SURVIVAL

Or,

Tales Of Hope And Villainy From A Time Of Plague

A Mercia Blakewood Special

DAVID HINGLEY

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I

The library was as full of apprehension as it was of books. Books which bulged from each shelf, the spines jammed one against the other with barely a sliver of space left.

'But do you need to go back?' said Mercia. 'After what the peddler said, would it not be safer to send word?'

Gripping the same tankard of weak ale he had been clutching for the past half hour, the young man she was talking to seemed ready to bolt. 'Who else is going to fetch her?' he said. 'As it is I'll have to be certain she's not ill. God's truth, I should have gone back already.'

Mercia looked out the window onto the flowering rose garden. 'That is my fault, Nicholas. I have kept you here longer than you wished.'

'It was my choice. I wanted to stay longer to help you put things in order. But now I have to go.'

'I know you do,' she said, turning to face the familiar eyes of green. 'Then go down and come back as quickly as you are able. And – do not worry about cost. I will provide what you need.'

'Thank you.' He swallowed, running his free hand through his unkempt hair. 'I know 'tis an impertinence, but with the way things seem to be getting worse in the city –'

'Nicholas, after all you have done for me, the cost of the carriage there and back is no such thing, nor so the care of your child once she arrives. The difficulty may be finding a coach to take you. Bethany thinks they may not be running as well as they did, if ever well is the word that could be used on that rutted route.'

'I'll have to try. If I ride to Oxford this afternoon, I can get the coach early tomorrow. There'll likely be fewer people wanting to travel to London now, so there

should be room, even if 'tis on the roof. If it isn't running, I'll get them to hire me a fast horse and I'll ride myself.'

'If the coaches are all stopped, I doubt the coachmen would let you take a horse either. If needs arise, you can continue with mine all the way from here. Tis not as though you cannot shoe a horse yourself if one slips.'

'Can horses get plague, then?' he asked.

'To say true, I do not know. I do not think so. But you know how folk are. Rumour and panic oft fly swifter than truth.'

'Hell's teeth!' he swore. 'A year abroad and as soon as you're home in your manor house – this. I really don't want to risk. . . but I don't know where else to take her. If she falls ill on the way, I'll head straight back to London.'

'Let us pray for now that Eliza is well. The peddler may have been embellishing his tale. As for the plague, it will pass in time, as ever it does. But I wish there was more I could do myself.' Thinking, she sucked at her lower lip. 'Perhaps I should come to London with you and –'

Nicholas punched down his beaker, a little harsher than he intended. 'No. No, no. You will not come to London. No.'

Amused, she tilted her head, her hair's ringlets shimmering in the noontime light that was falling through the lead-paned window. 'I thought I was the one in charge here.'

The attempt at humour did little to break his sombre mood. He folded his arms.

'Well first, I'm no longer in your service, and second, even so, I'm still going to want to protect you. Mercia, there's plague in London. Tis getting serious. It seems we barely got you away in time. Even the King is on the cusp of leaving, if those reports are true. You have to stay here.'

'Still, I –'

'How many trials have you survived to get back here? What would be the point of them if you catch your death now?' The stern mask eased a little. 'I know I'm just a farrier and you're a grand lady, but that's the end of it. Besides, think of Daniel. Think of your mother.'

'Thinking of Daniel and my mother is the only reason I agree with you. But there must be something I can do.' She began to pace up and down the black and white tiles of the floor. 'Besting murderers and spies seems easy compared to this unseen menace. Tis precisely because I have faced all those trials, as you put it, that I find it hard to sit here while hundreds are at peril of death.' She paused in her pacing, resting her outstretched fingertips on a pile of musty books. 'There has been enough of that in this country of late. War, strife, war again. Now plague. Sometimes I fear we are cursed.'

'Let's just think on it,' said Nicholas. 'In the meantime, look to yourself for once. Let Phibae and Bethany take care of you.' He glanced at the side of her dress, an elegant brown outfit slit at the front and tied fast at the back. 'You're sure you're being honest when you say that doesn't hurt?'

'Well, the wound might ache at times, but I refuse to let it stop me dressing well.'

He sighed. 'It was not so long ago you were near death. At least stop walking so much.'

'I like walking.'

'And I like rum, but I won't be drinking it while I'm riding south.' He reached out, but even with the bonds of their shared endeavours he stopped short of resting his hand on her shoulder. 'Thank you, Mercia, again. I'd hoped not to be a burden, but offering to help – it means a lot. One day I'll pay you back.'

'You are always welcome, Nicholas. And you have already paid me back, countless times over. But do one thing for me?'

'Anything.'

'Ask your family if they would return with you. Your sister, her husband, their children. This house is large enough to provide sanctuary to them also.'

'Oh. . . no, Mercia, I can't ask that of you. Besides, I know my sister. She won't want to leave home.'

'Still, ask. And Nicholas?'

He bounced on his heels, impatient to prepare to leave. 'Yes?'

'Be wary as you go. Plague or no, there are plenty of villains about.'

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Earlier that morning, Mercia's maid Bethany had appeared in the parlour of the house with a roughly dressed man in her wake. Dusty hat in hand, more like one of those the Puritans used to wear than anything in fashion now, his eyes roved the tidy room, settling everywhere but on the mistress of the house. Setting down the volume of poetry she was reading – a daily tonic for her recuperation – Mercia looked at Bethany with a querying eye.

'Sorry to disturb you, mistress,' she had said, 'but this man has news. He's a peddler from Witney, come to the house to sell wares he gathered at market, but I asked him to come and tell you what he just told me.'

Mercia nodded almost imperceptibly at her maid, an upright stalwart of around sixty years, immaculate as always in her crisp white bonnet and apron. 'Thank you, Bethany,' she said. Then she turned to the man, by contrast a nervous, ill-shaven individual, with a faded brown mark staining the patched waistcoat he had hooked into his woollen breeches.

'What is your name, sir?' she asked.

The man blinked more than once, but mustered the courage to look at her and bow. 'Roger Beech, my lady.'

Mercia rolled an internal eyebrow. 'There is no need to call me my lady, for I am not one. Mrs Blakewood will do.'

The man nodded, turning his hat round on the left thumb he had poked through the small hole in its apex.

'Your maid ask me to come and speak with you, Mrs Blakewood.' His eyes darted about once more, taking in the brightness of the space. 'I never come in before, I always ring at the door and get sent on my way, but it never hurts to ask.'

'I'm told Mr Beech only started visiting last year,' explained Bethany.

'I see,' said Mercia, her lightly cuffed wrist hanging over the thin arm of her chair. 'Well, Mr Beech, there has been a restoration of ownership at Halescott. As the King was restored to his throne, so I have been restored to my manor. You will doubtless find more welcome here now than when my mother-in-law was in residence.'

'If you say so, my lady, although your maid here is a fair fierce creature.'

Bethany sucked in indignant air, but Mercia could barely suppress her smile.

'Pray, Mr Beech,' she implored with a deliberate air of formality, striving to hide her amusement. 'Tell me your news?'

The poor man swallowed. 'Tis just what I heard about the plague, my lady. How it's getting bad.'

Immediately Mercia's frivolity vanished. 'In scarce one fortnight? How so?'

'They've started fleeing the city for places like here,' he continued. 'Merchants and the like, them that can afford to get out, they're coming up to be safe. Some folk don't like it, they reckon they might bring it with them, but I say good, let them come and sell me their things so I've got more to sell on.' He cleared his throat. 'I got a nice set of candlesticks in my basket out there, they'd look lovely in that grand hall you got.'

Mercia held up her hand. 'No doubt the candlesticks are lovely. I am more concerned with what you have to say about the plague. I was in London all of last month, it was appearing here and there but it was largely confined. Has that changed?'

An image drifted into her mind of the haggard woman she had met on a crowded London thoroughfare, warning passers-by against walking down a particular street, where a red cross had been painted on one of the many doors. The woman's unfeelingness had shocked her; she had thought on that moment often since.

'Yes, my lady, and fast,' said the peddler. 'They'd hoped it was going down, but now hundreds are dead, more and more each week, and where one is ill, whole families are shut up in their homes with no hope of escape. Foreigners are to blame, some think, and it did start overseas. The King is running to Salisbury, 'tis said, and Parliament is shut. The deaths can only increase.'

'May the Lord have mercy,' said Mercia, and then a cold, stabbing shock flashed through her body that had nothing to do with the wound she had suffered. 'Dear God. Which parishes are worst hit, Mr Beech?'

'St Giles is where it started, they say, but 'tis spreading all over. The theatres are closing in Drury Lane. Holborn's got it, Charing Cross near the palace, even the lawyers near Lincoln's Inn, round Newgate, serve them right if it gets in there o' course, Smithfield with the cattle market, getting round Cowcross and the like, even some the other way down in Westminster, now over the wall inside the city itself, they say a doctor got it there, and he shut himself up to stop the spread –'

'Cowcross?' said Mercia, and the cruel chill deepened. 'You say Cowcross?'

'Yes, my lady. And three days have passed since the merchants I spoke with left. Things must be getting worse every day. And 'tis so hot in the city, they say, worse than here.'

'Dear Lord.' Mercia rubbed her temples, feeling sick. 'Bethany, fetch Nicholas quick. Cowcross is where his family lives. And Mr Beech, thank you for your report.' She reached into a purse and threw him a penny. 'Please return with more news if you hear anything else.'

Beech caught the penny as Bethany disappeared through the door. 'Thank you, my – Mrs Blakewood – I will.' He shifted on his feet. 'In the meantime, I don't suppose – would you be interested in those candlesticks?'

Mercia dismissed him with a look. 'Thank you, Mr Beech. In the meantime, I would not.'

II

Nicholas had been lucky in Oxford, finding a coach able to take him on the two-day journey to London as well as a seat up front. He had been obliged to sit outside, true, but the weather was dry and hot, and the prattle of the driver beside him had not always been unwelcome on what felt like a very long road. Now at journey's end, Nicholas leapt from the scuffed footboard and turned to watch his less fortunate travelling companion jump from his perch on the roof, the new boots Mercia had bought for the nimble boy skidding on the ground as he landed with a deft bump.

Dust was still swirling around the wheels of the coach, hanging steady over the alighting passengers in the absence of a dispersing breeze. Eight people had made the trip to London, and for a time all eight remained on the spot, surveying their surroundings as though uncertain whether to progress with their journey or return to the country right away.

'You take care now, Nick,' said the driver, a portly man whom Nicholas had got to know well following the hours squeezed up alongside. 'And your strange friend there.' He nodded at the teenager who had jumped from the roof. 'I go back in the morning at eight, remember, eight. I'm not waiting in this town any longer than I have to.'

'You're not anywhere near the town,' said Nicholas, taking in the fields around them. 'Tis still two miles off.'

'I'm not taking any chances. You saw the carts and coaches going the other way. Never seen so many panicked faces in my life.' He spat, rotating his shoulders as if to stretch away his worry. 'I don't mind bringing folk down if they've got to come,

but I'm not going into London myself. This is close enough for you to be there in an hour or two.'

'And what about her?' said Nicholas, gesturing towards an old woman his companion was helping retrieve a small case from the rear of the coach.

'She seems sprightly enough,' shrugged the driver, and then clearing his throat he raised his voice. 'Any of you wanting to go back after tomorrow, forget it. No one who's been in London for more than a day is getting on this coach or on anyone else's I know. Any of you feel ill, get a cough, start sweating. . . you're not coming either. I'll be watching you before you get on, so don't try to trick me 'cos I'll know. You can't hide the plague.'

Heaving himself back on his coach, he geed up his horses and set off in the direction they'd come, falling in line with a row of scurrying traffic to head for the coaching inn they'd passed a few miles back. Nicholas turned to his companion.

'Ready, Kwadwo?' The teenager nodded. 'Good. Then let's go.'

Pulling his bag over his shoulder, Nicholas led the way against the oncoming crowds, heading for the city of death.

The old woman was as vigorous as the driver had observed, keeping easy pace with Nicholas and Kwadwo as they walked towards the first houses that marked the edge of London. More than once they were forced to leave the road, until Nicholas decided that traipsing through the grass was preferable to the constant threat of being run down by a cart or bumping into an irate stranger.

'Tis just like the ride down,' said another of the passengers, an innocuous man of around thirty who was walking with their small group. 'I think my shoulder will be forever bruised from the number of times that coachman swerved to avoid the coaches fleeing north. Thank the Lord for his cursing, else we would have had no warning a jolt was coming at all.'

'I was more concerned with that abandoned cart,' said the old woman. 'A highwayman's ruse, ha!'

'The driver seemed to think it was.'

'Ha!' she repeated. 'Walk ten feet from the cart and you'll have found a body. Folk are dying in the roads, I'm sure of it.'

'From. . ?'

'From the plague, you can say it, man. They leave town and it overtakes them before they can get ten miles. You're all too young to remember, but I've seen it all before.'

The innocuous man laughed nervously, then nodded up ahead where two of their fellow passengers had built up a steady lead, not waiting for anyone as they marched towards the town.

'What do you think?' he said. 'Those two. Soldiers?'

'You were in the coach with them,' said Nicholas, wishing the man had marched ahead himself.

'They didn't say much. Nothing at all, indeed. Seemed quite perturbed when I asked them their business. And have you noticed,' he continued, clearly enjoying his ruminations. 'The other two from the coach, behind us, that strange man and his wife. Both times we've paused to rest they've lingered back. I wonder what they're whispering about? They didn't care much to talk with me on the journey either.'

I wonder why, thought Nicholas, but he merely shrugged, reaching to take his turn with the old woman's case. 'I tried to talk with them when we stopped for the night but they said they were tired. I think folk are just anxious, you can understand it.'

'Why don't you leave that, Nicholas,' said the old woman, pointing to the case. 'You'll be wanting to see your daughter. Go on ahead.'

'A few minutes longer on the road won't hurt. And you'll be wanting to reach home, just as quick. You don't want to dally with all these madmen rushing past.'

'I know, but – 'tis not the same, is it? At least we old folk have had our time, it's when the youngsters go it breaks your heart.' She looked into the distance. 'I've had twelve children, you know that? And only four of them passed their eleventh year. Never got any easier.' She touched Nicholas's shoulder. 'Your child's your first?'

He nodded, not much put at ease by her abruptness. But it had the effect of making the innocuous man drop back.

'And your wife?' the woman pursued. 'What's she look like? Pretty, I'm sure, handsome fellow like you.'

'I don't have a wife,' he said, short in his turn. 'My sister looks after my daughter while I try to earn money to feed them.'

'Oh. Well, none of my business I suppose.' She waited a moment. 'Is the child's mother. . ?'

Nicholas sighed. 'I don't know where she is. We knew each other for a short time, then she went away. A few months later she came back with a babe in her arms, told me to take what was mine, and left again. I've never seen her since.'

'Oh! Cruel heart!'

'Maybe. But she gave me Eliza, and I won't ever regret that.'

The old woman linked his free arm with hers. 'You're a good lad, Nicholas. You get your daughter and leave the city as quickly as you can.' She nodded. 'A lucky lad, too. My niece I was visiting in Oxford, many a time she's told me of the Goodridge family, or the Blakewood family as she is since getting wed, that – oh, what is her name. . ? Strange name, after some old kingdom or other.'

'Mercia, you mean? Her father was keen on old times, from what she tells me, named her after something – Saxon, is it? Goes over my head, I tell you.'

'Didn't go over his head though, did it, when it got cut off his shoulders?' The woman shook her head in pity. 'More's the shame. And her a widow so young.' She sniffed. 'Still, I'm glad she got her house back from them who lived there last year. My niece heard she kicked them out soon as she was back.'

'News travels fast,' said Nicholas.

'Not as fast as the plague, son. You don't take any chances.' She glanced to her side, where Kwadwo was ambling along caught in his own thoughts. 'How did you get to know this one?'

'Would you believe me if I said at Whitehall Palace?'

'Don't be daft.'

'Tis true! Mercia knows the King, in a way, and he put her in the palace to find out a traitor. I was her manservant, Kwadwo there was servant to one of the women she was after, although his mistress treated him like a dog. Mercia got him out of there, not two weeks back, so he helped her home and now he's coming back, to see to a mate of his with all this going on.'

'Another brave soul,' she said. 'Most would stay well away.'

'Why have you come back, then? Couldn't you have stayed with your niece?' He smiled. 'For all you like to talk, you haven't said much about that.'

'Saucy cove!' She laughed. 'Well it must be an hour 'til we get to Soho. Plenty of time if you want to hear, though I might need to rest once in a while to catch my breath.'

THE OLD WOMAN'S TALE

'How old do you think I am? Ha! That's kind. No young man, I'm seventy one. I was born in the last century, when Good Queen Bess was still alive, a haggard, cantankerous old mare, much like I am now. Oh, you think not? There's plenty wouldn't agree.

Yes, I was a child when Guy Fawkes tried to blow up King James. Already old when they lopped off the first Charles's head. Ancient before his son came skulking from his hiding place to take back the throne he said was his. Does it offend you that I spit at his name? No. I thought not.

I've lived through it all, see, that terrible war we had when you were just a babe, King against Parliament they said, like it were all so grand, though it were more brother against brother from what we could tell, men and lads killing each other over nothing – nothing! Then Cromwell and his lot, ending everything left and right, until the King come back, so tell me, what was it for?

Me, I look out for my own, I help those that need it, and I scold those that need that. I bested the last plague thirty year ago, and the one twenty year before that. Maybe this time it'll do for me, or mayhap I'll keep going for another ten year. Tis in the lap of God, say the priests, but then the priests are often in the lap of something else – a rum lass most like – so they have little to say to me.

That's right, my boy, this isn't the first plague I've known. What was your name again? Kwadwo, you say? Hmm. Got any meaning to it, that name? Ah, born on a

Monday. Well yes, plague's nothing new for us London folk. When Queen Bess died, thousands followed not long after and the same happened when the Scot went, James, as if thousands couldn't bear to live without him. Peculiar, that, how plague came down on us twice then, yet I'll wager Charles is still alive, the randy dog, no kingly death to warn of this new sickness. Ha! He'll go on and on, that one, unless some rogue comes along and runs him through.

No, I don't much care for kings, you can tell. I'm more worried that my brother could get stuck in a loft, no one to pass the days with him if things get bad, if he falls sick and his lodgings are shut up. My brother, yes, who fought gladly for the King in that cursed war, and finished with nothing but an arm sawn away at the elbow and a payment promised but never got. No, don't you be sorry, young man. Don't you be sorry.

Me? I'm in rude health, and as you asked, I live with my son and his wife – and five of their children besides, although the two eldest are already flown – one a worker of metal like his pa, one about to have a child of her own, so soon! – 'tis cramped but we get by, I won't moan when I have a warm bed and a warm hearth. So many don't. But my brother's alone, his wife gone in childbirth, and his children, poor things, long since with our Lord. Me, yes I'm widowed, my husband's been dead near twenty year, taken by some consumption, and that were bad enough.

Our niece I've been with Oxford way, just out of town, she's widowed too, widowed in the war she was, but that's nothing strange, there's many a woman suffered that. Every year I go to stay, for a summer treat for us both, well more for me, I should say, being a whole score older. The sweet air is good for my humours, must be, and my son gets a rest from his ma. I pass a pleasant month but I'm not idle, no fear! I help with the household – when Annie's not telling me to sit, but I tell her right, ha! I'm not dead, I can work, better than she can with her back. Sometimes her sons come round too – twins, they are, about your age I reckon, they're good lads. But it's been hot this year, too hot.

Then same as you, I heard word the plague was getting bad and I thought of my brother and I had to come back. The babe of the family he is, at least to me, never mind he's past sixty. He'll always be my youngest brother, ever since he were a chit

and I helped him with the bullies in the lane, and he's the only one of my brothers and sisters I've got left.

How times have changed for us! Who'd have thought we'd have lived through so much, but that's the point, young man, we lived. Don't know why, or how, but we lived. Through plague and war, fights with the French and the froglander Dutch, bad harvests, cold winters, we got through it, London got through it, and through this new plague we'll get through it again. God's truth, there'll be bad times, and He knows there'll be villains as much as kind souls to bring us succour, but we'll fight and fight as ever we do.

I've seen it all, lad, and what do you think I've learnt from these many years I've been given? That who's above us, for all my talk, them lot's not important, what matters is who's about you, people who'll help each other to come through, stop us getting lost in our squabbling. After every storm there's a harbour waiting, that's what I say. And if I don't make it through this time, there's plenty who will. Those that die, we mourn them, but we think of the good they did, and we remember a friend worth having, and that has to be enough.

No, Nicholas, don't worry for me. Look to your daughter, give her a life as long as mine, not the same as mine, to be hoped, but a better one. You keep close with that Mercia, she seems like the sort to see you right. And you, lad – Kwadwo or whatever you're called, you don't take any chances, you hear me? You're only young, see to your friends but you see to yourself too.

You hear?'

Kwadwo rolled his eyes. 'I hear.'

'And here we are,' said Nicholas, accentuating the 'here'. 'Well, the edge of town, at least. Just down that road is Soho Square.' He looked at the old woman. 'You know, for all we should be worried by plague, I'm glad to be back.'

The old woman reached out a hand. 'Of course you are. For you and for me, this is home. Tis where we belong.'

Nicholas looked around him, at the boundary of field and town, and relinquishing the old woman's case to the innocuous man's grudging care, he shook out his aching arm and took a single step forward.

'Well,' he said. 'Shall we see how things fare?'

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 check 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 princock, 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.'

IV

Nicholas stood back, as far as he could in the cramped room, grown uncomfortable from the day's heat. Taking a deep breath, he watched his sister busy herself with the pile of washed laundry that had been lying untouched since his arrival.

'Why do you want to take her at all?' she said abruptly, folding a small pair of woollen breeches. 'She's safe here. She's always been safe.'

'I'm not sure it is safe here, Eve. You must have heard things. I saw at least three houses with crosses painted on their doors just two streets back.'

'There aren't any crosses in this street, Nick. And if folk do get it, they'll be shut up.' She paused in her folding. 'Poor things.'

'That doesn't mean it won't spread. People get out. The smells get out. I just want her to be well.'

'And what will folk think when they hear Eliza's been taken away? Why haven't all the other kids been taken, that's what they'll ask. Why is Eliza so special, they'll ask. Half of them don't realise she's yours, not mine.'

'Eve, I think most everyone round here knows she's mine, whatever story we put about. And if we're honest, 'tis hard to know who's father or mother to quite a few of these kids round here.'

'You make it sound like we live in a whorehouse.'

'Well, there is that one down –'

'Don't get clever with me, Nick.' She glanced away. 'I just don't think. . . I don't think she should go to some strange big house where she won't fit in.'

'Eve, 'tis more than just keeping her safe, if she goes to Halescott for a few weeks she'll have the chance to learn things. Jesus, Eve, she can learn to read. A child of mine!'

'Aye, well.' Eve shrugged. 'Learn to read, eh? Lot of good that'll do when she's older.'

'Don't mock. I never thought it was worth it either, but since I've been with Mercia and I've learnt a few letters, it opens your eyes.'

Eve snorted. 'How is the lady benefactress?'

'Big word, Eve! You must have picked up a book yourself.' He softened his tone. 'No need to be bitter. Her family worked hard for what they've got, and her especially.'

'I work hard, Nick, and look at what I've got. Six children, one of them yours – yes I know I agreed to it, and I've never regretted it – a husband who's barely home and this palace.'

Nicholas surveyed the familiar room. It was small, barely space enough for the two of them and a table and chairs, let alone when the children were home instead of in the streets. A kitchen of sorts was adjacent, its one glass-paned window letting in what light the street could afford, its shelves stacked with herbs and papered blue as a remedy to ward off flies. Above, a partitioned bedroom provided sleeping space, which the residents often shared with smaller, furrier midnight intruders. Above that, on the second floor that jutted so far into the street its residents could reach through the window to touch the hands of the neighbours opposite, a barely lit garret space had been given over to another couple, a young butcher and his pregnant wife, who had moved in last year when the previous tenant had been taken much against her will to her new accommodation in Newgate.

'Where is John?' asked Nicholas.

'Working in the yards, where do you think? Where he is from sunrise to sunset.'

'Out somewhere he can catch plague, then.'

Immediately the words were spoken he regretted them. Eve seemed to pale, and her composed face crumpled under her dry blonde hair.

'All's well for you, Nick, isn't it? Now you've got that Mercia you can come in, take Eliza, and go. We have to stay here, and John has to work, and yes he could get

plague, and then I could, and the kids could, however hard I try to keep things clean. But if he don't work, we don't get money, we don't get fed, and we die any way. There's no charity round here, and if there was, I wouldn't want it.'

'I've tried,' said Nicholas softly. 'You know I've still not been paid for those years I served on the ships, same as everyone I know, despite all my petitions. Despite Mercia asking for me.' He sighed. 'Eve, she's paid me well these past few months, better than I could have earned here, and you know it. I'm sorry I've not been around, but – that money's been of good use to you, I hope.'

'Aye, well, I won't deny that's helped. I thank her for that.'

He took a small step toward her. 'You could all come with me. She said so herself.'

'I told you. I don't want charity.'

'Not even for the kids? I could take them all with me. Take you.'

'And how's that going to go down in the country, all these ragged folk from London showing up? Besides, Robert and Jem have their own work. As for the rest of them. . . oh, Nick, maybe. I don't think even Eliza needs. . .' Her cheeks seemed to go rigid. 'Look. We can see. As it is I'm not going anywhere. I can't.' She held up the sheet she had unknowingly scrunched in her fist. 'Someone has to look after John.'

'John's big enough to look after himself. Damn it, Eve. Why are you always so stubborn?'

'I've had to be to cope with you, little brother.' Her eyes, pale brown to Nicholas's green, suddenly fixed on his. 'Everything. . . everything will be fine, won't it? There's no need to worry. . . surely?'

'I don't know, Eve. That's why I want to take her.' He frowned, noticing the uncertainty in her darting pupils. 'Is anything wrong? Is John –'

'Of course not,' she said, turning back to her laundry. 'She's yours, Nick. Do what you want, I won't stop you. Maybe you're right, maybe it is for the best.'

'What's that mean?'

'Oh, nothing.' She jerked her head towards the door. 'Now go and see Dapps and the rest of them. They'll be throwing them drunk out of the Star afore you get there.'

'They will that,' he agreed, reaching for the jacket he'd left lying on a chair. 'You're sure there's nothing amiss?'

'I'm sure. Will you be wanting supper?'

'I'll buy a pie out, don't worry about me. And I'll see what lodgings there might be for when I'm back again from Halescott. Thanks for letting me sleep down here tonight.'

'*Don't worry*,' she repeated under her breath. 'That's the problem. I always do.'

Eve was right: little in her crowded street seemed different from the narrow thoroughfare of aging hovels Nicholas knew of old. But when he passed through an alley and turned the corner into another, wider street, he was confronted by a scrawny teenager with a pole tucked into his belt, and opposite the boy, a succession of doors daubed with a red cross and the phrase 'Lord have mercy upon us' in variously jagged lettering.

'Hey', the lad called. 'Don't walk over that side. 'Taint safe.'

'No fear,' said Nicholas, stopping beside him. 'How long those houses been shut up?'

The boy shrugged. 'That far one, I've been watching it since I started a few days back. These two here, only yesterday.' He drew himself up. 'A right. . . pother it was when that one was shut up.'

Nicholas took in the way the boy was striving to hold himself erect, evidently keen to impress. In other circumstances the attempt would have been worthy of a jest.

'What kind of pother?' he asked instead.

The boy didn't answer, instead peering at Nicholas until –

'Are you Nick Wildmoor?'

Nicholas paused. 'Why ask?'

'You are, aren't you? Lord above!'

'Why say that, Lord above?'

'Because everyone round here knows you! God's truth!'

The admiration in the boy's eyes was as bizarre as it was unexpected. 'Erm, do they?'

'I'll say. Who else round here's been in the King's palace, or sailed to America and back? Besides, I'm Robert's mate.'

'Robert?'

'Your nephew.'

'Ah! The lad been talking, has he?'

'All the time! He's told everyone about that highborn gentry-mort you work for.' He leant in closer. 'What's it like at Whitehall?'

'Full of arsworms as you'd expect. And she's not that highborn.'

'You've spent too long away, mate! Have you seen this shithole of a street? She is compared to us.'

'Well, you're right there. Robert behaving himself?'

The boy smirked. 'Out bowsing ale, most nights, when he's not tiffing with some wench.'

'Where's he get the coin? No. Don't tell me.' He jerked his head in the direction of the boarded-up doors. 'Aren't you a bit young to be a watchman?'

'Kiss my blind-cheeks!' the boy retorted. 'All the crossed doors are to be watched after those orders came down last week. But the normal watch don't have enough men to do their rounds and stay on the doors too. So they need new people. In this street, that's me.' The same as before, he drew himself up. 'And I'm sixteen.'

This time Nicholas couldn't suppress a smile. 'Very well, watchman. You seem a fine one for babbling, so why don't you tell me how things stand?'

THE WATCHMAN'S TALE

'I've been here four days now, Nick. Day watch I am, six in the morning til ten at night, then night watch takes over, Gerard's his name, strange lad but honest, though I don't see how it stands I get sixteen hours and he gets eight. I'm ready for bed by ten, I tell you, but don't fear, I'm not about to fall asleep, no one leaves them houses. Your

family's safe. It's devil hot, mind, when the sun's right over. Morning's good – shade from that side; evening's good – shade from behind, but at noon, God's wounds, it's hot! Never known a summer like it.

A month or so back, we started hearing word from St Giles way that folk were taking ill, though we thought nothing of it til some old 'uns started getting sick here. You know what it's like, aside from them who's got to, most stay right near where they are. I mean everything's here, isn't it, and if we did need anything from down St Giles, we'd just fetch it from somewhere else.

But now it's here, don't know how, but it's here. I've heard tell 'tis bad smells cause it, so my ma's made this posy for me to keep beneath my shirt. Some of the lads banter me for that but I say fuck them, they won't laugh when they're shut up and I'm not.

A week back, the alderman gave word he needed men to watch the houses, same as women to search the bodies to be sure it were plague that took them and not something else. Why that has to be women I don't know, but that's the way of it. Tis not a task I'd want, but I reckon they get something from it, from the pockets and the fingers of the dead, if you know what I mean. Still, what else is going to draw them to such godless work?

So I said I'd help with the watching, 'cos I reckon them who can help should, and my dad says we've got to look after our own. Folk've been cleaning the roads, not waiting for them to get done, and I tell you, shovelling shit's not pleasant, whether it's from a man's arse or a horse. In truth 'tis a worry, we try to stop up the smells by wearing cloth round our face, but the smell still gets through, and no one knows if covering our noses helps any way. And 'tis funny, before we all used to walk at the edges of the street so as not to walk in the muck, but now we walk right in the middle of the road to be away from the houses, to guard some little distance from the sick. Odd how life changes like that.

But – 'tis hard, Nick, I don't mind saying so. I look at that ken where I'm supposed to keep them in, yes that house there, but I see the hands pressed on the window, and. . . I don't know. Down near the market, the night watchman got in trouble for letting this mort out to get food for her young 'uns, and I heard tell of another lad who got beaten half to death by some cull who wouldn't listen that he had

to stay home. Smashing him like the devil, they say this cove was, but you won't catch no one culping me. Aye, that's why I've got my own stick at my side, I'll give anyone what he deserves, you know what it's like, and we don't want plague on the streets.

Here's another thing queer. A girl came by before, a wench like, and when she went past another stopped in front of me, saying I had rum ogles and would I like to take her out? Well, I do have good eyes, but not like she meant, for I could see that as she was talking the other lass was trying the door of the middle house yonder. So I had to go over to make her stop, and it got hot then, with the two of them in a fury, but I sent them on their way. Though. . . the girl at the door had been holding a basket of bread, and in the house, the old woman was looking out, and she started to cry. I. . . don't know what's best, Nick. I don't want folk to suffer, but. . . there's many more would if this gets out. That's right, Nick? That's right?

When I started this seemed like a rum bit of sport, but I'm starting to get. . . no, not afeared! Uncertain, perhaps. Two days back, the searchers came as I was finishing my time, into the house at the very bottom of the row, do you see, down there, and then a half hour later a cart came past, the driver ringing his death-bell, and they took a body out and drove it away. Then they shut up the house again, so there must still be folk inside – do you see that lad down there? He's the watchman for that corner. Those girls would have wheedled him.

And that pother I was talking of, in that house right here. I was on watch, as usual, when a doctor came round, two men with him, and they went in. Then there was a scream, and I looked up, and a woman ran out with a baby, begging for mercy for her child, and one of the men came after, and then her husband, with some sort of black boil on his face, cursing and shouting, but the man who'd come with the doctor just took hold of the woman, harsh like, it must have hurt, and he started to drag her back, while her husband, he couldn't stop him, he didn't have the strength, though he looked like he should have, and then the doctor and the other were by him, not too close like they didn't want to touch him, and you should have seen the street then, suddenly everyone's running, there's this hawker drops his knives, this milkmaid splashing all over, and the man, the husband I mean, he collapses, like that, and the doctor he don't know what to do, but the husband, I don't know how, he just stands up again, like he's found his strength, and he walks towards his house, calls his wife to

come back, and she starts to cry, shaking the man holding her off, but the husband says they have to think of folk, and she says what about the baby, and then a woman comes up, a friend from down the way, it seems, and she lets out a great sob, I'll never forget it, and she gives this woman the baby, and as quick as that like she's scared she'll change her mind she follows her husband in, and they shut the door, themselves, and the doctor turns to the woman who took the baby, but she's gone, who knows where, and out comes the paint, the red cross and the Lord have mercy, and the house is locked.

I keep thinking about that woman, and her baby. About how she got the child out, while they chose to lock themselves in, knowing they'll both be dead by next week. She could have run, that woman, in the hubbub. And I think, Mark – that's me, Mark – sometimes God is hard, sometimes people are, but in the midst of it there's folk prepared to do what's right. Good folk, putting themselves in harm's way to save their child, to save the rest of us.

Good folk like me? No, Nick, I'm no saint. I just watch. I don't know as I'd have the courage to shut myself up like those two did, or to go inside those houses like that doctor does. I think. . . I think I would, but knowing I'd face death so close, so soon. . . I can't be sure.

Can you?'

'I don't know, lad,' said Nicholas. 'I think I'd do what was best.' He clapped the boy on the back. 'What are you supposed to do if people try to get out?'

'Bring them back any way I can. Call the hue and cry if I have to.'

'Well, then. That would put you in harm's way, for certain.' He smiled. 'You're doing a good job, I'd say, better than some would.'

The boy shrugged, looking embarrassed. 'It's the doctors who have it worse. The ones that haven't run away, that is.' He looked up. 'I'd love to do what you did, once this is all over. Leave this shithole and sail to America. I think I'd stay there if I could.' He leant in. 'Got anything you can tell me about your gentry mort friend? Robert says she's got right nice – '

Nicholas snorted. 'You keep those rum ogles on the girls round here. And tell Robert to stop prattling. He's never seen her.'

'Aww!'

'Goodbye, watchman. You take care.'

'Bye, Nick. You take care too.'

Nicholas walked off, taking the young watchman's advice and sticking to the middle of the road. As he made his way to the inn where he was meeting his friends, the teenager's last words brought Mercia to his mind, and as he walked, avoiding the carts and the crowds, he wondered how she was faring in the country, and what she would think when he told her what he had decided he must do.

V

In a candlelit room at Halescott, Mercia sat back, letting her arms drop to her sides. She took a long breath, then turned to face her audience.

'I told you I could not play,' she said, raising her voice. 'I am surprised I remembered even that old tune.'

'Nonsense. You were marvellous,' Tanner shouted back, illuminated by torchlight as Luis and Alena applauded politely alongside. 'It is good to hear music in times like these.'

'If only the music were better performed.' She rose from the instrument, a polished virginals she had practiced on since she was a girl. 'Luis, will you not change your mind and play? I have not heard a violin for a long while.'

'I cannot while Simon is missing.' Luis turned from the window the three were standing outside, looking in at Mercia from a cautious distance. 'We should have stayed searching longer.'

Alena touched his shoulder. 'You and Joshua were out all day, Luis, today and yesterday. There was little else you could do.'

'No?' he said, barely audible in his soft Spanish accent. 'We may have had good fortune to find this sanctuary, you two and I, but he is still out there. Where is he?'

'You are sure you saw nothing else?' said Mercia as she approached, her shadow looming across the wainscot as she held her nosegay towards her face. In reality two days had passed since the musicians' arrival, nearly a fortnight since they had left London, but she had promised Bethany she would use the sweet-smelling bunch.

'No more than –' began Joshua in reply, but Alena lightly shook her head. Joshua paused, trying to hide the interruption in a cough, but Mercia had noticed.

'No more than what?'

'Oh. Nothing.'

She looked between the three players. 'I have learnt that any detail is important.'

Luis looked out into a darkness he could not have seen through. Joshua sucked in his lips.

'There were some footprints in the mud where Simon was washing by the river,' he said. 'It does not do to dwell upon it.'

'What footprints?' said Mercia. 'My man, Tom, did not mention any in his report.'

'We. . . do not much get on with your man, truth be told. And we did not wish to trouble you with tales of false hope.' Under her curious gaze, he flicked a seemingly carefree hand. 'The footprints led off briefly but quickly disappeared. The ground is bone dry when you move from the river. We found them yesterday when we looked, and made a wider search of the area today. There was nothing.'

'Indeed?' Mercia frowned. 'How many footprints? Were they of just one man?'

'Yes,' said Alena. 'One man, Joshua, that's what you said?'

He glanced at her. 'One man, a few prints, nothing more.' His mouth opened wide, finishing in an exaggerated yawn. 'Mrs Blakewood, thank you for your music and for letting us near the house. But I fear we are tired, and should sleep. We hope to ride to some of the nearby villages tomorrow, if they do not turn us away.'

'You are sure you are comfortable in the barn? I would have you in the house, but. . .'

'Quite comfortable.' He doffed his close-fitting hat. 'Well, 'tis a fair walk, so I think we best start.'

He picked up the torch he had rested in one of the sconces set into the back of the house. As they wandered across the lawn, Mercia watched the flickering light fade into the dark as her suspicions flickered bright within her mind.

***

At very first light she got up, washed quickly in the rosewater Phibae had left in a jug in her bedroom, and dressed herself in a practical outfit that required little attention: a pair of men's breeches and a plain shirt, suitable attire for what she had planned. Taking what remained of yesterday's bread, she looked in on Daniel before leaving the house without a word to anyone, feeling alert in the sharp morning air as she walked out of the gates and towards the adjoining village. Once there, she climbed the path of a small cottage whose occupant would doubtless be preparing himself for his day's work. But when she knocked and heard footsteps approach, the door swung open to reveal he was not so ready as she had presumed.

'Tis barely past dawn!' he began. 'What do you mean by – ?'

Recognising his visitor, he cut himself off. With nowhere to hide, he folded his arms across his naked chest. 'I'm sorry, my lady. I didn't. . .' He looked her up and down. 'Why are you dressed as a man?'

'Forgive me, Tom,' she said, ignoring his tone of disapproval. 'I will wait until you are dressed.'

Stepping outside, she waited on the short path, looking down the dusty street. The sun's rays were yet to fall on the orange stone from which most of the houses were built, or the golden thatch of their rooves, but the scene was pleasing all the same. Just out of sight was the cottage she owned herself, the largest in the village where she had lived with her husband before the death of her father and her elevation to the manor house. What places she had seen since she had last left that cottage, she marvelled, where she and her friend Nathan had uncovered the hidden clue that had set them on her strange adventures in the first place! Indeed, she had been wearing similarly odd clothes that night, and maybe, she thought wryly, she had done better to stop then, to accept her fate and to remain in that cottage, than to become the peculiar creature she was sure she was now considered to be, rightfully restored to the manor house or no.

She laughed at the absurdity of the notion. And then her laughter ceased, and she found herself thinking of Nathan, how she had left him behind in America, and for the first time since returning home a dull melancholy took her, a sense that the village was somehow emptier now, without Nathan, without her husband Will who

was dead too soon, without herself in that old cottage. But then the door pulled open behind her and her reflections vanished.

'I'd never thought to see you here, my lady,' said Tom, now fully dressed. Behind him, his wife and children stood at the back of the one dark room, peering out despite the early hour. Swiftly, he pulled the door shut. 'How may I help?'

'I am sorry to disturb you,' she said. 'But I have need of a guide.'

'How so, my lady?'

'Tom. Can you not call me that? Mrs Blakewood will do. Now. I want you to take me to where our musician friends were attacked. I want to see for myself.'

Tom frowned. 'In truth? Tis not fitting, surely?'

'Come, Tom, I have done and seen too much to be bothered by such niceties. Perhaps you can tell from the attire I have chosen to wear.' She raised an eyebrow, trying to draw him into the conspiracy but merely succeeding in making him stare. She cleared her throat. 'I would be most grateful for your help.'

'I searched that area myself, Mrs Blakewood. That man they claim they've lost was nowhere to be found.'

'Claim?'

He scoffed. 'Them three aren't telling us the whole truth, by no means. Maybe they don't have the plague, I'll grant, but I wouldn't be surprised if there were no other man, or they've done for him themselves.'

'Indeed, Tom, but then why would they have told us about him at all?'

'I don't know. But I don't trust them, all the same.'

'Certainly they are not telling us the whole tale. They mentioned they had found footprints, but it seems they said nothing to you.'

'About footprints?' He cocked his head, at last taking an interest. 'No, Mrs Blakewood.'

'Well, then. Who knows what else may have been withheld, or overlooked?' She gave him a smile she knew full well would disconcert him. 'Come then, Tom. I am eager to start. Let us gather what provisions we need and be on our way.'

They rode quickly, their horses swift on the track that served as the first part of their journey, but as the road became rougher while winding through a wood, Tom signalled

they should leave it to pass among the trees. Immediately the going slowed as the horses picked their way through ferns and roots, and in the mounting heat, Mercia was soon glad of the weak ale they had brought to quench their thirst. Maggie, her faithful steed, was just grateful to reach the river where she could sate her own.

'Not far now, Mrs Blakewood,' said Tom at the water's edge. 'We should leave the horses here and finish on foot if you're able.' He looked at her. 'You're sure you want to carry on?'

She leapt from the horse, barely remarking the twinge in her side.

'Of course. Would you like something to eat before we walk?'

She offered him a chunk of bread which he gladly took. Then she laughed.

'What is it?' he said, biting into the small loaf.

'I took that from the pantry while no one was there. I am imagining the look on Bethany's face when she reads the note I left. Hopefully Phibae will calm her down.'

Tom merely grunted. 'Tis good bread still. Now, we go this way.'

Tying up the horses, he led her along the riverbank for several minutes. The wood was calm, no breeze today to ease the closeness. She looked at Tom's back as they went, and thought how strange he must think it for the two of them to be out here together deep in the wood, and she found she was missing Nicholas in his place. But then Tom stopped.

'This is where they say that Simon was washing.' He gestured to his right. 'And a little through there is a sort of clearing where they say they were attacked.'

'*Where they say*,' she repeated. 'You are very mistrustful, Tom.'

'I don't see reason to trust folk who turn up uninvited in your barn, is all.'

'No.' She looked around. 'Tom, what do you think of the plague?'

'I think I don't want to get it.'

'What do you feel about it, then? When I was in London last month, I could tell people were becoming scared.'

'It is something to be scared of, Mrs Blakewood. That's why we don't want folk from London stopping here.'

A niggling doubt entered her mind about the ease of Nicholas's return; although he was hoping to stay elsewhere for some days first, if people everywhere felt

like Tom, he would not receive a warm welcome on the way. And would the Halescott villagers be happy to learn she was taking in his daughter here?

'What would you have done to the musicians had I not arrived?' she asked. 'You were menacing them with a rake.'

'I just mean to protect you, Mrs Blakewood. As I protected your father before you. As I mean to protect my own family. I would have sent them on their way.'

'You imply I fail to protect my own son.'

The strong man swallowed. 'I didn't mean. . . I'm sorry. My wife's always saying I don't think before I speak.'

'Don't be sorry. I prefer to hear opinions firmly expressed. As for Daniel, you can be sure I would always hope to shield him from harm. Now.' She turned her attention to the riverbank, looking up and down the meandering watercourse. 'Does this not strike you as curious? Mr Tanner said there were footprints here, but I see nothing. Yet there has been no rain to wash them away, and if the mud had dried, it would have preserved the prints with it. But – ah, look here! This mud has been flattened, as though someone were deliberately erasing what was there.'

Tom came across. 'It could have been an animal. A deer perhaps, rummaging near the river.'

'I doubt it. And look there.' She pointed up the far bank. 'Another patch of mud, flattened the same. And another just past it, before the ground turns hard away from the running water.' She looked at him. 'You say you examined this place yourself?'

'Yes. But we were searching for a man, nothing else. A body we thought most like.'

'Did you look in the direction these flattened patches lead?'

'I didn't notice them.'

'Wait here a moment.'

She walked a short distance in the direction the tracks had started, but there was not enough of a trail to be sure which way she should go. She turned this way and that, walking back and forth while peering at the ground, but the dense undergrowth revealed nothing. Then returning towards the riverbank, she raised her eyes and –

'Tom!' she exclaimed. 'Look at this!'

Into the mutilated bark of an old chestnut tree were etched five words, carved in small, ragged letters, some barely discernible, but the message they delivered was stark. Five pleading words beneath a gouged-out cross, words that spurred a shiver through her heart:

†

Lord
Have
Mercy
Upon
Us

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 swotted 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, clasping 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 – hoi! 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.'

PART TWO

VIII

Six weeks later. Six hot, uncomfortable weeks with little rain and less progress.

The earlier summer heat had only worsened. More and more often did Tom's workmen take their shirts off their backs, leading to more and more blistering sunburn; more and more did Mercia stay indoors, or else linger in the shade of her beloved trees, shunning the fierce afternoon sun.

Her investigations had come to naught: she had found no trace of the musicians, who seemed to have vanished as swiftly as they had arrived. All that remained of their presence was the mourning ring, which she kept locked in a secure box in case the trio should return. A second visit to the clearing in an evening of boredom had likewise accomplished nothing, save she had left a note in the gash in the fallen tree, in case the musicians returned there to seek the abandoned ring, although she had been careful not to identify herself by name lest more dubious searchers find it:

Return to the place you found sanctuary to retrieve what I found here

But she had placed that message five weeks ago, and nobody had come. Unable to let matters lie, she had returned to the clearing for a third time the week before, solely to check on the note, but the fragment was still in the tree, although covered in the slime of grubs. She had replaced it with a fresh one, written before she had set out in the expectation that the first paper would have turned as rotten as the hole in which it lay.

Nicholas too had long since been and gone, leaving his daughter in the safety of the countryside, an evacuee from the perils of London. It had been awkward at first, especially when he had confessed he hoped to head home as soon as Eliza was settled, uneasy to rest safe at Halescott while his family and friends took their chances. Nonetheless, he had promised to remain at Halescott if Mercia wished it, unwilling to presume Eliza could stay in her care without him, but she had dismissed the notion without hesitation, happy to do this favour for a man who had risked his life more than once in her service. It made her proud, in all truth, to think of Nicholas as he was now, Nicholas after the adventures they had shared, different to the man she had first met in that rough London tavern, different to the man who had needed to fight hard to regain her trust. He had said he was now in her debt forever more; she knew he had already paid that debt in advance.

Daniel had taken to Eliza straight away, excited to gain a sibling he had never before had, and as Nicholas had hoped, was already well on the way to teaching the young girl some letters. In time she barely seemed to miss her family, save for a few upset hours when she pined for home, but whenever Phibae appeared this seemed to calm her, and so the energetic maid's duties soon grew to include care of the child, at Phibae's own request. Mercia's heart soared to see the girl running free on the Halescott estate, away from the sorrows of London, and she could not help but picture herself as an infant, terrorising the grounds in much worse ways than Eliza was doing today.

Before Nicholas left, on a mangy horse bought cheaply in Oxford that would take him all the way now the coaches had stopped, she had told him the story of the mysterious musicians; he had been as intrigued as she was, and had promised to find out more back in London if he could. But for all that was a welcome possibility in her desire to get to the truth, the memory of Nicholas riding down the driveway in an early morning haze was engraved in her mind, for the fear she had felt for him on the sad morning of his departure had never gone away. Every evening she included him in her prayers, beseeching that he would be spared the plague's grasping claws.

And so the weeks had gone by, and Eliza's reading had improved, and the land had grown yet more scorched, until something happened that Mercia did not expect.

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Now fully recovered from her wounds, Mercia had begun to turn her attention to the managing of the Halescott estate, which according to the terms drawn up when the manor was restored to her keeping, she was to run in trust for Daniel until the young boy came of age. She had once again summoned James Calthorpe, her adept land manager who had worked for her father before her, and who had stayed with the estate in the interregnum when her uncle had seized the land. Or rather, this time it was Calthorpe who had requested a meeting, and she had asked him to come to the house.

'You seem cheerful, mistress,' said Phibae, as Mercia was sat at her desk waiting for Calthorpe to arrive.

'I do not know why, but I enjoy this,' she said, tapping at a piece of paper full of neatly compiled figures in tables. 'Reviewing the success or otherwise of the estate is an involving task. I like it.'

'And Mr Calthorpe?'

'What of him?'

'You enjoy his company, I think.'

Mercia fixed her with a look. 'He is a good manager.'

'Of about your years.'

'Yes.'

'Handsome.'

'Yes.'

'Well, then.'

'Phibae, he has a wife. And I am his. . .' She widened her eyes. '. . . overlord.'

Phibae laughed. 'Forgive me, mistress, I speak out of place.'

'If I wanted maids who only spoke *in* place I should not have employed you, Phibae.' Elbow on the desk, she played with a ringlet of hair that had come loose from the silver wire that was holding her style in place. 'Besides, you are right. The man is able to hold a conversation and he is scarcely ill favoured in appearance.'

'Indeed.'

'Indeed? Now that is all you say?'

'How long has he served here, then?'

Mercia chuckled. 'James? He started his present duties three years ago, working for my father at the time. His own father managed Halescott even in my grandfather's

time, staying with us until well into his sixties. John was one of those men for whom work and duty were his life.'

'And his son?'

'His son is no less assiduous, as you see from the detail on these papers he has drafted. He can be contrary, in truth, and his opinions are very – set, shall we say? But he is an excellent manager, and he has the trust of the men, so I am glad to have him.' She glanced towards the door at the sound of heavy footsteps in the corridor outside. 'And I think he is here. The way his heels strike the ground as he walks is most distinctive.'

'Indeed so, mistress. With your permission, I will get back to Eliza.'

'Certainly. Thank you, Phibae, for taking her under your care. I appreciate it greatly, as I know Nicholas does.'

'I do it gladly, mistress. Ever since Ayo and I. . . lost our own child. . .' She smiled sadly in remembrance. 'Eliza is a blessing to us all.'

With a light bow, Phibae opened the door and passed into the corridor. Almost immediately, a tall, long-faced man wearing a doublet as impeccable as it was dour entered in her place, closing the door behind him. He threw the wide-brimmed hat he was gripping between callused fingers onto the bar of a nearby high chair and bowed, just a little, in his turn.

'Mrs Blakewood,' he said, the pitch of his voice among the deepest she had ever known. 'I trust you are well?'

'Completely recovered now, James, thank you.' She indicated a vacant chair on the other side of her desk, upholstered with fine leather. 'Will you sit?'

Calthorpe nodded and took the offered seat, eyes sweeping across the papers she had laid out.

'You are satisfied with the accounts, I hope?'

'I am, although I have a few ideas about the estate I would like to discuss. Is it about the accounts you asked to see me?'

Left eye twitching at the mention of ideas, Calthorpe quickly cleared his throat and inched closer to the desk.

'In truth no, Mrs Blakewood. It is about those musicians you were so – intrigued by.'

The unexpected reply made her sit up straight. 'You have heard news?'

'More. . . a rumour. But you asked to be informed of anything new.'

The unnecessary pause as he pulled a thread from the braid of his doublet was maddening.

'Well?' she said.

He looked up. '"Tis one of the women who live just beyond the edge of the estate, Warwick way, in one of those three cottages in the middle of nowhere.'

'Ah yes. I know where you mean.'

'The young couple in the middle cottage – I employ the husband from time to time for farming work on the estate, and the wife does, I don't know, something with her wheel.'

'Something?'

'Makes clothes and the like, sells them at market to make more coin for the pair of them.'

'An industrious woman, then.'

'As you say. Her name is Mary Stevens. She claims to have heard something about the players at the market. I'm not sure how much credence to pay her, and so I was hesitant to bother you, but. . . she was insistent she would speak only with you.'

'Only me? Why?'

He shrugged. 'She's probably after some reward and thinks you'll give it her.' Again, he cleared his throat. 'But I have made her come here, which she was pleased to do. Wanted to get close to the house, no doubt, pry around where her husband gets his wage. I left her waiting at the other end of the garden. Away from the house.'

'Thank you, James,' smiled Mercia as she got to her feet, all thoughts of the accounts forgotten. 'Shall we go and find her?'

Mary was sitting in the shade of a mulberry tree, cooling herself with a colourful paper fan that served to dissuade a pair of inquisitive wasps as much as to provide a current of air. At Mercia's approach she quickly stood, her eyes seeming to stare straight past. She was wearing a simple woollen dress, and her boots were scuffed, although the ribbons in her grey hat complimented her fan in bringing cheer to the practical outfit.

'Is that Mr Calthorpe?' she asked.

The manager assented with a curt grunt. 'I have brought Mrs Blakewood, as you asked.'

'Ah, thank you,' said the woman, turning her gaze towards Mercia. 'Please forgive me if I do not look at you directly, Mrs Blakewood, but I cannot see more than the faintest of shapes.'

'Mary is blind,' explained Calthorpe.

'Not blind, precisely,' said Mary, 'but much lacking in sight. Thank you for meeting me, my lady.'

'If you will permit me?' said James.

'Of course,' said Mercia. 'But come back later, if you would, to discuss my thoughts on the estate.'

Assenting with a brisk nod, James walked off. Mercia turned back to Mary.

'There is a bench just there which I have always found most comfortable. Shall we sit and talk?'

'Thank you,' said Mary, following as Mercia walked slowly to the bench, where both women sat, guarding a decorous distance between them. Left alone with the lady of the manor, Mary sat stiffly with bowed head, pulling with her right hand at the fingers of her left.

'Now,' said Mercia, keen to find a way to put her at ease. 'Mr Calthorpe suggested you make clothes to sell at market. Why don't you start by telling me a little about that?'

THE SEAMSTRESS' TALE

'Mr Calthorpe told you I sew for extra coin? My husband works our small bit of land, but most months 'tis not enough, so he's pleased to be hired to work on your fields, tilling, reaping and the like. Still, sometimes we struggle, as all folk do, and he's glad to let me help. There's many a man wouldn't let his wife go to market to sell her work,

but he knows what starving's like from when he were a child, and besides, he's a kind soul, that one. Has to be, to put up with my temper, so he says, but I think he's only teasing.

It was my grandmother taught me how to sew. You may not be able to see much, she said, but you can feel your way round a wheel and thread right enough. And she was right, for I always sell what I make, little doublets for children, scarves for ladies – maybe you'd like one? – or gloves, though I don't think we need those this summer. I do darning for the men too, when they need it, which is often, as you can guess. You should see the state of some of their shirts, they sometimes come to me more hole than cloth.

I come from up near Daventry, though I married a man from round here, and so I know most of them who sell at Daventry market, and it's there I still like to go, even though it sometimes feels far, and if it rains hard on the way, half the time I turn right round. But when it's dry, like now, I'm glad to get out the house, although Robert, my husband, he rides with me when he can, or makes sure someone else does, just in case. And they look out for me, up at Daventry, if some thief tries to steal my wares, the men make sure he ends up in the stocks sooner than steal from a blind woman again.

Though as I said, I don't like to call myself blind. My father raised us after my mamma died bringing my youngest brother into the world, and with two young boys about I had to help keep house, so not seeing didn't come into it. He married again a while later, and my stepmother didn't care for us kids in truth, but my grandmother was an angel, and I grew to learn when to speak back, and when to mind my place, at least I hope. After we wed, Robert did try to stop me going to market, out of worry, but I want to, simple as that, and I'm sure you can understand why. I can tell when to move out the way, and I've got a cane to help when 'tis needed, and the kindness of strangers too if ever I need that.

Now, you'll be wanting to know what I've heard of these players. It were a woman buying from my stall who mentioned them, in more than passing, and I remembered what my Robert had said, that some strange folk from London had been staying in your land and then just up'ed and gone. There was talk of them having plague, he'd heard, but he didn't pay it much mind himself, though not all of the lads

who work with him agreed, if you want to hear the truth. Some of them were mighty afeared, for all they were strong men, and it were only Mr Calthorpe and that Tom fellow that got them out of their grumbling.

Me, I think it were right to help them out, not that 'tis aught of my business, and I hope you don't mind me speaking so plain. I won't say I'm surprised, mind, that folk were feared. I've heard talk of plague, how it takes a strong man, a strong woman, and lays them low so quick there's no time to think of saving them. Makes them into like beasts, they say, or as men bowsy on too much ale, unable to move, let alone speak. And the pain, they say, the fever, 'tis like the Devil himself has entered in, supping on all that is holy. And those awful swellings, all over, turning the skin black as darkest leather, the very picture of it makes you sick. An awful way to die, terrible. Tis to be hoped those swellings go by the time the sick come to Heaven, God have mercy on their souls.

In Daventry market too we had our scare, when a packet arrived from a London merchant, a pile of cloth that was damp and which stank and you should have heard the panic, folk running, folk screaming, and you can be sure how that was terrifying for me. The Lord preserve us, Mrs Blakewood, they say all over the land, people are being turned away, dying on the roads, while in London God has abandoned the town and they're rotting in the streets. I don't know how much is true, I only go by what I hear, but some of it must be right, and you can scarcely blame folk for their worry.

But that's by the by. Soon as I heard this woman at market talk of some queer musicians, I asked her to tell me what she'd heard, and it were this. Now afore I go on, Mrs Blakewood, I was wanting to know if you might see your way to – not give me charity, mind, I don't need that – but asking whether anyone in the manor might want aught? You'll wear much finer things than I can make, but you'll have maids and the like. If you could but ask, that would be a kindness. Oh thank you for that, Mrs Blakewood. Thank you.

So this woman, Lou her name is, from a village up near Rugby way, well, when I asked her, she told me these musicians had gone further north, all the way to Leicester she reckoned, where they spread word they came from Oxford and began to amuse with their playing. But then it came out they were from London, and even though

much time had now passed, some of the townsfolk still took scared of the plague, and seeing their untidy clothing, torn here and there from weeks on the road, their fright grew past reason, and the angry among them – you know the kind I'm sure– got the constable to declare them for vagrants, on point of them having barely no coin, and you know what that means. The men, the pair of them, were stripped to the waist, held fast in the pillory and flogged, and the woman – well, I'll come to that, but let's say for now that she wasn't harmed. After they were whipped, they were thrown out the south gate and ordered to go back to London, and by all accounts that's what one of them did, for the next time they were seen, near Rugby, the one fellow, the foreigner, he wasn't with them. But there was a reason the other two stayed behind, and this Lou, she's seen that for herself.

I know what you'll say, why should I believe her, when folk make up tales all the time? And 'tis true I don't know her, but I'm sure she weren't lying, for she came to my stall to find them something particular, something I always have because it's quick to make, and she described them like Robert had done.

And so I'll come to it now, the thing you'll most want to know, that the woman – pretty name, Alena, that's right – what she needed particular, it was a small tunic, a very small tunic, because – aye! – just last week, in the midst of her troubles. . . just last week, she gave birth to a little boy!'

'What?' interrupted Mercia, leaping to her feet. 'But she was only here a few weeks ago. I admit, I never spoke with her up close, but surely I would have noticed. . . I mean to say, she wore loose garments, but I thought that was for the heat. And even so.'

'We've all known women who worked hard to hide a child,' said Mary. 'Apparently this baby came early. But it survived.'

'A baby,' wondered Mercia, pacing up and down. 'God's truth. I did not expect this.'

IX

London, August 1665. Each week the Bills of Mortality came in; each week the numbers of dead kept rising. A month before, when Nicholas had left for Halescott with Eliza, hundreds had died that same week. Just yesterday, a slumped friend had told him of the latest Bill. Now the toll was in the thousands, five, six thousand a week and getting worse.

'Will it ever stop?' said Eve, who made Nicholas call by each time he heard the latest. 'I'd be scared to go out the house if I didn't have to. I know life wasn't perfect, God's truth, but at least it was life, however poor. I can't keep mourning friends, Nicholas. Whole families buried in dead of night, no one allowed to go and say goodbye.' Expressionless, she looked at her brother. 'You should have stayed in the countryside.'

'You know I couldn't, not when there's you and John and all the rest here.' Stood in the doorway he glanced down, a numbed sadness lowering his eyes. 'That young lad round the corner I got used to speaking with, the watchman. . . you know they buried him last week, in some common grave?'

Eve closed her eyes. 'Another mother grieving her son, if she's not dead already herself. Another marriage that'll never happen, children that won't ever be born.'

'It will pass, Eve.'

'And how many of us will see it?'

'Most folk will. Keep thinking about that.'

'I don't care about most folk, I care about my children.' She sighed, throwing down the cloth she was holding. 'I don't mean that. Of course I care. I'm just tired, Nick. Tired of fetching whatever next door wants, tired of John moaning, tired of

hearing them upstairs arguing, tired. . . just tired. And in this heat too.' Unconsciously, she shuffled the yellowing sprigs of herbs she had laid about the table. 'Everything stinks.'

'At least we are still here. You know the boy I came down with – Kwadwo? He tells me things are rough down where he is. And if it gets into the safehouse. . .'

'Safehouse?'

'The place where they hide the runaway servants.'

'Oh, you did tell me. I can't remember anything at the moment.'

'Not that I know where it is exactly, I'm not meant to. Mercia hid there, apparently, when she went on the run from the Tower. But point is, if the plague gets in there, that's a certain death trap.'

'We're all living in a death trap, Nicholas. It's called London.' She sighed. 'Why've you got to go out and look for those musicians now? That Mercia wouldn't want you risking yourself on the streets.'

'I know but. . . I'll be careful.' He shrugged. 'London's always a place of death.'

'It's one big plague-infested shithouse. What's the use of them setting up plague houses outside the city when it's just as bad all over? To hide sick folk away to make things look better than they are, that's why. Thank God Eliza is away from all this.' Finally, she allowed herself a faint smile. 'You're not a bad father, Nick, when all's said. Taking her away from here.'

'Could be better. Reckon I'll spend more time with her when this is done.'

'Let's hope you get that time. I'm worried about that new room of yours.'

'Yes,' indulged Nicholas. 'I know.'

He left not long after, heading back into the eerily quiet streets of London, with barely a wanderer about. Since his return from Halescott, he had managed to rent a small place not far from Eve's, where he enjoyed a whole room to himself with a door that just about closed, if he pushed it hard enough, and a disconcerting view onto the narrow alley behind. Indeed the edge of the room jutted right over the alley, and in the corner furthest from the door, he could dangle the tip of his foot out into the space beneath, although some feral crow would likely try to snatch it away. But it was the only room he could find at short notice – the only room where the previous occupant

hadn't died of plague, or so the lackadaisical woman who owned it had claimed. Once the plague was over, he would find a more suitable abode, so he hoped, something that needed work that he could rent cheaply in exchange for carrying out the renovations himself.

But his ramshackle room wasn't his present destination. Based on what Mercia had told him about the musicians' life in London, over the last couple of weeks he had asked around and managed to track down both the house where Alena's mother lived – where some of the musicians had stayed before leaving the city – as well as where Simon, the vanished flautist, had sent his wife to live with her sister. It was even possible, thought Nicholas, that Simon could be safe there right now, returned from his harrowing journey weeks ago, and so it was there he decided to try first. Visiting the plague-ridden district of St Giles, the first epicentre of the outbreak where the musicians had all had their own homes, was out of the question: nobody dared venture there now, save the bravest and the criminal.

After a brisk walk made brisker by the absence of traffic, Nicholas stood in front of a bakers at the far end of Thames Street, near to the river as the name implied. Simon's sister-in-law's home occupied the middle storey; the bakery below it was shut, and evidently had been for some time. But the building appeared reasonably maintained, if unwashed, and the entrance was thankfully free of a red cross or any other warning against the plague.

Passing beside the bakery, Nicholas climbed a set of narrow steps to reach a tiny landing where the staircase turned back on itself, the door he was seeking almost hidden in darkness. Although the street had been quiet, a little river noise had found its way across, the shouts of watermen or murmurings from those people who had ventured out, eyeing each other up with nervous looks. But here in the stairway all was silent, that oppressive kind of silence that can almost be heard, and Nicholas was taken with an uneasy feeling, as though it were an effort to remain in the oppressive stillness rather than return to the open street.

Well I'm here now, he thought, and lightly knocked on the door.

No answer.

He knocked again, a little firmer.

Still no reply.

Again.

'Who is it?' hissed a woman's voice, close behind the door.

'Good morrow. I'm looking for Simon,' he tried.

'I've already told you, I don't have it. I don't know where he is.'

'Sorry, I reckon you must. . . I've never been here before.'

A slight pause. 'Aren't you with them?'

'Who's *them*? No, I'm here on my own.'

'I don't believe you.'

'Look, I don't know who you've got me confused with but I'll go as soon as we've talked. We can do it through the door if you want, but it'd be better face to face.'

He waited, hoping the reassuring tone he'd attempted had been enough to put the woman at ease. Still, it was a few seconds before the bolt on the other side screeched across and the door opened just a crack, revealing a querying eye.

'Who are you then?' asked the woman.

'I'm a friend of. . . a friend of a friend. I'm looking for news of a musician named Simon and I heard this is where his sister lives. Have you seen him of late?'

'Why?'

'Tis just a question.'

A light appeared through the crack, illuminating the eye as it looked him up and down. 'Simon's my husband. But he left here weeks ago, after the plague got bad.'

'He still not back to London, then?'

The eye narrowed. 'Why should I say if he was?'

'I only want to know if he's safe. Last I heard, he was with a group of musicians. That right?'

'Musicians.' She scoffed. 'He spends more time with them than he does with me. That's what he said he was doing, yes. He also said it'd be safe for me here, away from St Giles. Shows how much he knows.' She opened the door a tiny bit further. 'Go on, then. Who's sent you? Lion?'

'Lion? What kind of a – no, like I said, I've come for a friend.'

'This friend, she a woman?'

'Yes.'

'Ha! She can keep the faithless arsworm.'

'God's wounds, no, I don't mean it in that way. She tried to help his group when they needed somewhere to stay, but they left without a word. She's. . .' he searched for the right word. '. . . concerned.'

'So what's your role in this?'

'Me? I'm just the errand boy.'

'Then it's none of your business what he does, is it? Tis barely any of mine. I'm past caring.'

'If you don't want to talk to me, that's your choice, but. . .' He cleared his throat, uncertain how much of Simon's fate he should reveal. 'Listen, I don't want to be the one to tell you, but your husband got. . . separated from the rest. We only want to know where he is. Maybe he just wandered off, but if you've seen him, it would ease a bit of worry.'

'He's always wandering off, usually towards the nearest lass.' The woman stared at him. 'You sure you're not from them?'

'Who's this *them*?'

'If you don't know, you can leave well alone, and if you do know, you're lying. Either way I don't know who you are, and I don't see I need to believe anything you say.'

'Come, I'm not after your husband for anything. I just said I'd see if I could help.'

'Sound like prying to me.'

'I'm not –'

She shut the door on him before he could fully retort. Shrugging to himself, he turned back down the stairs and went out onto the street.

The woman was right to be sceptical, he thought – it really was none of his business, although he still couldn't decide if he would have done better to tell her the whole truth, that her husband's band had been attacked. But it was best not to worry her, he reasoned, at least not for now, especially when there was nothing she could do. But she was clearly agitated about something, or someone, and he wondered what she had meant when he'd knocked on the door and she'd said she didn't have *it*.

Now he turned his attention to the part of town where Alena's mother lived, a marginally more attractive district where the houses were less steeped in the grime of ages. After a half hour walk along roads he still couldn't believe were this quiet, even with the ban on selling wares in the streets, he found himself standing once more outside an unfamiliar residence on a corner plot, this one much larger than the last, occupying the whole of a two-storey building some way distant from London's walls. There was another, more harrowing difference. The door to this building had a cross daubed onto its wood, and the familiar refrain of *Lord have mercy upon us* was scrawled in hurried brushstrokes beneath.

'Shit,' he swore. He looked up and down the street, and sure enough red crosses had been painted on a number of doors, over half it seemed. 'It's even got out here.'

'It's got everywhere, love,' said a woman who had come up to perch on the low wall behind him. 'You think you're safe, cos you're a certain age, a certain sort. Have a certain wealth.' She sniffed, examining the backs of her hands. 'But plague don't care 'bout that. You looking for someone in particular?'

Nicholas turned to look at her. She was neither old nor young, a little older than Mercia if he had to guess, but she was filthy, her hair streaked with soot, her face and hands spotted with red paint, her clothes unremarkable. A childish grin spread across her freckled face as she cocked her head to the side, running her hand through half-finished ringlets.

'The woman who lived in this house here,' he answered.

She kicked at a shrivelled cat mewling at her feet, the emaciated creature more bones than flesh. With a wild screech the terrified animal fled.

'Damn things should all have been killed in the cull. Was she family?'

'No.'

'Friend?'

'No.'

'Then you won't mind me telling you, I saw her carted off two weeks back.'

'She's dead?'

The woman nodded. 'A nasty death it was, more of them horrible boils than I've seen on any other poor devil I've searched.'

Nicholas winced. 'What do you mean, you searched?'

'I mean I'm the searcher round here.' She laughed. 'That cat got your tongue, did it?'

THE SEARCHER'S TALE

'I know what you're thinking, I don't look the part – not some haggard old crone like you expect a searcher should be. Not too bad for my age, eh, all of thirty five! I'm part time watchman too, you know, ever since the coves who were meant to be doing that died of plague themselves, Devil take them, and that's why I come up to see who you were, well that, and because you're a handsome sort, if I'm honest.

Aye, plague took both of the poor bastards, day watch and night watch alike. Do you think I'm sitting here for my health? But soon as there's a death roundabouts, well, more like a few hours later – no sense in not taking care – I get myself up, go in that house, no mind the danger, and check it were plague. That's my job, see, as a searcher. Not pleasant, I'll give you, but someone's got to do it. I search the dead to be sure it were plague. And it don't take much searching on some of them, let me tell you. Them blisters, so black it makes you sick.

If they are dead of plague, first thing I do is – well, first thing I do is get out quick, and second I tell the alderman's lot, the examiners they call themselves, and they add the tally to the numbers of dead. Though between you and me, and I'll tell you as 'tis scarce a surprise, the alderman likes us to take a few off the numbers, a few more each week to speak true. They don't want news getting round things are this bad, see, though any fool on the street who's chanced on a body can tell. We get a small fee, course. A woman's got to live, don't she, minded she's not coughing her last herself.

Don't say that, you'll make me laugh, and 'tis not seemly in this day and age, though if you can't laugh, what can you do, that's what my uncle used to say, least 'til he tumbled into the same sodden grave as half his wretched street did. Tis to be hoped

he's laughing in Heaven, but I doubt that, he was a stingy sort with coin as he was with kindness, saying one thing and acting another, less stingy with his strap. His wife, my aunt, she took ill too, she did, but she survived, and she's inherited his trade, having no child, and a good trade it is too, not that she'll let me near it, the untrusting mare. So don't tell me plague brought no one good luck, for it turned out good for her.

But I was saying, don't make me laugh, what, you think all we searchers do is go in, glance at the body, help ourselves to whatever we can carry, and run back home quick as like? Ha! Have you seen the most of what folk round here own? There's not much I'd want, I'll tell you, and if there is, well, why shouldn't I take a little bit, I could die going into them homes, and 'tis most like their kin are lying in their own graves, or fast on their way there, so who else will want that pretty bracelet, or that handsome watch? I can clean such as that up, get rid of the smells, and keep them or sell them, no trouble. I won't take the linen though, nor the clothes, I don't trust them, and besides, examiners say nobody should be taking them from out of a house that's had plague, whoever you are. Still, no mind the orders, there's plenty of searchers who do, though some of them I never see again, and you can guess why. Aye, thrown into them graves just the same.

No wonder I'm scowling. Them common graves, have you seen them, or the plague houses outside the city? They try and keep them out the way, so people don't see them, but I make it part of my business to go, and I tell you, every time I do I cross myself for safety, though I don't believe in all that crossing, being a believer of our English Church, and not of Rome. Not that it makes much odds what you believe with this sickness. Ha! Lord have mercy upon us, that's what they write. I've written it myself where I've been asked to, just look at the paint on these hands. My God, look at the calluses, the creases. . . do you know, there was a time when these hands were smooth? And yes, I can write, what do you think I am? Well, I can write that at least, and that's what's needed for now.

Yes, most of the time it don't do you no good, however you pray, save for comfort when I'm up there, 'tis a horrid, terrible sight, and no wonder we searchers grow such a thick skin, same as on these hands, having to see all that. Them lads with the carts who take the bodies up, they have it worse, they have to load their carts with the dead – grab them, like, close – drive all the way with rotting corpses on back, tip

the carts up, hear them squelching in among the rest, and then come back and get some more. I don't know who it is covers the graves when they're full, but it must take a big lot of shovels, the width of them holes – holes straight down to Hell! Tis us who keep the streets clean, us, the carters, the diggers, the doctors too I suppose, and the nightmen, them who clean up the shit. You know the carters have stopped ringing their bells, there's so many dead they'd be ringing all the time, so folk can scorn us all they like, or spite us for taking a thing or two in payment, but without us there'd be many more dead, so folk should be grateful we do it. Most would not dare.

So you want to know about that woman who lived over there? I know of her, is the pity, she was reasonable liked in these parts, a decent old widow with three sons and two daughters, the sons were fine lads, until two died too young, and the daughters, one of them married a farmer and left town, and the other – well, a vixen is all I'll say, taking up with a group of four men like that, a group of musicians no less, and traveling about the city, and now the country so they say. Well, I don't know much about music, save I like to dance a jig in the alehouse, at least I used to, but I know the virginals is means to be an upright instrument, but there's nothing virginal about that one, I can tell you. Ha, ha! A singer, she fancies herself, and to give her due she does sing fine, like a bird she sings, and she wears nice clothes, and does her hair and face so as you'd think she had a temper as angelic as her voice. But that's where the likeness ends, and if you think I'm being loose with my tongue about a woman who's not here to speak up herself, 'tis to warn you to take care if ever you see her, for with those looks of yours she'll be on you right enough.

Well, yes, yes, you're probably right, maybe I am being a little unjust. Truth is I wish I could sing as she does. But tell me then, why are you here, what is it you want to know? See, I was right, it is about that girl, that Alena! Always the same. Yes, she was here a few weeks back with two of them musicians, a Spaniard the one was, and another cove, though he never said much, at least not to me. They were in mourning, it looked like, for they were wearing black, or black bands, but that's not surprising. Most of the city is black with grief these days, and some of that grief's even real. Like the grief these musicians had, that seemed real, and it turned out sure enough it were a friend of theirs met his maker.

Here, you're not with them other lot, are you? Not that it matters to me, you understand, but I like to know who's who and what's what. No, you've never been here before? That's a relief, after what I've been rattling on! Because let me tell you, not long after those musicians came, a group of other lads turned up, right angered, and well, I didn't know what went on at the time, but the day after, the pair of them musicians just left with that Alena, leaving the old woman on her own, poor thing, although afterward she said it was her idea they should go, to bring cheer to the countryside with their music. Cos we don't need cheer here, do we? Still, there was no reason to doubt her word.

What were they like, this other lot? Not very friendly is all I'll say. I never saw them round here before, which was why I just asked if you were with them, cos you're not either, but you say you're not, and you don't act like them, so I don't doubt you. There were three of them, I think, three rough looking lads who didn't fit in, and I gave them a good look over, you know how it is when you see strangers round where you live. Two were. . . about your age – middle twenties? – while the other, the one in charge, he were a lot older, forty five, fifty? They weren't here long, but they didn't look happy. Came back a couple days later, too, after them musicians had gone, and this time they left in a right fury, got into a fight with young John Lee down the way, but don't go thinking to ask him about it, for he's died of the plague since.

Seems to me half round here have gone, though maybe that's cos even them that aren't sick are locking themselves away, sealing up the draughts to stop the smells getting in, no matter 'tis so hot, only coming on the streets to find what they need or when their confinement's got too much. It's grown too familiar now, to speak true, sitting here and watching them doors, calling the alderman's lot to say another house needs boarding, or another soul needs taking to the pits, but I'm alive, aren't I, and that's a blessing lots don't have. Although this heat, sometimes it makes me think the Devil's taken up all of London and cast us down in Hell, cos I can't imagine Hell being much worse than this, save the pitchforks and demons and imps. Though the look on them men that fought with John Lee, they weren't far different from such creatures, no they weren't.'

'And you've no idea who they were?' said Nicholas.

'None, and if I were you I'd stay clear. I wouldn't fancy being one of them musicians just now.'

'Why say that?'

'Because during that fight they had with John Lee, nobody could avoid hearing it, the streets are so quiet now, the one told the other to leave off, for it weren't that lad they needed to fight, they had to go for the players, wherever in England they'd gone.'

Nicholas whistled. 'Have they ever come back?'

'I'll say so, couple of weeks back, but by then the old woman was dead, and maybe that were a good thing, for they were raging, and I reckon it were only fear of the plague that stopped them pillaging the house. Since then, I've never seen them again. Wherever they've gone, they've either found what they were after, or – '

'Or they're still searching,' said Nicholas. 'Shit.'

X

Mercia felt uneasy as she rode to the coaching town of Dunchurch, the best part of a day's ride north and east from Halescott. Not with the usual nerves heightened in travellers by the possibility of highwaymen, or any disquiet about spending the night in an unfamiliar coaching inn – she had spent enough nights in much more adventurous places of late – but troubled by the ring she was carrying in her pocket, lest she lose it or yes, lest it be taken from her by force. But the ride was more dull than eventful, uncomfortably warm as was usual for that summer, her steed Maggie sweating with the effort of carrying her to her goal at her usual brisk pace.

Although she had set off early, it was late afternoon by the time she arrived in Dunchurch, her journey lengthened by a needed break for a lunch of apples and cold meats that Bethany had prepared the night before. But when she rode into town from the Oxford road the sun was still bright, the bells of St Peter's chiming four times as she handed over her horse at the inn where James Calthorpe had recommended she stay. The friendly stable boy greeted her with a warm welcome, which she rewarded with a smile and a penny for his kindness.

According to Mary, Dunchurch was where Alena had given birth, and needing time to recuperate after a difficult delivery, she and her companion had been put up at one of Dunchurch's other many inns, or so the seamstress's local acquaintance from Daventry market had said. Not wanting to waste any time, Mercia refrained from changing out of her riding dress and headed there now, hoping the pair would still be at their inn, but if they had left, hoping to learn where they had gone.

Just south of Rugby, Dunchurch formed the crossroads of two major coaching routes, the one from London to Birmingham, the other from Oxford to Leicester. As

a result, the village seemed to be made up more of inns than houses, and the sheer number of taverns astonished Mercia as she passed along the street, walking with purpose towards a run-down establishment called the White Horse that might have been pleasant when the first Charles was alive, but which had lost much of its appeal today.

When she arrived, she was immediately struck by the smell of uncollected horse manure as she entered through a narrow passage and across a cobbled square with stables set along two of its ragged sides. The large cellar doors set into the ground were wide open, and the sight of them made her nauseous, reminding her of the terrible events that had befallen a similar inn in Harwich during her previous mission for the King. But she forced the bad memories aside, and went into the inn proper through an uneven doorway that likely hadn't been renovated since the year it was built, most likely a century before.

An elderly woman barely taller than Daniel was leaning against a scratched bar directly opposite the door.

'Good evening,' said Mercia. 'I am looking for two friends of mine, a man and a woman. Joshua Tanner is the name of the man.'

The woman barely looked up. 'No one staying here by that name.'

'Has there been? I think you would have remembered. The woman had a baby last week.'

'Oh, her,' said the woman, seemingly indifferent. 'Aye, she was here.'

'Was?'

'They left for another of the inns. That interfering busybody made the girl move, said it wasn't clean here.' She snorted. 'This here's as clean as any a place you'll find in Dunchurch. You want a room, love?'

'Thank you, I already have one. Do you know which inn they went to?'

'If you don't want a room then – ' she narrowed her eyes – 'no.'

'No?'

'No.'

Mercia held the gruff woman's gaze, hoping for more, but to no avail. 'Thank you,' she sighed, aware the woman probably knew precisely where the players had gone. But the news the pair had remained in town was encouraging, and so she left the

sorry inn and made her way back to the street. Standing clear of the once-white wall, she looked left and right, taking in the number of inn signs steady in the lack of wind, a dozen or more, and that was only along the road she could see.

Only one thing for it: visit each of the inns in turn and ask.

A whole ten inns later, the only thing Mercia had learnt was that the spread of gossip in a coaching town like Dunchurch could clearly outdo the spread of the plague. Despite various embellished tales about the manner of Alena's delivery, she had received no definite news of her whereabouts, other than a faint hint that she and Tanner might have been moved towards the edge of town, but even that clue was uncertain, and she decided to stick with her methodical approach of moving from inn to inn. She was beginning to wonder if the musicians had left town altogether, when in the more enticing surroundings of a spruced-up hostelry at the sign of the Dun Cow, she yet again put her same questions to its rotund landlord.

'Joshua Tanner,' he mused out loud. 'And Alena. . . yes, we heard about that. Think the whole town did, it were almost like the Christmas story what with them looking for an inn and her giving birth in more or less a stable and all, but no, there's neither her nor any other wench here with a newborn, no children at all, but – wait a moment.'

Mercia waited with set teeth: she had now heard the Christmas joke for the fifth time that evening, and each time, the storyteller had thought they were the first to make it. This particular raconteur tucked his towel into his hooked breeches and raised his voice.

'Peter,' he called. 'Hoi, Peter me lad, pay me some mind!' He rolled his eyes at Mercia. 'Fool boy never listens. Peter!' he shouted again. 'Did you hear aught about that woman with the new baby? This lady here wants to know where to find her.'

The boy continued sweeping under the tables, ignoring the customers legs as much as he ignored the landlord's question.

'Peter!' resumed the landlord. 'You heard anything about that woman with the new baby? God's wounds! Peter!'

Finally the boy looked up. 'Don't know,' he said in a monotone. 'Ask him, he's the one come here to get away from her.'

Almost taking the head off a surprised woman sat alone at the table behind him, Peter swung his broom round to point past the unlit fireplace, shaking the loose bristles at a shadowed bench set the other side of the cavernous inglenook. There was a man sitting there, or there had been, for he was already almost on his feet, but now he shot fully up, pulled his hood across his face and began to push his way to the door.

'Hey!' shouted the landlord. 'You haven't paid for that ale!'

'Mr Tanner?' said Mercia as the man reached the door. He paused, the briefest of moments, before pulling his hood closer and hurtling out of the inn.

'Get after him, Peter, I'll never catch him!' ordered the landlord, and this time the boy responded, throwing down the broom with a mischievous smile and racing out in pursuit.

'God's wounds,' he grinned as Mercia followed. 'I love it when they don't pay!'

Out in the street, she saw Peter running in the direction she had been heading before, past the crossroads in the centre of town and up the Birmingham road to the west. The street was busy, full of travellers enjoying their stopover in the warm open air, and the crowds were impeding Tanner's progress, while the younger Peter dodged nimbly – and less caringly – left and right. Mercia hurried after them, easily weaving through the crowd now it had been separated by Peter's passing, the surprised pedestrians cursing the young lad who had trodden on their feet or elbowed them to the side.

Up ahead, she saw Tanner step into the middle of the road, straight into the path of an oncoming coach, but the gasp she let out was unwarranted, for the horses were merely trotting along, and he had no difficulty jumping past. Peter was forced to continue on this side of the coach, but losing patience at the horses' slow pace he grabbed a case piled on the back and used it as a pivot to swing himself round, speeding him back on his way while tumbling the case to the ground in the process. No time to stop, Mercia stepped around the fallen case, following Peter as best she could, or more properly following the trail of bemused onlookers he was leaving in his wake.

At the sign of the Three Horseshoes near the edge of town, Tanner seemed to hesitate, turning his head towards the door before accelerating on. But Peter was persistent, and swifter, and in the thinning crowds soon narrowed most of the distance between them, while Mercia pressed on in her turn, thankful she was wearing her more

forgiving riding dress than her usual attire. Still, for a moment at the end of the street, where the last house gave way to fields, she thought she might have lost them, but emerging into an open meadow, at its far end she enjoyed the amusing scene of Tanner taking cover amongst a herd of cows as Peter was nearly upon him. And then she winced as Peter finally caught up with his quarry, pushing the unfortunate musician face down to the ground with a disgusting squelch.

She hurried towards them, stepping carefully around the cows that were lowing at the unexpected intrusion. The scene was comical, she thought despite herself, and so it continued, with Peter knelt astride Tanner, holding him down with wicked enthusiasm, but Tanner was strong, and he managed to push the slender boy off. He stumbled to his feet, his hood falling from over his face, but by now Mercia was alongside him, and she stopped him with the palms of both hands as he walked directly into her path. Raising his head, he stared at her from annoyed eyes.

Startled, she took a step back.

'You're not Joshua Tanner,' she said, taking in the man's dirty blond hair and proud face, in difference to Tanner's more swarthy appearance.

'Josh? Why would I be Josh?' said the man, and now he laughed. 'This is an amusing turn, Mrs Blakewood. It is Mrs Blakewood, I take it?'

'You seem to know me, and yet I cannot say the same about you. Keep an eye on him, Peter, please.'

The man was still laughing. 'Don't worry, I won't run. The others said you were a stubborn sort.'

She tilted her head. 'Who are you?'

'Who do you think?' he smirked. 'I'm Simon, of course.'

Final instalment coming soon

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