

SURVIVAL

Or,

Tales Of Hope And Villainy From A Time Of Plague

A Mercia Blakewood Special

DAVID HINGLEY

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INSTALMENT SEVEN

XI

‘Simon,’ stared Mercia. ‘How are you here?’

‘What does it matter?’ he replied, thrusting back his head while Peter looked on as if he would pounce at any moment. ‘Thank you for sheltering my friends for a time, that was generous. But we can cope on our own now, no?’

‘That is not what I have heard. There is a reason I have come. Is Mr Tanner not with you?’

‘Josh? He left us.’

‘For where?’

‘He left. That is all.’

‘Here, lady, I’ll make him speak,’ said Peter, and the boy kicked out at the back of Simon’s knee, causing the unfortunate lutist to crumple to the ground in pain. ‘Now, friend,’ he continued with an evil grin, ‘you’ve still not paid for that ale. I’m taking her side.’

‘Hell’s teeth,’ swore Simon. ‘I’ll have you in the stocks for that, and then we’ll see who owes what.’

‘No need for that, Peter,’ said Mercia, although she made no move to help Simon up. ‘If you would tell me where I could find Mr Tanner, I will leave and – ’

‘Stay out of it, Mrs Blakewood,’ growled Simon. ‘For your own good.’

‘For my own – ?’ Annoyed, she folded her arms. ‘I should also like to see Alena, if I may. I hear she had a difficult birth.’ She put on a smile. ‘Call it . . . a mother’s shared compassion.’

‘Really, I don’t – ’

'As for Mr Tanner, I have something that belongs to him. Or it might belong to Luis, and so I suppose you could tell me where he is instead.'

'To Luis? Why should – ow?' He swung to look behind him. 'Do that again and I'll – '

'Way I see it,' interrupted Peter, 'you answer her questions, you give me my money, you can go. Otherwise I'll be chasing you back to your inn, and I won't let off chasing 'til you do pay.'

'God's truth,' said Simon, rubbing the back of his leg as he clambered to his feet. He reached into his pocket and threw a coin into the grass. 'Here.'

Peter bent to pick it up. 'Don't be expecting no change for that after the pother you've caused.'

'You're a one, aren't you. Now get out of here.'

'Not til you answer her questions.' He shrugged. 'I like her, running after you like that.'

'God's wounds,' sighed Simon. 'Luis has gone back to London. He didn't want to stay away any longer. Josh is – gone. Probably to London too.'

'Gone?' said Mercia, hoping for more. 'Very well,' she said when nothing came, 'what happened to you? Your group was attacked, it seems. Were you hurt?'

He remained silent.

'Sir, a lot of my men gave a lot of their time to try to find you. All I want is to know what happened.'

He scratched at his neck. 'Oh, I got away. By the time I came back the others had gone. I found them a few days later.' He inclined his head. 'What do you want to give to Josh?'

She ignored the question. 'How did you find them if you had no idea where they were?'

'Well, I don't know. Maybe when you're on the road in a hostile part of the country you make arrangements to meet again should you get parted.'

'Indeed,' she said, adopting a sarcastic tone of her own. 'Strange then that none of the others knew where you would be.'

'I didn't say they all knew. Look, Mrs Blakewood, if it'll get rid of you, Alena, Luis and I are involved in some matter that Josh didn't know about. Tis nothing to worry over.'

'What kind of matter?'

'One he didn't like when he learnt of it. I notice you didn't answer when I asked what you had for him.'

She studied his blank face. 'Merely an item that was left behind. I would still like to see Alena, to see how the baby fares. It must be difficult cooped up in a coaching inn.'

'She's tired. Leave her be.'

'I am staying in Dunchurch tonight. I can pay a visit in the morning.'

'God's truth!' Clearly exasperated, he pulled up his hood. 'Goodbye, Mrs Blakewood. Don't come looking for us again.'

He turned to leave, but Peter was still in his way. The boy struck out, but this time Simon lost his patience. He grabbed Peter's arm and bent it behind his back, causing the startled boy to cry out in pain.

'Listen, you little runt. You've got your coin, now fuck off out my sight. If I see you again I'll have the harmans on you. Understand?'

'Yes. Yes!' squealed Peter, and Simon let him go.

'And you too, Mrs Blakewood. I expect you to be gone first thing.'

'Or I will regret it?' she said, eyes flicking to Peter and back.

The corner of Simon's mouth twitched. 'I didn't say that. Good day.'

She offered to help Peter back to his workplace, but the chastened boy was more embarrassed than hurt, and after a few coarse words directed at nobody in particular he went sullenly on his way, his youthful ferocity depleted. By then Simon had disappeared towards the Dunchurch crowds, and she made her way back into the busy town herself.

As she passed the King's Head Inn, she remembered how Simon had paused here during their pursuit, and she looked through the arch into the stable yard beyond, taking in the clip-clopping of hooves and the wisps of smoke wafting out from inside the inn. Listening intently, she thought she could hear a baby's cry, but that was hardly

conclusive, and mindful of Simon's hostility she chose to await a more opportune moment to speak with the new mother on her own.

Instead she returned to her own inn, finally taking the opportunity to change out of her riding dress into the outfit she had packed for the evening, a simple cloth affair shorn of embellishment, the most practical thing she owned that served a dual purpose: light in weight for her horse's back; undistinctive in look so she could sit down to dinner in some dark corner of the inn's dining room unnoticed. Or so she had hoped.

Half way through her simple meal of chicken and peas, a bareheaded interloper sat down on the bench beside her, resting a small tankard of ale on the knot-ridden table with barely a thud.

'Hello, Mrs Blakewood.'

Surprised, Mercia swallowed the rest of her mouthful and turned to her new companion.

'Good evening,' she greeted. 'I had not thought to find you looking for me.'

The woman beside her shrugged. 'It grows stuffy in that little room. The baby keeps crying.'

'You have not left him on his own?'

'How do you know he's a he?'

'Oh. . . a guess.'

She shrugged. 'Simon is with him. Which means he won't come here to interrupt us. He may be a shit, if you'll forgive my cursing, but he won't leave his son alone.'

Mercia looked Alena up and down. She had grown thinner since they last met, thin in the face and gaunt in appearance, and her once pretty hair was unkempt, no wire to hold up her ringlets, no ribbons to give contrast to its redness. Yet it had been brushed, and the scarf around her neck looked new, in contrast to the dusty, dirty dress that smelt musty, almost mouldy, but Mercia made sure she did not inch away.

'How is the baby?' she asked.

'Lively, shall we say, for such a small one. He came early, and the midwife thought he might not survive, but he's a fighter. He was sickly at first, now he's making up for it.'

‘Is he your first?’

‘And last, after that birth. And yes, Simon is the father, and before you say, I know he’s married to someone else.’ Holding Mercia’s gaze, she took a sip of her ale. ‘Things happen when you’re travelling.’

‘I make no judgement. Why have you come here, to me?’

‘Simon said you were here. Said he’d come across you in town and sent you on your way.’

‘Did he indeed?’

‘And so I wanted to talk to you. I wanted – ’ She faltered, took another sip, and pressed on. ‘I wanted to ask you a favour I have no business asking. The inn is no place for a baby. ‘Tis so hot, and we’ve already passed our welcome. And I’m scared, Mrs Blakewood, of taking him to London. With the plague and. . . and all.’

‘All?’

‘Oh, just a word, I don’t mean anything by it. But I wanted to ask, and you can send me on my way if you want. . .’

‘Yes?’

‘If. . . we could return with you to Halescott?’ She looked longingly across the crowded room. ‘It was peaceful there, the one time we had rest on this whole journey. We wouldn’t want to stay long, and we could use that barn again, only for a few days, while we’re deciding what to do.’

Mercia looked at her, uncertain how to take the unexpected request. She allowed herself a long pause.

‘Not two hours since, Simon warned me to mind my business. I doubt he would welcome what you ask.’

‘He will agree if I make him.’

‘Can you make him?’

‘I can try. He can go back to London if he prefers.’ She glanced down. ‘Before, I wanted to leave you as soon as we could. But now. . . with the baby, things have changed.’

Mercia took another long pause. Alena’s face appeared earnest, but in the shadows of the inn, who could truly tell?

'Alena,' she said after some seconds, 'I will not say no straight away. I have the room, and I feel nothing but pity for your baby's plight. But if I allow it, you will have to be honest with me. I sense something is not right, and I need you to tell me what.'

'I understand. What would you like to know?'

'For a start, why you left so abruptly. How you found Simon when you claimed you had no idea where he was.'

'I knew where he would be. Josh and Luis didn't.'

'Then why - ?'

'Did I keep it to myself while the search went ahead?' Twisting her tankard in a circle, she breathed deeply out. 'At the clearing, when we were attacked, Simon managed to run before the brigands saw him. When I went to search, on the horse as best I could in the moonlight, he heard me and whistled. I took him a little way off so he could find a hiding place. I didn't know where we were exactly, there was no way to tell in that darkness. We arranged to meet back at the clearing when we could, but he told me not to tell the other two. He... didn't want to put them in danger.'

Mercia frowned. 'In danger of what?'

'Of being attacked again, I suppose. He was worried we'd stumbled into some outlaw band's territory and didn't want to put them at risk. He had no way of knowing we would find you and have the assistance of your men. But after Luis had returned there with that – Tom, I think was his name – and told us there was no sign of any brigands, the next day I went back for Simon and we decided it would be best for us all if we left.'

Mercia looked her up and down. Over the past year she had heard many wild stories, and she was certain what she was hearing now sounded practiced. But Alena returned her gaze without a flinch.

'Are you telling me everything?' Mercia asked. 'Why did Simon have to hide while you felt able to return to the others?'

Now her eyes flicked down. 'I don't know. It was for...'

'Their own good?' she said, recalling Simon's earlier words in the cow field. 'What of the matter, as he called it, that he told me you were involved in but which Mr Tanner knew nothing about, which he liked little enough to abandon you? Would you care to enlighten me as to that?'

'That is between us,' said Alena, a new edge to her voice. 'If I offend with that reply, I am sorry. Really, 'tis better you not -' Of a sudden, she broke off. 'I think I've made a mistake coming here. Forget us, Mrs Blakewood. We'll manage.'

Hurriedly, she got to her feet. On an impulse, Mercia caught hold of her dress.
'Alena, wait. What if your child falls sick?'

As she gripped the coarse material, so different in texture even to the inelegant dress she was wearing that evening, the thought of Alena's baby tugged at her compassion just as her scepticism warned her against Alena herself. But with a child's welfare at stake, compassion would always win out.

'Very well,' she said, releasing the dress. 'You can come to Halescott for a short time. But I have children of my own to protect, and so you must do as I ask, and you must leave when I say. When the baby is safely there, we will talk again, and I shall want more answers. Is that agreed?'

Alena hesitated, and Mercia was uncertain what choice she would make. But then she turned back round.

'Thank you, Mrs Blakewood,' she replied. 'You have a kind heart.'

XII

‘Are you sure this is the place?’

Kwadwo gave Nicholas a querying frown. In return, Nicholas shrugged.

‘That’s what the searcher found out for me.’

‘There’s nothing here. I told you she couldn’t know what she was talking about. She just wants to get in your breeches.’

Peering out from behind a small, mossy rise, Nicholas cast his gaze over the dreary landscape ahead. Aside from a battered stone hut on the near side of the river, the mudflats before them seemed to sprawl across nothing but rushes, rocks and reeds. The occasional calling of fowl was the only hint of life amidst the grim desolation.

‘When did you get so quarrelsome?’ he said. ‘Back in Whitehall you were shy as anything.’

‘Back in Whitehall I was made to belong to a woman who thought I was her pet. Now I’m out of there I’ve had time to think about it. This plague – it makes you a different person. If you manage to live.’

‘I’m glad you’ve found your fire, Kwadwo. Just don’t let it rule you, is all I’ll say.’

Kwadwo’s hand slipped on the moss. ‘Ayo – Phibae’s husband, you know – ’
‘I know.’

‘He said the same. And now . . . now he’s sick.’

‘Kwadwo. Why haven’t you said?’

‘I don’t know. Maybe I don’t want to believe it. He had to go somewhere for a few days. He never came back. When one of the women at the safehouse tracked him down, he was locked away in a stranger’s house, sick.’

'Dear God. Poor Phibae, she won't know.'

'It can't be in the safehouse for no one there's ill. But... I spoke harshly with him the last time we talked. He says the same things as you, thinks I'm just some kid.'

'I wager he doesn't.'

Kwadwo scowled. 'How would you know? You've never met him. But these past weeks, he's been almost like a brother with me, even when I argued and said I didn't need his help. Just like my real brothers, the ones I had before they were taken by the ships. And then I think of her in the Tower, you know who I mean, and I get angry about that too. I wish I could -'

'March up there and break her out?'

His eyes flicked down. 'Don't mock me.'

'I'm not. It doesn't change that you can't do anything about it. Course there's other times, other fights... times when you've lost yourself, when you think there's nothing left you can do, and you meet someone like Mercia who is so... astonishing, it makes you want to turn yourself around.' Surprised at his own words, he shook his head. 'I'm sorry about Ayo, truly. If he doesn't - well. If he doesn't, we'll look out for Phibae together. Right now, bring your anger to bear on helping Mercia instead.'

'Why do you think I'm here? I owe her my escape, I'm not about to forget it.'

'Mercia would say you don't owe her anything.'

'She already has said that. But I do. Shall we get back to why we're here?'

'You're a good lad, Kwadwo.' Nicholas clapped him on the back, eliciting a renewed grimace. 'Now then... I don't see why the searcher would lie about this place. When I told her I wanted to find these coves, she was quick to help. Suspicious, maybe, but quick. Past the edge of the city, where the mudflats begin. Most every twilight, she reckoned. That building must be it.'

Kwadwo looked at him. 'It doesn't have a roof.'

'I can see that.'

'Then how is anything kept there safe?'

'We have to look, Kwadwo. I want to see if Mercia's caught up in anything dangerous.' Then he snorted. 'Hell's teeth, this reminds me of that smuggler bitch.'

'Who?'

‘One Eye Wilkins, the smuggler who did this.’ He held up a finger, where the nail had been torn away. ‘This is just the sort of abandoned place she would use.’

‘You don’t think it’s her, do you?’

‘No, she disappeared after that business with Mercia. She’ll be back, no doubt, but not yet.’ He gave the teenager a sideways glance. ‘What do you think, then? Should we go down there now or wait for dark?’

Kwadwo thought a moment. ‘Wait for dusk at least, ‘tis only an hour or so. See if anyone does go in.’

‘Sensible. Let’s stay hidden and keep a watch out.’

Twenty minutes later, a solitary wherry boat sailed past their lookout, but it continued downriver without pause. A quarter of an hour after that, more voices drifted across on the wind behind them, and soon enough a second boat came into view, a lantern lit at its prow against the fading light. On board were what seemed to be two large bundles at one end, and a pair of men at the other, but it was difficult to be certain. As the boat approached, the voices dropped away, leaving the vessel to ply the river in silence. But this time the boat slowed.

‘They’re going to stop,’ said Kwadwo. ‘Maybe you’re right. Do you think it’s them?’

‘Hard to know,’ said Nicholas, not taking his eyes from the single-masted sloop. ‘There’s only two of them, but they’re where the searcher said they’d be. Let’s watch a moment, see what they do. If they drop their cargo and leave, we’ll take a look.’

The boat was mooring not far from their hiding place, making it easier to observe what was happening. One of the men leapt to the shore, tying the prow to a hook set into a chiselled stone, then seemed to hesitate before rejoining his companion to help haul out the ungainly bundles, each as large as a person. The boat rocked to and fro as they were lugged onto the rocky shore, and then by the folds of the thick sacking that kept the contents in, the men quickly dragged the cumbersome objects into the hut. As soon as this was done they cast off and began to row upriver against the current. Within minutes they vanished, as quickly as they had arrived.

‘Come then,’ said Nicholas, leading Kwadwo from behind the rise.

The pair hurried to the hut in the spectral twilight. Although the couriers had gone, Nicholas still felt an uneasy trepidation. Reaching the hut, he glanced around.

‘There’s no one here,’ said Kwadwo. ‘Let’s see what’s inside.’

Before Nicholas could stop him, he went in. Immediately he let out a startled cry, and jumped back outside.

‘There’s dead bodies,’ he managed in a croak.

‘What?’

‘Dead bodies. In those sacks. Don’t go in!’ he shouted as Nicholas approached the door. ‘They’re dead of plague!’

Nicholas stopped still. ‘How do you know?’

‘It’s not so dark that I can’t see! One of them’s got an arm dangling out. It’s got those boils all over it.’

‘Shit.’ In haste, Nicholas followed Kwadwo away from the hut. ‘Did you touch any of them?’

‘No, and I didn’t breathe in any of the air either. I was in and out so fast.’ Recovering himself, he inhaled deeply. ‘Can the dead give you plague?’

‘I don’t know. There’s plenty of searchers and grave diggers still alive, so –’

‘I think I’ll be well. God, I hope so.’

‘You will be, Kwadwo. You can’t walk the streets in London without seeing a corpse slumped on every corner. If you could get plague from that, everyone would have it.’

‘There’s chests in there too, crates. God knows what’s in them, I wasn’t going to look.’

Despite his returning confidence, Kwadwo continued to edge away. And then he let out a cry as another man’s voice rang out in the gathering gloom.

‘I’ve got your little friend,’ it drawled. ‘You got any weapons, throw them down.’

Nicholas peered forward. An insubstantial figure, in the dusk more like a ghost, had one pale arm thrown round Kwadwo’s chest. The other held a knife.

‘Steady, friend,’ said Nicholas, slowly raising his hands. ‘See, I haven’t got any blade. Let him go, he’s just a lad.’

‘Grab him!’ shouted Kwadwo. ‘You can – ’

An abrupt thud cut him off as the ghost-man pushed him forward and struck him on the back. Nicholas swore under his breath and slowly advanced, but Kwadwo's stunned body gave way before him, and he barely managed to catch him before lowering the teenager to the ground. Within an instant the translucent aggressor was upon him.

'Easy,' said Nicholas, aware of the sharp blade being brandished at his chest.
'We don't mean any harm.'

'Then what you doing here, eh? What you been watching for all afternoon?'

'Just put that down and we'll talk.'

'You with the harmans? Can't be, by the look of him down there. What you doing with him?'

On the ground, Kwadwo was already coming to himself, although Nicholas's eyes remained firmly on the knife. But it was a loose grip, and Nicholas took a chance, darting to his feet and jumping clear of the man's grasp just as he pivoted off his ragged shoulder. As Nicholas righted himself, the ghost-man turned, teetering on his unlaced boots as he stumbled into Kwadwo's recovering body. With a curse he fell to the ground himself, collapsing across Kwadwo as the knife slipped from his hand.

'Good,' said Nicholas, kicking the blade aside and looming over the fallen man.
'Now we talk.'

'Couldn't you have thought of a better way than using me as something to fall over?' moaned Kwadwo. 'For all his slightness, he's heavy.'

'Sorry about that. You learn to use everything available in a fight.' He turned to his opponent. 'I'm not a harman. I'm not interested in stopping whatever foul scheme you've got going on here. I certainly don't want to take any part of it. You tell me a few things, we'll go, and you can get on with your ungodly business. Otherwise we've got the knife and you're on your arse.'

The man made no effort to stand. 'You're in the shit now, mate.'

'I told you, I'm not interested in – '

'I know you did. Makes no difference.'

Nicholas narrowed his eyes. 'Who are you, anyway?' Losing patience, he lunged forward. 'You've got plague bodies in that hut. I may not be a harman but I doubt you'd be popular if I told them what was going on here. Now, talk.'

THE THIEF'S TALE

'I'll talk, but not 'cos you've made me. I can see you're not harmans, but how's I know you're not trying to rob us of our gains? You turned right round when you saw them dead 'uns though, didn't you lad? That's why they'm there, princock, so as no one'll dare go in and take what's ours, and the good on it is, all that's in there used to belong to folk like them, when they were living, so we're only keeping things where they fit.

I've been watching you the past two hours, ever since you come. It were hard not to see you, when no one walks down these flats, no one but them who's up to no good. Wondered if you'd come down when the lads brought the guards – we call them the guards, them dead 'uns in there – but you stayed put, and I told 'em I'd wait to see what you did. They'm moored up just round the bend in the river now, already on their way back 'cross the fields, so you've got – ten minutes, I reckon, afore they get here, and if you're not gone by then you'll soon be learning how the bottom of the river looks nice.

Don't believe me, eh? That's your choice, but I wager you won't chance it. So you've got some short minutes, and I can keep talking 'til then. When do you up and go? Ha! That's for you to guess.

Well, if you're staying, I'll say who we are and maybe that'll get you gone. We're a band of gentlemen who admire other folks' things, aye, cloyers if you like, thieves, though I'd never call it so crude. Thieves who know how to stay alive, mind, sometimes to the hindrance of them who don't, so you best take care, I don't give a goose that you've got the knife. When the plague come, we didn't think like the other coxcombs that we had to hide ourselves away, no, we were cleverer than that, what we thought was, where's the profit? And the profit's in taking from those who don't need it, and this summer there's plenty of them. Whole families passing on with no one left, no one to claim their goods but us and the searchers. And them searchers, well, after a

little talk you can get them to do whatever you ask, to snatch us things on the promise they can keep a share, and if they won't help, well, they might end in the plague pits themselves, if you follow.

Why're you looking like that? These folks are dead! There's others take from the living, from the doctors and the rest who go to the plague houses, waiting to rob them on their way home. So you can leave your holiness in the church where it's welcome. But we don't take kindly to others poking about, and if you want to keep your life, now's time to go.

Well then, why are you here if not to rob us? You want me to tell you how we're mixed up with who? Those musician coves? Ha! Come looking for your friend, have you? Now there's one who's hiding, that Spaniard, ever since he come back from the country and we got him scared, and I tell you, if you're mates with the other cove, that Simon, we'll have you scared next, 'cos if there's one way to get to that bastard, it'll be through his mates. And if that don't work, well, we might bring them mates to stay with them guards in there, and see if he likes that.

You're not friends with him? Well then, why're you. . . what matter. I got no love for 'em, none of us do, and least of all for Simon. Aye, him who plays the lute. When we started this business, back May time, it was him let slip 'bout a friend of his who'd died, another of them players, Mark was his name, and we had the idea then that we'd go in with the searchers to see what we could take. Dead of night we went, pitch dark it was, and it were all still there, all that wretched family's things going to waste. No one else dared touch it, save them searchers, and if they thought we'd leave 'em to it, they were bigger fools than they look. But then Simon, and the rest of 'em with him, he took against us taking his mate's things, and knowing where we hid our gains, him being family –

Aye, that's right! Family! Didn't you know? His wife, 'tis her father's the one in charge of us, and her brother's in on it too. So he knew where we kept our gains, and he came, with the fellow we got scared now, we reckon, and they took from us what had belonged to this friend, but then he got greedy, see, 'cos by then we'd made an art of it, looting the homes of the dead, and he come back and took more of what we'd worked hard to pilfer. Even a fool like you'll know how that went down. We went after

him, course, and he denied it, but then he come back for more, and this time we weren't to be taken for fools, and we went to sort things out.

He was staying with some old woman at the time, the mother of that pretty mort, what's her name? – Alena, that's right – but by then he'd hidden what he'd took and left London with the rest of 'em, and you know what else? He'd got that Alena with child, and you can be sure how his father-in-law felt about that. In a rage he was, never seen him so mad, and off they went to hunt Simon wherever he'd gone, leaving me to stay here with the guards. In the end they found 'em, the players, but not Simon, and they had to come back, not knowing where he's hid all he's stole off us, and more's the pity that this one we've got frit now don't know, 'cos well, let's just say we could use the coin. He's told us about some other woman mind, some well-to-do mort who'd helped them out, reckons she might have something of his he'd tried to hide, so they'll be going back soon enough, to see what she knows, and if she don't know nothing, that'll be a shame for her.

Now why you getting angry of a sudden? Here, you're not with Lion's lot are you? Aye, you might say I've turned paler, 'cos – hey, are you mocking me for that? No one mocks me for that, you hear? Don't say then, but . . . if you are with them, we'll get you the money, no fear. Just don't go asking his daughter no more, she don't know nothing about it. And if you're not with Lion. . . ha, ha! We'll tumble you in the river, 'cos you're for it now! Over here, lads! Hurry on!

The pale man had called out behind them. Nicholas turned to see two figures racing in their direction, still someway distant, but the speed they were running made their intentions plain. He took one look at Kwadwo, the boy now fully restored to himself, and without hesitation the pair of them fled. The going was damp and dirty, but they were spurred to be quick. Ten minutes later they jumped into a waiting public wherry boat and were on their way back to the city, their pursuers left gasping for breath on the shore far behind.

'Not even close,' said Kwadwo, laughing as he shook a comical fist at the riverbank. 'I could've outrun them even after a huge meal.'

'Don't get cocky,' said Nicholas. 'Not now we know they're planning on going back north. And that they've heard of Mercia, Hell's teeth.'

'We don't know that.' Kwadwo was beaming with exhilaration. 'He just said "some other woman". Could be any woman.'

'Any well-to-do mort? We can't take that chance. I'll have to warn her somehow.' He glanced at the boatman, who was pretending not to eavesdrop. 'Now keep silent 'til we're alone.'

Once back on land, the pair nonetheless walked in silence as Nicholas considered what he should do. They were walking towards his part of town, but Kwadwo tagged along, hands in pockets as they avoided the sewage yet to be collected from the middle of the stinking road. Candles and lanterns were lit outside many of the buildings around them, but the streets were fast getting dark.

"Thanks for coming with me today," said Nicholas after a time. "I appreciate it. Want a drink before you go?"

Kwadwo shrugged. "Why not?"

"We can get an ale at the Horse and Star, where I used to shoe horses. It's closed, course, but 'tis a warm evening, and the owner'll let us have a couple of tankards out in the courtyard. Let me just stop by Eve's – my sister's – on the way. I've not been round there for a few days."

The two of them carried on through the gloomy streets, but as they came into Eve's neighbourhood, Nicholas noticed more than one pair of eyes fall on him as they passed. One woman pulled up short as she came too close, scurrying under the overhang of the tannery opposite.

"What's she running from?" he wondered.

"Probably me," said Kwadwo. "Don't worry, I'm used to it."

"No, people are looking at me." He shook his head. "Come on."

They turned the next corner into Eve's cramped street. And then half way down, outside her house lit by a lantern from across the narrow way, Nicholas stopped

still. Despite the summer warmth, the deepest chill he had known descended from the unfeeling heavens to pierce his thumping heart.

‘Dear God,’ he said. ‘No. Please, no.’

‘Fuck,’ was all Kwadwo could manage.

Anger, despair and fear swirled through him as one, as oblivious to the street around, Nicholas stared at the ragged red cross daubed onto his sister’s front door.

Final instalment coming soon

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