

SURVIVAL

Or,

**Tales Of Hope And Villainy
From A Time Of Plague**

A Mercia Blakewood Special

DAVID HINGLEY

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INSTALMENT TWO

III

With Nicholas and Kwadwo in London, Mercia continued her recovery at home. But she was a bad patient, defying Bethany's protective wrath by walking ever longer routes through the Halescott grounds. The faithful maid's worries were allayed somewhat by Mercia's promise not to take her daily exercise alone, but the companion she chose, her new maid from her time at Whitehall, was beset by her own worries.

'I keep asking myself if I've done the right thing,' the young woman said, as they walked through the more formal part of the garden, past a succession of cherry trees fanned out on a sturdy stone wall. 'Poor Ayo! Every night I lie awake, thinking I should have gone with Kwadwo and Nicholas.'

'I know it is hard for you,' said Mercia. 'But Ayo will want you to be here, Phibae, and not to return to London until the plague is over. He could have come here too, gladly, with Nicholas when he returns with Eliza.'

'He will not leave London,' said Phibae. 'He will want to keep those in his care safe.' She smiled. 'Imagine the look on his face if I arrived home now. He would be furious, send me back here without a thought, never mind I am his wife. As it is, Kwadwo will receive a stern rebuke.' The smile faded, her lips setting in a grim line. 'And yet I do not know if I should have returned.'

'Tis strange, but I find myself worrying for my uncle just the same, even though I should be forgiven for leaving him to rot, may the Lord forgive me for saying so.' As she spoke, Mercia unconsciously tugged a loose leaf from a mulberry bush and crushed it in her palm. 'But perhaps he is safest in the Tower. Perhaps those thick walls will keep the plague at bay as much as they do any human enemy.'

‘You are a kind woman, mistress. Most folk would expect you to wish him dead after what he did to you.’

Mercia took a calming breath, inhaling the welcome scent of lavender as bees buzzed around their legs. ‘Then that is one good thing to come out of times like these. Despite their differences, people set rancour aside in the effort to comfort and help. Well, most people. And those that do not, perchance they cannot, or perchance they are simply afeared.’

‘Still, when you hear of the rich fleeing while the poor suffer, ‘tis hard not to feel aggrieved.’

‘Do not worry, Phibae.’ Mercia paused beneath an archway that led out to a wilder part of the garden; the stonework was covered in winding ivy, framing her entirely. ‘Ayo will get the letter you asked me to write, and he will know you are well. Should he wish to return with Nicholas after all, he will be most welcome.’

‘Thank you, mistress.’ For a moment Phibae’s eyes shone with the hint of moisture, but she quickly blinked it away. ‘That would make a nice portrait,’ she said. ‘You, in that arch.’

‘Looking like this?’ Mercia pulled a face. ‘I am hardly at my best, but thank you. Let us call the artist now.’

The joke succeeded, making Phibae laugh. ‘I think you must be better, mistress. You’ve walked further today than in the past week, and without pressing onto your wound.’

‘Tis good to hear you laugh, Phibae. And you are right. Come, then. Let us take a turn through the wood. The sun is so bright today.’

Phibae frowned. ‘Are you sure? When I said you were better, I didn’t mean – ‘

‘Trust me, this is the best tonic I could have. I have lain bored looking at the trees and hoping soon to walk among them.’ She winked. ‘Just do not tell Bethany.’

Passing round the house towards the gravelled drive at the front, Mercia approached a rusting side gate and squeaked it open. In the near distance, an uncleared wood provided a boundary between the manor house grounds and the wider estate beyond, and she led Phibae into its shadowed eaves, taking in the scent of a fresh, soily arena where rays of sunlight competed with indifferent trees for dominance of the airy space. Following a faint path traced out by years of regular use, Mercia felt less like an

adversary among them than a friend being welcomed back to a beloved childhood playground.

‘Look at that,’ she exclaimed, extending her fingers towards a broad chestnut tree that spread both sky- and sideward, its ancient base split hydra-like into three separate trunks. ‘That enormous branch there, about eight feet up – I used to sit on that all the time. I played at waiting in the wood to waylay an evil sheriff’s convoy, like a knight from my father’s books. Malory and Spenser, those were the tales I loved most, the stories about Guinevere and Britomart.’

Phibae gave her an indulgent smile. ‘Books seem a wondrous thing.’

‘Your reading is improving each week, Phibae. Soon you will be reading whole volumes.’

A wind picked up, rustling the thick leaves of the leviathan chestnut and its less extensive fellows, while the more delicate leaves of the beeches behind seemed to shake in the dappled light. A small bird, a robin perhaps, settled near Mercia’s feet, its small head tilted as if determining her intent, before flitting upwards and out of sight.

Mercia paused, enjoying the coolness of the shade and the breeze on her face, stopping simply to *feel*, in that way that seems all time has stopped, holding onto the infinite moment as though never wanting it to end. But the dart of time resumed its inevitable flight, and she reopened her eyes, took a sweet breath of warm air and continued with Phibae through the narrow wood, soon emerging on the other side where a glorious view opened up atop a gentle slope, across the shires of Oxford and Warwick and Gloucester beyond, the faint trace of far-off hills rising in the distance. For miles upon miles, forests and cleared land alike basked in the warmth of the sun, with scarcely a wisp of dishevelled cloud to cast its meagre shadow.

In the dip at the bottom of the slope, the carpet of yellow-green was interrupted by a stone barn, near which some of the men who worked Mercia’s land were congregating for a midday break. She had barely looked away when a blurred rush of movement drew back her attention and a discordance of gruff shouts resounded up the slope.

‘What is happening down there?’ she said, as much to herself as to Phibae. She squinted, screwing up her eyes so as better to see, and saw the group of men concentrated on one spot, brandishing tools or simply their fists. To their right, a lone

pair of figures stood defiant, although a third figure behind them was slowly backing away.

‘They cannot be fighting?’ said Mercia. ‘Well, Phibae. Here is a chance to show the mistress is back.’

She set off down the slope against the protestations of her maid. The sun was hot on her face, hotter beneath her cumbersome dress, but neither the heat nor her wound slowed her as she descended towards the barn. As the gentle green grass gave way to worn-away scuffs of earth, the shouts grew louder, and the diorama came into full focus.

‘Just go,’ one of the farmworkers was saying. ‘We keep asking. We won’t again.’

One of the pair of strangers Mercia had seen from a distance was standing with hands outstretched, scant defence against the vicious rake the farmhand was wielding.

‘And I keep explaining. All we wanted was somewhere to sleep. We weren’t intending to stay forever.’ He narrowed his eyes. ‘But take that back what you said.’

‘Why? You are diseased, must be!’

The stranger churned spittle inside his mouth. ‘You want me to spit on you so you can find out?’

The infantile threat forced all six labourers back. ‘You think we’re afraid,’ said their spokesman. ‘But you’ll be sorry you came here when I break your precious lute. See, I wager that’s worth something to you.’

The stranger swallowed. ‘It’s just a barn. ‘Tis not like anyone lives here.’

‘But it don’t belong to you, does it? Now fuck off.’

‘Aye, but I doubt it belongs to you either.’

‘No,’ said Mercia, ‘it belongs to me.’

As one, the labourers and strangers turned to face her. ‘Explain,’ she said, addressing herself to the farmhand with the rake.

‘Stand away, Mrs Blakewood,’ he said, not lowering his tool.

‘I beg your – ‘

‘For your own good, mistress. These lot have got plague!’

‘What?’ she said, taking an involuntary step back just as Phibae did the same behind. ‘You are sure of this?’

‘We do not have plague,’ said the stranger. ‘I keep telling them, look at my face.’ He jiggled his head, turning first his left cheek then his right towards her. His blue-green eyes stared out defiant, his jaw taut as he looked over a long nose that had clearly once been broken, but the effect seemed rather to enhance his sharp features. Then he pulled back his sleeve, already loose at the cuff. ‘And my arm.’ He looked Mercia up and down as he held out his bare forearm, strong and devoid of blemishes, although like his face, it was streaked with dust just as his thick brown hair was ruffled with strands of hay. ‘Are you the mistress of these lands?’ he asked.

‘I am,’ she said in an equally challenging tone. ‘Who are you?’

‘Mrs Blakewood,’ urged the labourer, ‘tis not safe, get back.’ Around him, his fellow workers murmured their agreement.

‘Tom, is it?’ she said, casting him a glance. The man nodded, eyes widening as though surprised to be remembered, but amongst his tanned creases were the same attractive features Mercia recalled from her teenage years, when this same man had worked the land in his youth. ‘See, I shall keep a few feet’s distance,’ she continued. ‘Now, stranger, I ask again. Who are you?’

‘My name is Joshua,’ he said. ‘Joshua Tanner. And these with me are my companions, Alena and Luis.’

She glanced at the woman beside him, and the man a short distance behind. The former was of an age with the speaker, early thirties she guessed like herself, pale-skinned, red-headed, aloof. The man Tanner had called Luis had raven black hair, a dark, tanned face, and was dressed in what would have been fine clothes were they not torn in places, the large rip in his tailored breeches exposing a patch of equally dark skin.

‘I am Mercia Blakewood,’ she said. ‘I own Halescott Manor. What brings you onto my lands?’

‘We are musicians,’ said Tanner. ‘From London. We ran from the plague but we do not have it ourselves. We have been on the road a full week so we would know.’

‘They cannot know,’ said Tom. ‘They smell like sh. . . I mean, they smell terrible.’ He looked at Mercia. ‘That’s how it spreads, isn’t it? Through bad smells?’

‘Miasma?’ she said, nodding. ‘Some think that is how it spreads, yes.’

Tanner gritted his teeth. ‘We smell like shit because we have spent a week being chased from place to place. We have scarce been able to stop to wash in a stream before some ignorant churl forced us on. We are tired, and hungry, and grieving for the loss of a friend. We just want to rest.’

‘Then what happened to that friend?’ shouted one of the other labourers. ‘He died of plague, must have. You’ve all got it, damned Londoners! Don’t bring it here!’

‘If you call off your dogs, Mrs Blakewood, I can tell you the truth of it.’ The men growled as if in answer to Tanner’s insult, but he ignored them. ‘Then harry us out of here, as you doubtless wish, but at least give me chance to speak plain.’

Mercia glanced between the musician and her men. The threat of violence seemed to have passed since her arrival, but she could tell the labourers had only held off before through fear he was carrying the disease.

‘Very well, Mr Tanner,’ she said. ‘But I suggest you stay back from my men.’

THE MUSICIAN’S TALE

‘We were five, in London. We spent our days together, evenings together, we drank together, entertained together. Now we are three. One died. One we have lost. We do not know where he is.

Back at home, we were a company of musicians, playing in parlours for gentlemen and their guests as often as at a jig in the tavern – the best taverns, mind. Alena sang, Luis played the violin, I sat at the keys of the harpsichord, Simon strummed the lute, and Mark. . . Mark made the angels sing on his flute the same as he’s doing now. It was an uncertain living, wandering from tavern to tavern, at summer from fair to fair, but we loved our music, and we made folk happy, for the most part, so it was good enough.

We lived in St Giles, most of us, although I was born in Kent, and Luis in Spain – did you guess? – while the others are from London proper. Do you know London?

Oh! At Whitehall Palace, in truth? I envy you, what we would have given to have performed for the Court, but we never made it that high, never had a Frenchman with us as the King seems to like, although I hear he favours Italian players now. No, we were just musicians, bringing harmony to people's lives for that short moment when they listened, hoping they would take the music with them once we'd stopped.

Last year we went around the country, visiting all the fairs, Stourbridge Fair up near Cambridge, oh what a thing to behold! Musicians come together, people live out in the fields, buying from the hawkers and making merry, losing their minds on too much ale and their coin on too much wagering, dancing until the fields turn to mud and you think you never want to return home. You should have seen it! Such a spectacle of folk all revelling in life's pleasures after the dark years, when music was silent. And then winter in London, still playing, when we weren't home taking a needed rest.

And then the plague came.

If you know London you'll know St Giles, aye, to the west of the city, where the poorest of God's wretches live crammed in their stinking hovels and in the next street along, the grand houses of the rich shine with all their finery. And they say plague doesn't judge, that it affects rich as much as poor, but you tell me, Mrs Blakewood, who do you think's dying in droves, and who's fled their homes and gone with what money they could? No, it doesn't treat all the same, and I won't believe those who say different. Not when I've seen what it does.

Oh, is that right? What did she call you – Tom? Aye, we got out too, we got out when we knew we would die if we didn't. I didn't claim I was poor, not back then at least. One or two started dying round by us, that wasn't anything new, but then it was three or four, then nine or ten, and soon the whole parish was afeared, and folk from outside would barely set foot in certain streets, and scorned us when we ventured out to play our music.

Then Mark, our friend, it got him. It got him and his wife and his little baby son and not one of us could stop it. Soon as he knew he had it, soon as the sweating started and the swellings appeared, he locked the door on us, ignored our banging on the wood. Soon enough word got round, a cross was drawn on the door, and a watch

set in the street to make sure no one went in, that no one came out. Not even his little lad.

And no one did come out, not living. One day they say the groaning stopped, that all they could hear was the cries of the child, until a neighbour with some kindness in her heart broke in to fetch him out, but it was too late for the boy, and soon it was too late for the neighbour. In time the searchers came, with the carters ringing their warning bell, and they carried out Mark and his wife, threw their scarred bodies on a wagon and buried them at night.

All this time we were helpless, trying to understand, we even went to the alderman, but he said there was no more plague than normal, that everything would be well, and this with our own friend dead. Damn that alderman. Damn him to Hell! The boy – named Mark too, for his father – was buried in the end, alongside the neighbour in some hastily dug grave. Heaven knows how they must have suffered in that house, Mark and his wife and his boy. But they suffered, shut up alone that the rest of us might live, so you, Tom, don't talk to me about plague, because you know nothing of it. Nothing, you hear?

Then crosses began appearing all over, and still the alderman refused to act, still he didn't set fires to clean the air, not even when it leapt into the next parish. Me, I don't know how this spreads, whether 'tis through demons or foul smells or 'cos folk haven't washed, but London stinks, it stinks, and 'tis crowded, so crowded, so why weren't the streets cleaned sooner, or folk asked to stay apart? But what do I know, well I'll tell you, I know that half the doctors fled as quick as the crosses were painted, and what does that say when learned men run that fast?

Luis and I stayed with Alena after that, at the house she shared with her mother away from St Giles, in a far part of the city where folk scarcely needed worry about plague, and it was her, Alena's mother, who said we should leave while we could, take our music where we could still bring cheer. That seemed a good purpose, a blessing we thought when we looked on Mark's flute, so we picked up our instruments, the flute too, and we left to make a living somewhere else.

And yes, hoping to save our lives. You men can scoff all you like, but you want to live as much as we do. There's nothing shameful in that.

So we ran, Mrs Blakewood, from St Giles. Simon was married, the only one of us who is, so he sent his wife to her sister out of harm's way, and Alena's mother we hope is safe where she is. Then we went west, thinking to go through the towns on our way to Salisbury where we hear the King's about to hide, hoping some of his noblemen might need someone to play. But when we got to Reading we were set upon, they'd had plenty of warning from the coaches fleeing ahead of us, and they were ready at the gate, the Reading men, blocking our passage, forcing us away. So instead we turned north, heading over the hills, hoping the scholars of Oxford would have more sense, but all folk everywhere seem to do is throw insult and rocks, thinking we're going to see them dead.

Aye, soon as folk found out where we were from, they threw us out of Oxford too, and we've already spent most of our coin. We've got a lute, a violin, a flute, a horse, and that's it. These last days we've been forced to steal food from where we could and snatch game from traps, cooking the meat on fires we've set in the wood – thank the Lord for this heat, making the tinder so dry! We slept in the open two nights back, but last night we came here, looking for some place to shelter from our fears. We're not thieves, least we weren't. We won't steal what's yours.

You see, we don't know what to do. Simon. . . Simon has gone. Some brigands must have seen our fire, or else some village folk, for we were attacked at our camp last evening, as Simon was washing the grime off in the river. We escaped by lying, pretending we were full of plague, and they backed off at that, let me tell you – no, you princcock, that was so we could escape, we are not ill, how many times! Alena went on the one horse we have left – that one you see there, by the barn – and Luis and I ran different ways, hoping to come to Simon, but in the darkness of the wood I heard him cry out, and by the time I got to the river all I found was his shirt and boots, abandoned on the ground. I called out myself, and the twigs snapped behind me, but it was only Luis, and we searched and we searched until the moon was passed half the sky, until Alena came back to us, but of Simon there was no sign.

And so we came here at dead of night, found this barn, the three of us scared and wretched, hoping we weren't followed, affrighted by what could have happened to one of our own. We hope he heard the noise of the attack and fled. We hope. . . but we did not sleep. And then your men chanced upon us, and I think you know the rest.

We're not villains. We're not sick. We're just musicians, good folk from London, hungry and hurt, our world fallen on its head.'

As Tanner progressed through his tale, the jeers of Mercia's labourers fell quieter and quieter until they were largely silent, save for the odd heckle quickly hushed. Now at its end, Mercia looked on the trio of strangers, evaluating whether the story was all truth or in part deception, and although she could tell there were details the musician was holding back, in the circumstances she thought he was allowed to be wary.

'Your tale is a sad one, Mr Tanner, and I grieve to hear it. Perhaps your companion is somewhere nearby. I will send men to search, if you can remember the place where the attack occurred.'

Clearly the chief among the labourers, Tom looked at his group and shrugged. 'I don't mind raising a party if you can spare me from my tasks, my lady.'

'Why does everyone want to call me –' She sighed. 'No matter. Thank you, Tom. Speak with Mr Tanner and choose a few men. But – do not get too close.' She held up a hand. 'I know you say you are free of plague, Mr Tanner, and though it seems you are well, you will forgive me if I insist on being careful.'

Tanner looked at her for a long while, then finally he nodded. 'I understand. We are grateful for your assistance. In truth, it is the first kind act we have encountered since leaving London, or at least. . . well. I thank you. We would like to help with the search. We are not sick, whatever you may fear.'

'Of course. Just trust to caution for a few days more.'

'A few days?' said Tom. 'How long are they to be here?'

'As long as the search takes,' said Mercia. 'We can do that for these people, at least.' She turned back to Tanner. 'I will order food and drink be brought to the barn, and blankets. You can rest here.'

'And nosegays for the men,' said Phibae. 'Rosemary and mint, to ward off any bad smells.'

'And nosegays. And then once the matter is resolved, and you are restored to better humours, there is one favour I will gladly take from you.'

‘And what is that?’ asked Tanner.

She looked at him and smiled. ‘You can play,’ she said. ‘You can bring your music to Halescott.’

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