

SURVIVAL

Or,

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

A Mercia Blakewood Special

DAVID HINGLEY

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SURVIVAL

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INSTALMENT FOUR

VI

Tom made the sign of the cross. Mercia glanced at him, wondering.

‘You can read, Tom?’ she chose to ask.

‘Not much. But I know well enough that says Lord, from a Bible the priest shows me, and above it that’s a cross.’

‘Lord have mercy upon us,’ she read out loud, sweeping the syllables around her mouth as though speaking them would impart some hidden knowledge. But nothing came. ‘Tis said they write that on doors where those within are stricken with plague.’

Tom took a step back. ‘Did those players write this? That man we’re looking for, he’s not here in the earth, is he?’

She surveyed the ground about them. ‘Why would his companions say he was missing if they knew he was lying dead here? It would be easier to say nothing at all.’

‘That’s as may be. But if you’ll take my advice, I say we should go.’

‘In a moment.’ She looked carefully up and down the tree, noting the age evident in its mossy creases, then made a steady tour of its wide base before crouching down to sweep the undergrowth with her hands. ‘Nothing,’ she said. ‘No disturbed soil. No grave. Nothing.’ She swatted away a troublesome gnat as she stood. ‘Another possibility, Tom, is that their assailants carved those words as a ward against a sickness the musicians never had. When he told us his story, Mr Tanner said they lied that they had plague to get the attackers to leave them be.’

‘Then they’d have to be sage folk, them attackers. To be able to write.’

‘That is true. Now, what of the clearing?’

He squirmed as he pulled a sour face, jiggling his shoulders, but seeing her expression was serious he nodded. 'I'll show you. But the morning is passing, we best be quick.'

Stepping back to the footprints by the river, he led her a short distance through the trees to a small open circle of ground. There was a black patch to one side topped with the remnants of charred twigs, but no evidence otherwise that anyone had been there of late. Mercia paced the circle, thinking.

'I wonder who it was set upon them?' she said. 'Which villages are close?'

'None within a few miles.'

'Don't you think that odd?'

'You mean why travel all this way to attack them?'

'Indeed. But even if some group were deliberately searching them out, it would have been hard to find them, especially in fading light. That fire could not have been seen until close.' She glanced at the enclosing trees. 'Are there brigands in this wood?'

'Brigands, poachers, strange folk, there's been all sorts.'

'Then that remains a possibility. And the musicians have told you nothing else about the attack?'

'They've said scarce little to me. They reckon they're above us, most like.'

'Have you said much to them?'

Tom merely grunted. She resisted the urge to roll her eyes.

'What did Mr Tanner do while you were here looking?' she asked instead.

'I can't say particular. I left him and that French fellow to it.'

'Spanish fellow.'

Another grunt. 'They looked round this clearing, had a few raised words, then went off to search in one direction while me and the lads went another.'

'Raised words?'

'Didn't sound nothing serious. I reckon they were just on each other's nerves.' He sniffed. 'That – Spanish – fellow, the one who plays the fiddle, he spent a good while on the ground over there, behind where you are now, before he followed.' He nodded towards the very edge of the clearing. 'We looked back when we went off, don't think he knew we were watching. Probably wanted a few minutes to himself. We left him to it.'

Mercia shuffled backwards a short distance. ‘You mean about here?’

‘More or less. By that fallen tree there, I can’t remember exactly.’

She roved her eyes along the length of the indicated tree, a decaying log about twenty feet long, its crumbling slivers covered in clumped mushrooms of varying colour and size. Starting at one end, the tangled stubs of roots arching level with her hips, she walked slowly forwards while staring between ground and trunk, peering with minute precision.

About three quarters of the way along she stopped.

‘Is this something?’ she said. ‘I see only the bases of mushrooms here, as though the top parts have been ripped away.’ She glanced down. ‘See, here are the rotting mushroom heads, on the ground. And there on the trunk itself, a hole.’

She poked her finger at the entrance of the hole, instinctively recoiling from the uncertainty of what might be within. But she overcame her disgust to push a fingertip through, and when that was not bitten, the rest of the finger and then another, and then two more, until finally her hand was in up to her wrist.

‘Ugh,’ she moaned, feeling an insect skitter across her knuckles as she rummaged through the slimy cavity. Then her fingertips brushed something cold and hard; she grabbed hold of the object and pulled it out.

‘A ring,’ she observed, shaking a millipede from the back of her hand as she turned the silver object in her fingers. It was barely dirty, as though it had recently been placed, and on the inside was a small inscription:

MF ▪ 1665 ▪ in caelo cantemus

‘A mourning ring, perhaps,’ she said, thinking of the inscriptions that were engraved on the insides of her own two such rings resting in a locked box at home, those that commemorated her husband after his early death, and her father, killed last year on Tower Hill. ‘MF, 1665, may we sing in Heaven,’ she translated. ‘Latin. Did Luis leave this, I wonder? Or was it already here?’

Pocketing her find, she walked to examine the spot where the fire had been set, but there was nothing to see.

‘Nothing more but questions,’ she mused. ‘Come, Tom, let us return. If there are answers they are with the musicians, or else with their attackers.’

Tom had been watching her progress with a bemused tilt of the head. ‘Does it matter, Mrs Blakewood? Send them on their way and forget them.’

‘Are you not curious, Tom? Whose is this ring? Who carved those words in the tree by the river? Why are the footprints we found apparently scuffed out?’

The labourer shrugged. ‘I leave what’s curious to those who have time for it.’

His words made her laugh. ‘Very good, Tom. But as my husband told me once: there are none so curious as me.’

The ride back to Halescott passed without incident, other than the rogue fawn that fled across the track causing her horse to rear up astonished, but Mercia was an accomplished horsewoman, and she handled the disturbance with ease. Only once did someone pass the other way, a woman it seemed, and that rider swerved off the road to avoid them, just as Mercia often did when riding alone, wary of highwaymen or simply men out here in the woods.

Tom spoke little on the way, his silence suiting Mercia well, caught up as she was in her own thoughts, when the grooves and ruts of the jarring track allowed her to indulge them. Back in Halescott by noon, she bade him a quick farewell, the labourer clearly relieved to return to more familiar work.

She spent the afternoon going over her questions, rearranging the possibilities that came to mind just as Bethany rearranged the plates and trenchers in the kitchen, but her maid was more ready to admonish her morning adventure than to assist in her circular pondering. When evening came, and she was back in more regular attire, she walked in the midsummer light to the musicians’ barn, hoping by now the players would have returned. Phibae came with her, a diversion to split the trio so she could question them one at a time: she took cake and ale too, an incentive to open up.

After putting a grumpy Daniel to an early bed, they made their way to the barn in that glorious evening warmth particular to summer, when those who are still outdoors feel blessed to be outside, aware their winter selves would have long since seen the sun descend below the horizon, plunging the countryside into the chill of freezing dark. So the walk was pleasant, a joy indeed, and even in her haste to reach

the barn Mercia slowed her pace, taking her time to meander through the small wood and amble down the grassy slope.

As they reached the barn, she paused. Alena's horse was nowhere in sight.

'Perhaps they aren't back from their search,' said Phibae.

'Then they are abroad late. Mr Tanner? Are you here? I have cake!'

The culinary inducement spurred no response. Hesitating a moment, and then chastising herself for her instinctive fear of a plague she was sure had never arrived, she swung open the barn door and thrust in her head. The evening light entered before her, while two square holes high above added their small illumination to the hay-strewn scene.

'They are not here,' she needlessly observed. She walked tentatively in, but any qualms she may have held about disturbing the players' belongings were quickly quashed. There were no belongings to disturb.

'Phibae, I fear this bodes ill. Surely they cannot have taken everything with them on their search? Even their instruments are gone.'

'Perhaps they took them hoping to play to earn coin?' offered Phibae, remaining in the doorway.

'Perhaps,' said Mercia, unconvinced. 'Let us wait a while in case they come back.'

Returning outside they sat on the yellowing grass, waiting as the sun's orange glow dipped beneath the treetops, cascading a tapestry of purples and reds across the wide sky. And yet still no one came.

'We should get back, mistress,' said Phibae. 'It will start to get dark soon.'

'No matter. The moon was full last night. We'll wait a little longer.'

The distracted look on Mercia's face told Phibae not to argue. But as the evening turned to dusk, and the dusk to twilight, and the players had still not appeared, Mercia was forced to concede.

No horse. No belongings. No instruments.

No musicians. The trio had gone.

A gardener dispatched the following morning confirmed it: the musicians had not returned in the night. There were two possibilities, thought Mercia as she leant against

the wainscot of her hall, arms stiffly folded: either they had deliberately left without word, or they had been waylaid during yesterday's search and were unable to return.

'But you said they took all their things, mistress,' said Bethany, as Daniel at the table beside her looked up from his book to nod in agreement. 'They must have left.'

'It does seem that way.'

'What will you do now?'

'What can I do? It was their right to leave when they wished. But it vexes me, Bethany, for they seemed pleased to find a place of welcome here. In the end, did they have something to hide?' She pushed off from the wainscot, the restored portrait of her parents hanging above bouncing lightly on its nail. 'I will make enquiries in the villages around, ask in Stratford and Banbury perhaps. They are musicians and need to be where people are willing to pay for their music. Unless they return to London, in which case there is nothing much more I can do. But a missing man. Strange assailants in the night. A macabre message scrawled in a tree. A hidden ring. And now three fled musicians.' She looked at her old maid. 'What do you think, Bethany? Should I just let matters be?'

'Well. . .' Bethany raised an eyebrow.

Mercia laughed.

VII

‘There it is,’ said Nicholas, thankful to set down the case he was carrying. ‘The coach.’

Where the track widened into a road at the end of the meadow ahead, in the same place he and Kwadwo had been dropped off the day before, a readied coach stood waiting in the morning sunshine. Ever diligent, the teenager had insisted on coming along to help with the heavy case, while a third member of the party made to run on ahead, but Nicholas caught her ragged dress and pulled her back.

‘No you don’t, Eliza Wildmoor,’ he chided. ‘I told you to stay close to me.’

The girl looked up and pouted, making him laugh.

‘Who’ve you been learning that face from?’ he said. ‘Your aunt?’

She shook her head. ‘Alice does it. It makes her look pretty, she says.’

‘Oh, Alice says, does she? There’s a fine one, for certain.’

Eliza frowned, as though not understanding what he meant, and in truth he didn’t know himself.

‘Now are you going to be good when. . .?’

He trailed off, casting a wary glance at the number of people standing beside the coach.

‘I don’t like this, Kwadwo. There’s too many of them. Eliza, come here by me.’ His muscles burned as he heaved up the battered case against Kwadwo’s protestations, wishing once again his sister had managed to find a lighter trunk. ‘Remember what I said – don’t talk to anyone. Don’t touch anyone either.’

‘I won’t,’ said the girl.

‘Have you got that posy for your face?’

She nodded, tugging at the place in her dress where a makeshift pocket had been sewn underneath.

‘Good girl.’

Nicholas approached the coach under a film of sweat, guarding a little distance. The same driver as before was standing on the plate, red faced as he argued with the two men the group had taken for soldiers on the journey down. Behind the coachman, four passengers were already seated on the inside berths, people Nicholas did not recognise, and in the space beside the driver’s seat up front, a well-turned out man in red doublet and fine coat sat with his hands clasped, staring straight ahead beneath a beaver-fur hat as though to avoid catching anyone’s gaze.

‘I’m sorry, lads,’ the driver was saying. ‘There’s nothing I can do.’

‘Yes, there is,’ the shorter of the two soldiers replied, a muscular middle-aged man with a vicious scar running the length of his right cheek. ‘You can take us like you promised.’

‘I promised nothing. Don’t get heavy with me. There’s only space enough for eight.’

Dropping the case, Nicholas glanced down at his daughter. ‘Stand over there a moment, by the side of the road. Take this and go with her, Kwadwo. I have to talk to these men.’

Eliza obediently skipped away from the crowded assemblage, Kwadwo dragging the case behind in defiance of his slender frame. Flopping onto the yellowing grass on the other side of the track, Eliza began playing with the doll she had brought, a forlorn little bundle of wool with mismatched buttons sewn on as mouth and eyes. His own eyes flicking between his daughter and the gathered passengers, Nicholas raised his voice.

‘What’s going on?’ he demanded. ‘What are all these people doing in the coach?’

‘Taking our places, that’s what,’ said the taller soldier, not averting his gaze from the driver. ‘A lot of bastards is what they are.’

Nicholas turned to the coachman. ‘What’s he mean, taking our places?’

The driver blinked. ‘Oh, hello, Nick. I, erm, I . . . well. Don’t look like there’s enough space.’

A cold chill swept through Nicholas's insides, swiftly replaced by hot anger. 'Tell me you're going to let my daughter on this coach.'

'Well, Nick, like I said, I can't have anyone who might have plague coming with me, and well, how do I know your daughter hasn't –'

'I don't believe this. What was all that about not taking anyone who wasn't on the coach down? About helping me out?'

'I'm taking him,' said the coachman, jerking his head at the innocuous man from the day before who was struggling to haul a roped-up box onto the back. 'Aren't I?'

'Aye, and you've made him pay for it,' said the scarred soldier. 'Three times what you wanted before. Now tell this lad to his face you're going to leave his daughter behind to take her chance with the plague.'

'Are you?' said Nicholas.

Silence.

'Well?'

Abruptly, the coachman threw back his head. 'What you want me to do, Nick? Eh? I've a family, same as you. I promised my wife this would be it, my last journey to London. After this I won't have work, because of this plague, and I need money, same as you do. These here on the coach are happy to pay me a lot, it'll keep my kids fed for months. What can I do? Only what I think's best.'

'Aye,' said the taller soldier. 'But not what's right. It don't matter to Jack and me, beyond the inconvenience. Oxford's not that far for us. We can walk, sleep in the open tonight, like we used to do. We don't have a big case. But that girl can't walk fifty miles, least she shouldn't have to.'

'It was hard enough to get her to walk the few miles here,' said Nicholas.

The coachman stuck out his chin. 'You want me to take her and not you?'

'Of course not. But you promised us a place. I intend to take it.'

'Like I said, Nick. I'm sorry, but I'm full.'

The soldiers looked at each other. The scarred man, Jack, subtly jerked his head towards the front of the coach. His mate nodded.

'Are you indeed?' said Jack, and before anyone could stop them, the pair darted round to the front bench outside the coach, hauled out the surprised occupant by the

lapels of his fine coat, and without ceremony sent him sprawling to the ground. ‘Now,’ continued Jack. ‘Here’s a pretty space for a lad and his young daughter, the space you said was his in the first place. And don’t think to charge him any more for it. You can give us our money back too.’

‘You can’t do that,’ complained the coachman, jumping from the plate as the ejected passenger stumbled to his feet, his grand hat knocked askew. ‘That’s a doctor, that is, and besides, he’s already paid.’

‘So have I,’ said Nicholas. ‘Remember? Full fare up front for anyone returning. Thanks, lads.’

‘You’re welcome. Ah, I don’t think so.’ Jack hurried to put himself between the coach and the silver-haired doctor, dodging nimbly left and right to prevent him getting past. Then tiring of the game, he lunged forwards, claspng a hand on the doctor’s shoulder and holding him fast.

‘In you get, Nick,’ he said, staring down the doctor, who clenched his jaw, returning the menacing stare.

‘Let me go,’ he said, although his voice cracked as he spoke. Nicholas began to feel embarrassed.

‘Be easy, lads. Tis not his fault.’

‘Isn’t it?’ said Jack’s friend. ‘I know this cove’s sort. He’s no doctor, no real one at least.’

‘How dare you say that,’ said the doctor. ‘I am one of the finest physicians in the city.’

‘Then why aren’t you staying in London, eh?’ said Jack. ‘There’s folk dying all about, with other ailments besides plague, like the fellow we came here to see, our old commander. They need doctors, but half of them have fled, the cowardly or dissembling half. And those that haven’t, the real brave men, the midwives too, they don’t wear no pretty coats like you’ve got, they’re dirty, and hot, and they’ve got a look in their eye that says they’ve seen death, a look you know well when you’ve seen it too. And that look – you don’t have it.’

‘He’s right,’ nodded Nicholas. ‘I’d understand if you didn’t want to go in those plague houses I’ve heard tell of. But if you’re any kind of real physician you can help folk some other way, through teaching them how to stop getting sick, for one.’

‘This cove knows nothing,’ said Jack. ‘He’s no man of physic, and to be sure no barber surgeon like served among us soldiers either. Look at his hands.’ He grabbed one and held it up. ‘There’s no scars from a slipped knife, no rough skin at all. He’s just a quack.’

The doctor scoffed: a bold move, thought Nicholas, considering he was still held tight. ‘Well maybe, sir, if you let me speak, you will see that my place in this coach is merited.’

‘Ha!’ scoffed Jack in his turn. ‘I doubt that.’

THE QUACK’S TALE

‘First leave go of me or I’ll say naught. Let go, I say! Aye, that’s better, you oaf. Now stand away and allow me to straighten my hat and to dust down my doublet and coat. Tis not cheap, this silk, and you’ve near torn a hole in it. Well, you will care when I send you the account. Ha! And the same to you.

I won’t speak to these ruffians, but I’ll speak to you, young man. Nick, did they say? Nicholas? Good. I’ll tell you what I offer folk and then you’ll be glad to let me back on that coach. Your daughter’s safe in London anyway. You know as well as I the plague is confined down St Giles. Very well, I concede there are sick elsewhere, but not so many as they can’t be shut up in their homes to stop it getting out. And believe me, plague is no more common than other afflictions, no more deadly. Scarcely deadly at all, indeed.

What, you mock me for that? You, who are – what, may I ask? A farrier! Once a sailor! And yet you profess to know more than I on these matters? Of course you cannot. And no, sir, I am not fleeing London as these others assert, I am leaving so I may assist where my knowledge will be of most use.

So yes, I am taking a coach, and paying handsomely for it, may I add, more than I should, much more when it should rather be I that am paid to go. You want to

protect your friends from the plague, do you not? Well then, that is indeed my purpose, to protect the good folk of Oxford from harm, and so protect you and your child into the bargain, no doubt.

You think they would fare better without me, do you – Jack, did he say? Well, cur, let us see how they fare in Oxford when those who are truly fleeing London arrive! I cast no aspersions on the company here, you understand. But what of those who harbour plague who ride out into England with no concern for others? What if they carry the disease to parts hitherto spared, where 'tis taken on the miasmas round streets and through windows to infect the unfortunates within? What happens to those sick folk then, who – alas! – bereft of advice must succumb without mercy to death's fatal call? But no, for once I am there they shall have my aid, and by my learned observation they shall live.

So I travel to offer my services, and good services they are indeed. I am known through London as a doctor of repute and a – what? you soldiering fool! You will recant that, I was obliged to let it pass before, but I shall not allow such slander now, I am not a – I can barely repeat it! – a quack! And lest you continue to doubt, good farrier, allow me to provide a report of my worth, and then you will agree my place in this coach is vital – I blush to say so, but we must admit it – worth five times yours, nay ten, for if I go I save scores, but if you go, those scores lose their chance.

Not three days since, a man came to me about his wife and daughter of a similar age to yours. I had been in their parish selling cures for a minimal fee – yes minimal, it means small – and he had heard of the good I was doing. I had already sold many of my tonics, a wonderous elixir that cures all ailments, and believe me when I say there was many a relieved parishioner who was thankful to buy it. Whatever your sickness, this tonic is a marvel, and when used with rest it cures any disease – yes any! – be it consumption, the pox, or plague. Why, do you doubt it? Quite naturally, sir, not every single one of my patients recovers, no, I must admit, but if they refuse to rest, or to drink the quantity I instruct, where lies the blame for that? Besides – oh pity! – when 'tis God's will that men die, then die they must, and there is nothing even the Archbishop can do about that. But I have sold so many vials, my tonic's worth is not in doubt.

But this man I speak of. He came to my selling place, worried his wife and child were laid down with plague, and knowing of my learning he begged for my help. The pleading look on his face, eager for my aid – I see it now, and it warms me to think of being able to assist. Naturally I put my own safety aside and asked for him to bring the woman and girl to me.

Oh, you think I should have gone to their house, do you? Are you a doctor now? I could give a better judgment in the open air. And so the woman and child came, coughing and wheezing, passing through the crowd who had gathered around me, and which stood amazed when I proved my knowledge, for just ten seconds later I could give the cause, an unsatisfactory diet of too much fish that had disrupted the balance of their humours. I sold them a restoring box of pills, most useful in these cases, that work on the phlegm and bile. It was odd, I laugh even now, for the man tried to tell me they never eat fish, save those oysters you get everywhere, but it must have been in jest, for the signs were evident. To be safe I sold him three vials of tonic beside, and advised they eat more meat. When the poor fellow complained the cost was too high – two months' wages, he pretended, the rogue – and that he could scarce afford meat, I even lowered my fee, a whole brass farthing, and assured him my pills and tonic would suffice.

Do I know what happened to them? Well I'm not, I mean I don't, I cannot be expected, I – no, stay away, I have told you how this coat is expensive! Very well, if you insist – the husband came back yesterday to tell me his wife had. . . alas, she had died, but do not think my advice was at fault, for if they had come sooner, there would have been more I could have done, and I am certain the daughter will rally. In truth he seemed sick himself by then, and confiding in me there was no one else he could turn to – a testament to my good reputation, you must agree – I was glad to prescribe him more tonic.

Of course it works! I devised it myself. And – what, soldier? If my tonic cures all, why am I leaving and not staying to administer it here? More slander! No, 'tis not because I am found out! 'Tis as I said, I leave to help those in Oxford ward off the plague before it arrives. For even you can understand, a small amount of tonic taken ere falling ill means you will never fall sick at all.

What do you mean, 'tis I who make you sick? Rather I make the sick well! I have sold near a hundred measures of my tonic alone, and – yes, I have some in my case, of course, and – ho! What are you doing, you soldiering fool, that is my case, take your hands off – no! Never mind you have laid it carefully on the ground, it is not yours to lay. And do not think to – Lord above! That is my property, and you open it without a thought.

Foul creature! That is my life's work. Put that back!

'Your life's work my arse,' said the taller soldier, holding up one of the several dozen small glass vials visible inside the open case. Pulling out the cork he sniffed the contents, tipped a few drops in his mouth, and immediately spat out.

'This is river water,' he said. 'From the Thames, I wager, infested with all its dung and foulness. You take water from the river, freely, and then charge folk desperate enough to pay for it.' He threw the bottle to the ground, crunching it under his boot. 'This will make people sick, not cure them. What do you say, Jack, shall we show this deceiver what we think of his cures?'

'Oh no, you don't,' said Nicholas, stepping in to hold back the doctor as Jack went to help his fellow heave up the opened case. As the ashen-faced quack looked on, the soldiers tipped the trunk upside down: countless vials cascaded to the ground, smashing into a myriad of glassy pieces, accompanied by several boxes, papers and folded clothes. Throwing aside the case, the soldiers rattled the boxes before emptying out their contents, a vast quantity of misshapen pills. They ground them to powder under their dirty boots, before trampling on the expensive garments.

'Your quackery will hurt no one now, and you aren't going to Oxford to trick worried folk there either. Now get out of here before I run you though,' said Jack. 'People are dead because they believed in what you and your like sold them. People who've fought to keep the likes of you safe. Leave now, and leave fast.'

'But my money,' trilled the quack as Nicholas let him go. 'I've paid!'

'Money you've taken from cheating the sick,' said Nicholas. He turned to the coachman. 'Where's the fare he's given you?'

The driver's eyes darted about. 'In my safe box, where it's going to stay.'

'It doesn't belong to you. It belongs to the folk he's swindled. Kwadwo?' The watching teenager immediately walked over. 'Take the money, and be sure the coin comes to good use. You probably can't find the families he's conned – Heaven knows, most of them are likely already dead – but you can see some charity comes of it. Let the coachman here keep a share for his trouble. That seem fair to you, lads?'

'I reckon so,' said Jack's mate, shifting his glare onto the driver. 'But give us the money we've already paid for the return.'

The coachman took in the anger on the soldiers' faces. He let out a deep sigh, but he reached under his seat, took a key from round his neck and opened his small safe box.

'Here. Take what that cur gave me and a bit for yourselves. I've still got my coin from the rest, and good coin it is.'

'And us?' protested a gruff voice inside the coach. 'Seems like we paid more than we should have.'

The driver shrugged. 'Paying in advance is cheaper. That's never going to change. Jump on, Nick. Looks like there's a space for you after all.'

Nicholas hesitated, glancing at Kwadwo with a concerned look.

'Don't worry,' said Jack. 'We won't rob him of the money as soon as you've gone. Unlike him,' he growled at the quack, 'we're decent men.' His scarred cheek wrinkled as it formed the right half of a smile. 'We'll hold this knave here until your boy's safe and gone.'

'Right, lads. I'll trust you. And thanks. You may have saved my daughter's life getting her on this coach, not to say all those folk in Oxford from drinking bad water. Kwadwo, you take care of yourself.' He nodded meaningfully. 'I hope I won't be long.'

'What about me?' squeaked the quack. 'You're worried for a damnable black, but what about me? You can't leave me alone with ruffians!'

Nicholas set his face. 'I'm sure you'll be as safe in their care as your patients are in yours. Come, Eliza,' he called to his daughter, who had been watching intently ever since the crash of breaking glass had made her look up. 'We're going north.'

Next instalment coming soon

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