charcoal-blackened pot that hung from the hearth. Throughout the winter months they mostly lived on dried meat and vegetables left over from that autumn's harvest, supplementing their diet with rabbits that they snared in the woodlands. He looked at the cottage and was reminded of the little repairs that he never seemed to get around to doing; the bit of thatch that had been pulled up

by crows, the stone that had fallen from the wall and the host of other minor jobs that were always put aside for more pressing work. As he neared his home he looked ahead, hoping to see the kids. Then, suddenly, two children ran out to greet him.

“Sam! Rebecca!” called Brendan, as he crouched down to embrace them, hugging them tight.

“Daddy, Daddy,” they cried in unison. “Come and play with us.”

Brendan picked up the girl and, holding her legs, slung her over his shoulder, making her squeal with delight. He tousled the boy's hair and raced him back to the doorway of the cottage, letting him win as they squealed all the way. Stooping, Brendan entered the doorway of his home and greeted his wife, who was standing near the hearth. Pecking her on the cheek he sat down in the large wooden chair set to the side of the hearth and stretched his feet out towards the warmth of the fire. A feeling of peace swept over him and he yawned contentedly.

“Daddy, what did you do in the war against King Raynor?” asked Sam, hopping from one leg to the other in excitement. “The Storyteller has been telling us about the great battles and how King Harald beat the enemies and held them all for ransom.”

“What did you do, Daddy?” chimed in Rebecca. “Were you in the big battles?”

“Don't pester you father,” scolded Sarah, “a hard day in the field and then home to you two bleating like sheep, you'll drive him mad.”

Brendan stretched luxuriously in his chair and yawned again.

“You two run along and get me a bottle of beer from the shelf,” he said. “I'll have some of the broth that your mother has made and then I will tell you about what happened.”

The two children raced over to the shelf, stood on a log destined for the fire and pulled down an earthenware bottle of beer. They brought the bottle back and poured a generous measure into a wooden cup and sat expectantly at Brendan's feet. Brendan fished about in his broth with his spoon and munched on a vegetable. When he had eaten and washed the grime of the day off of his face and arms, he sat down and, looking at the firelight reflected in his children's faces, began to speak.

“I was fourteen when King Harald called up the great army to destroy the invasion. I left the farm where I worked and joined my local militia, but they said I looked too young to fight so they let me be a part of the baggage train; your grandfather also joined the army. It was great fun! We were looking after the horses and distributing food to the soldiers. On the day of the big battle I came back to the camp after a foraging trip and could hear the noise of the fighting. Me and my friend climbed a nearby mound and could see most of the battle from there. It was an amazing sight! We could see the flash of the sun on the swords and the cavalry charging about and, from the hill, we could hear the battle cries as King Harald fought the enemy. It was very exiting! When the battle was over we went home. King Harald decided to take the borderlands and my dad, your Granddaddy, travelled here because he had never had land before. The best bit was that your mother also came here with her parents! Without the war I would never have met her and she never would have married me.”

“Now stop that,” said Sarah, “You make it sound like I married you for your Granddaddy's land! Now, Sam, Rebecca, it is time for you to go to bed. Remember, it is dairy day tomorrow.”

The two children complained but nonetheless went off to bed. As they left, Sarah slipped over to Brendan's chair and, sitting on his lap, planted a kiss on his lips.