

SURVIVAL

Or,

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

A Mercia Blakewood Special

DAVID HINGLEY

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INSTALMENT EIGHT

XIII

Kwadwo jumped from his horse as the first tiny houses on the outskirts of Oxford came into view. He didn't know exactly where to find the men he was looking for, but he needed help and some weeks ago they had offered. And somehow he trusted them. He wouldn't stop looking all night.

Nicholas fretted in his tiny flat, keeping himself indoors while riven with guilt and relief. Relief he had taken his daughter out of London when he could. Guilt, doubly, not only that he was healthy while his sister was fighting death, but also that he'd decided he shouldn't go north with Kwadwo. He paced up and down, up and down, not knowing whether he had chosen right.

Mercia closed the door on Alena, leaving the singer and her child to sleep. Simon sat downstairs in the parlour, strumming his lute while Phibae sang an accompanying verse. Through the window, she could see Daniel chase Eliza around a girthy oak, while from the distance came the lull of sheep. Returning the ring to the safety of her pocket, she lit the first candle against the fading light.

A group of three men sat round a fire in the woods, their captive slumped with bowed head against a familiar log. A stream flowed nearby, past a tree into which the words of the age were carved into the scratchy bark. Watching them unseen, another man, silent, aggrieved. Biding his time, keeping his quarry within sight.

The day was hazy, but pleasant. Finally the heat had broken, and although the ground was still parched, at least the air felt less intense, allowing Mercia to roam her grounds with James Calthorpe, her land manager, at noon without fear of turning raw pink. It was the first time they had talked since her return from Dunchurch a couple of days before, and as they discussed the arrangements for that year's harvest, the sound of a baby's cry came from a window above, a sound Halescott had not heard for some years.

'If you'll allow me to say, Mrs Blakewood, those two make me uneasy,' said Calthorpe. 'How long are they to stay?'

'A few days at most,' she said. 'They have been no trouble so far, I would not –'

She broke off as a cry went up on the other side of the house. Frowning at Calthorpe, she beckoned him follow her round to the front, where a small band of men was hurrying up the gravelled drive.

'What's he doing here?' said Calthorpe. 'He's meant to be down by the barn again today.'

Mercia stopped near the small set of stairs that led up to a secondary door in the corner of the manor's façade. She waited for the approaching group to reach her.

Calthorpe was more abrupt. 'What's this about, Tom?' he demanded, annoyance arcing over his long face. 'Why aren't you at work?'

Tom looked at Mercia. 'Beg your pardon, Mrs Blakewood, but there's trouble in the village. One of them musicians is . . . back.'

She raised an eyebrow at his hesitation. 'Back?'

'Not them two you've got in the house. Another. He's. . .'

'He's what?' said Calthorpe, and Tom took a deep breath.

'He's been hanging from a tree. Not dead,' he added quickly. 'The women got him down. He'd been tied up there, loose, a sack over his head and a cloth in his mouth. They sent to fetch us back, and no wonder. If I catch whoever scared them like that, I'll –'

'Do they know who did do it?'

'Some ruffians. I don't know who.'

‘Which musician?’ asked Mercia.

‘What?’

‘Which musician is it? Joshua Tanner, or Luis?’

‘The Spanish one, whatever his name was. He’s barely speaking, he’s so shook up. But he spoke enough to give a message from them who’d done that to him.’

‘Which was?’

The men around him murmured in agitation. ‘Give us Simon. Or we’ll bring plague to her house.’

She blinked, but stayed calm. ‘Plague? The man in the village, Luis. Does he show any signs of it?’

‘Well, no,’ said Tom. ‘But –’

‘You need to get rid of them, Mrs Blakewood,’ interrupted a man in the group. ‘Tis not safe, not for you or for us or our kids. We can’t chance plague here.’

‘Did he say where I was supposed to deliver Simon?’ she asked.

‘No,’ said Tom. ‘Well, he hasn’t said yet.’

‘Where is he now?’

‘On the little green on the other edge of the village. No one dares take him in their homes.’

Mercia glanced at Calthorpe. ‘It looks like the harvest will need to wait,’ she said. ‘I will go and speak with Luis myself.’

‘Bring that Simon with you,’ said one of the men. ‘Then we can all be safe.’

‘Not until I have spoken with Luis.’ She held up a hand as the men began to protest. ‘I have decided. Take me to Luis, and then I shall consider what is to be done about Simon.’

Brooking no further dissent, she marched ahead of her men along the drive and out through the iron gates.

In the shaded village street, a band of bonneted women was huddled in a close group, peering variously one way towards the green and the other towards the manor. As Mercia approached, the women seemed to gather as one entity and move towards her. Amongst them, Mary the seamstress followed the flow of the crowd, drawn to the village by news of the unwilling visitor, perhaps.

‘He’s up there,’ said one of the women, an elderly village stalwart who still favoured the dress of the Puritan era a decade before. ‘He’s come to his senses more now, but it were a fright for him to be hanging there, and for us to find him. Has Tom told you?’

‘He has,’ said Mercia. ‘Will you take me to him? James, Tom, stay here with the rest of them, please. I think it will be better for me to speak with him on my own.’ She leant into Calthorpe. ‘And keep an eye out. The villains who did this to him may still be close.’

As Calthorpe nodded, keeping the men back, the elderly woman motioned to the rest of her group to do as Mercia said. Then hitching up the hem of her dress, she turned and walked up the lane as though she were a woman not yet half her age.

‘How are your humours, Sarah?’ asked Mercia. ‘You appear well.’

The woman grunted. ‘Still as old as ever. Twice your years.’

‘Is Peter well?’

‘Well as ever. In other words, useless.’

Smiling to herself despite the situation, Mercia led Sarah to the triangular green, a small patch of land just past the last house with the track to one side and two lines of trees to the others. In the middle, Luis sat on the earth with his head in his hands, not looking up even as Mercia drew near.

‘Luis,’ she said, keeping a small distance between them. ‘Tis Mercia, Mrs Blakewood. Luis. Will you look at me?’

For a few seconds he kept his head bowed. But slowly he raised it, revealing a harried face and eyes that refused to focus.

‘Why do they want Simon?’ she asked, hoping to jar him from his stupor. ‘How can they bring plague here?’

Her directness worked. His wandering eyes seemed to restore themselves to reality.

‘They say they have a cloth steeped in it,’ he said. ‘I don’t know if ‘tis true, it seems unlikely they’d carry something like that about. But with these people, you can’t be sure.’

‘And Simon?’

‘He cheated them, and got Alena with child. ‘Tis his wife’s family chasing him, his father-in-law and brother-in-law. They’re in a mad fury.’

‘I see. How did you come to be with them, then?’

‘I’ve been back in London. They found me, got me to tell them where Simon might be.’ He looked down. ‘I had to tell them about you. Then in Dunchurch they found out you’ve given him a bed and they want him back.’

‘What will they do to him if he gives himself up?’

‘Beat him to an inch of his life, most like. These aren’t good people.’

‘And Alena? The baby?’

‘I don’t know. I don’t think they’d harm the child, but. . . no. I don’t think they’d harm it.’

‘You don’t sound very certain.’

‘I can’t imagine they would. They let me go.’

‘Only to pass the message to me. I presume they are still nearby.’

Of a sudden his brow furrowed with ire, and he pulled himself up. ‘They hung me up on that tree at dawn, telling me if I wasn’t quiet they’d hang me for real. Back that night before we first came here, when they set on us in the clearing, they caught me as Simon fled, made me carve those words in the tree. Lord have mercy upon us, they made me carve, threatening to bury me in the woods, as forgotten as a plague body thrown in a pit. They meant it, Mrs Blakewood.’ He lowered his head. ‘They meant it.’

‘You are safe now,’ she said. ‘You are here with me.’

He glared up at her. ‘I’m not safe. The only reason they didn’t kill me then was to make me promise I’d keep watch on Simon, tell them where he was if he came back. But then Alena went to fetch him from where she said she’d taken him on her horse, and we convinced Josh we had to move on from your barn. Didn’t tell him the truth then, of course, that we’d been mixing with these villains and wanted to be out of their reach, but he was wary something was wrong, wondered how Alena had found Simon so easy, wondered what had happened to the mourning ring we’d had made up for Mark, our friend who’d died of plague in London before we even left. How could I tell him I’d taken it to give to the men chasing us, as a token I’d do what they asked? How could I say I’d hidden it in that tree, and that when Alena told me I shouldn’t

have and went to fetch it back, it was gone? We said it was one of your labourers stole it, and Josh accepted that. But after struggling a long while on the road I'd had enough. I told him the truth.'

'And so Josh left you,' said Mercia. 'He went back to London.'

Luis nodded. 'He was angry. But I knew they'd find him, so in the end I had to follow, Simon be damned. And now those bastards are here, and I'm sorry, I am, but I thought they'd find Simon in Dunchurch and that would be the end of it, I didn't know you'd agreed to take him in.' He took a deep and tortured breath. 'These are the people you're dealing with. Yes, they're still nearby. They won't give up until they have him.'

As he finished his revelations, a cold realisation snapped through her. 'And while I am here with you, they might already have gone for him.' She whipped round. 'God's truth! Sarah, look after him. I have to get back to the manor.'

Flanked by his new companions, Kwadwo urged on his tired horse. He had barely slept last night, causing havoc as he hurried from place to place, disturbing dogs and sheep and irate farmers alike, searching for a hint of where the men he was after could be found. Eventually, under the light of a waning moon and a shaking lantern held up to his face, an annoyed maid told him where the men were living – and what he could do with that information. But getting lost wasn't Kwadwo's intention, and within an hour he had found the men, explained the situation and enlisted their help, as well as earned a bed, albeit of straw, for what little remained of the night.

Now it was just past noon. As the unlikely trio came within an hour's ride of Halescott, Kwadwo hoped that the trust Nicholas had showed in him was not about to be misplaced.

Beckoning sharply to Calthorpe, who in turn signalled with a jerk of his head to Tom and his men, Mercia hurried back to the house. But as the drive came into view, she

pulled up short. Three hooded figures were ranged on the other side of the gate, arms folded across long coats despite the summer warmth, still like silent sentinels, but these were not guards employed to keep the manor safe. From their position they controlled its front approach, the only way past them through the gates.

‘Simon Last,’ said the man in the middle, a generation older than the two alongside him. ‘You have him. We want him.’

‘I do not *have* anyone,’ she replied. ‘My guests are free to do as they wish.’

‘But he is here. Hiding where he thinks no one can see.’

‘Perhaps. But what I can see, is that there are three of you while there are many of us.’

The man smiled, reaching for the folds of his coat. ‘I find this usually evens the score.’

Out of his ungainly coat he pulled a doglock pistol. Immediately his fellows did the same.

‘Don’t think we won’t use them,’ said the leader, cocking his gun. ‘Men call me Lion. Men in London who know what that means. We’ve killed before. We’re not scared of the law.’

‘And I have confronted pistols before,’ retorted Mercia, trying to keep nervousness from her voice. ‘In the presence of the King himself.’

‘That means nothing to me. Maybe you have, but if your men don’t walk away, maybe this’ll be the last one you – confront.’

Behind her, she could hear Calthorpe ordering the men to retreat. The sound of heavy boots shuffling away followed, together with the growl of angry cursing.

‘Not you two,’ said Lion. ‘You two stay up front where we have a good shot if your mistress won’t do as I say.’

As Lion was surrounded by his fellows, so Mercia remained flanked by Calthorpe and Tom. The labourer made an attempt to stand in front, but Lion shook his head. ‘Stay in a line, some distance apart.’ He brandished his gun. ‘Aye, that’s better. Now, Mrs Blakewood, I’m told your name is, is this your writing on this note?’

Still pointing his gun, he returned inside his coat with his free hand and withdrew a torn piece of paper. Scrunching it into a ball, he threw it at her feet.

‘Pick it up.’

Mercia complied, unrolling the paper to discover the note she had left in the log at the clearing where the musicians had been attacked.

‘That Spaniard cove said that reads something like, go where you had sanctuary to get back what’s yours,’ said Lion. ‘Well, I believe this is where they had sanctuary. And what belongs to them, belongs to me, seeing as they took it. So what have you got?’

The ring in her pocket took on a sudden heaviness. ‘Nothing,’ she lied.

‘But that is your writing, I wager.’

She kept silent. In response Lion shook his pistol, teasing the trigger as he began to count down from five.

‘Very well,’ she conceded at two. ‘It is my writing.’

His finger eased off the trigger. ‘Then you must have something. Is this where they’ve hidden all they’ve stole from me?’

‘Stolen? Mercia frowned. ‘I know nothing of what you say.’

‘Lady, if you don’t give back what’s ours, there’s plenty in this big house I’m sure will compensate.’

‘Lay one hand on anything here and you’ll answer to me,’ said Calthorpe, but Lion merely laughed.

‘How about you and I find Simon, Mrs Blakewood, while my son and his mate keep your pack at bay. Once I’ve got what’s mine, we’ll go. Simple, eh?’

‘Don’t let him inside,’ said Tom. ‘What of the plague?’

‘We don’t have no plague,’ said Lion. ‘Look at us. How’d we ride here if we were sick?’

‘That player you hung up said you’d threatened to bring plague.’

‘We told him that to fright him, you innocent fool, and to worry you besides.’ Lion shook his head. ‘All you have to do these days is shout *plague*, and folk jump quick like. Makes it easy to deal with them. But looking from behind a gun makes it easier.’ He scoffed. ‘These your best men, lady? I’d hire yourself some others.’

Calthorpe narrowed his eyes. ‘Still, she won’t go with you.’

‘Then we’ll shoot. You or this other cove, I don’t care. Either way I have some sport.’

He nodded to the man at his right, who shared the same angular nose and large forehead: his son, no doubt. The young man raised his pistol and aimed it at Tom's chest. Tom took a shallow breath but held his ground.

'Enough,' said Mercia. 'I will come.'

She moved slowly forward. Lion's son lowered his pistol, but he kept it ready. When Calthorpe tried to follow instead, the other man raised his and he stopped.

'And you men at the back can give up trying to get over the wall,' shouted Lion. 'Your mistress is with me now. Anyone tries anything I don't like, she won't be giving you orders no longer.'

'Everyone stay where you are,' said Mercia. 'I will talk with this – person – and come to an accommodation. There is no need to fret.'

'Like your fine words, don't you?' said Lion. 'There's no accommodation. You give me Simon, my things, we go.' Then he frowned. 'What's this?'

A commotion had broken out at the gate. With Lion's gaze temporarily averted, Mercia dared to look round. A newcomer had arrived, covered in the dust of the road much like the first time she had seen him. He pushed his way through to stride directly towards Lion and his fellows.

He stopped before he reached them. 'Leave her be,' he said. 'I'll go with you. You don't need to threaten anyone here. I can get Simon to come out.'

Lion looked him up and down. 'Who are you?'

'I'm the one who wasn't involved with all this. The one who was lied to.' He laughed. 'I used to play the harpsichord, to lead this group of ours. And even after everything. . . I'd still like Alena to be safe. Let me help.'

'Mr Tanner,' said Mercia in surprise. 'I thought you had returned home?'

Joshua Tanner, the musician who had been the band's spokesman when they had stayed in the Halescott barn, glanced across and greeted her with a nod. Then he lifted a hand to scratch at his right temple; as he covered his eyes with his fingers, he subtly raised a eyebrow in some sort of evident signal. Curious, she pretended not to notice as he returned his hand to his side.

'I've been after these brigands since they left London,' he said. 'When they came for Luis I was with him. Poor fellow was so scared out his wits he went with

them when they ordered, but I was hid. I knew where they were coming, I heard them talk of it. Now they're about to have a surprise of their own.'

'What's that mean?' said Lion.

'Oh, just that I can get you what you need. And nobody need worry, I kept myself to myself in London. I don't have the plague.' He looked back to Mercia, this time briefly widening his eyes. 'Do I . . . have your permission?'

'Very well,' she said, unsure he meant by his gestures. 'But we will go together.'

Lion shrugged. 'I suppose he could be of use. Come then, the both of you.'

Against Calthorpe's protestations, the trio set off, Mercia and Tanner passing round the corner of the house at gunpoint. Thankfully the back lawn appeared to be deserted, no trace of Daniel or Eliza: Mercia hoped Phibae had taken them inside at the first sign of trouble. And yet behind the oak tree, she thought she could see movement, a peering face at least that ducked behind the wide trunk as soon as she looked. As Lion stopped near the outside entrance to the cellar, Tanner sidled to his right, ensuring Lion was facing directly away from the tree.

'Well, then,' said Lion. 'Where is he?'

'He's up here,' shouted a mocking voice from an upstairs window. 'Dear Lord, you're loud. I've been listening since you got here.'

'Simon,' said Lion, the two syllables dripping with disgust. 'Get down here now.'

Simon made no move to leave his perch. 'Nasty trick you played with Luis. You like to scare folk, don't you?'

Lion snorted. 'Means I found you. Now then. Jump out that window.'

'What? I'll break my legs.'

'I'm not having you run away while I wait for you to come down. Remember I know what else is up there. I can hear that bastard child of yours same as you can hear me. You run and something else will suffer.'

'You wouldn't –' began Mercia, but straightaway she cut herself off. Somehow the vague figure from behind the tree had emerged unseen and was now fully real, sneaking across the lawn towards them. With a barely stifled gasp she realised she recognised the young apparition, but he waved an urgent hand at her and she quickly

looked down. But Lion had not noticed, too busy swinging his pistol to point it at Tanner.

‘You’re right,’ he said, ‘I wouldn’t kill a child. But your friend here. . . Jump, Simon, now.’

‘Hell’s teeth, Josh,’ sighed Simon. ‘Why’d you have to come back? Very well. I’ll try.’

His head emerged from the window, but as he looked out over the garden he jerked it back, crying out in surprise where Mercia had managed to remain silent.

‘Oh,’ he said in explanation. ‘Tis a strange bird scared me. Tis just a bird.’

Lion frowned, obviously unconvinced. He began to look round. Tanner swallowed. Mercia picked up the stone vase by her side and smashed it at Lion’s feet.

He rounded on her. ‘You’ll pay for that.’

The distraction was all the time the approaching boy needed. Silently he came up behind the gang leader and struck him on the back of the neck. Lion stumbled, but he was brawny, and although he wavered the blow was not strong enough to push him off his feet. Staggering nonetheless, he twisted round to face his aggressor, and now Mercia and Tanner were behind him.

‘Out the way, Kwadwo,’ said Mercia. ‘Quick!’

As Kwadwo dodged to one side, Tanner went for Lion’s gun, grabbing the barrel while Mercia clasped hold of his arm. Together the two of them managed to shake the pistol free, and while Tanner struggled to keep Lion at bay, Mercia reached for the fallen gun. In an instant she had it aimed where she needed it.

‘Let him go,’ she said. ‘I mean now.’

Lion leered, pushing Tanner to one side. ‘You won’t shoot me, woman.’

She narrowed her eyes. ‘I am not just any woman. I am an agent for the King, a traveller of oceans, a protector of those who have sought my help. And you, sir, are in my home. Now you will leave it.’

In response Lion lurched forward. As he did a shot rang out, although it was not Mercia who had fired it. And then another shot resounded, and a third, the ricochets echoing off the manor walls with ferocious volume.

‘That was from the drive,’ she said as Lion hesitated. ‘Kwadwo, what is happening?’

Before he could answer, a short man with a scarred face appeared round the corner of the house, holding a smoking gun. Seeing the scene before him he reached for a pouch in his belt, inserting powder and ball and cocking it afresh.

‘This the other one, lad?’ he asked, and Kwadwo nodded.

‘Yes, Jack.’ He smiled at Mercia. ‘Don’t worry, I brought some friends. A pair of soldiers who live near here that we met down in London. Nicholas sent me to find them to ask for their help.’ He nodded at Tanner. ‘We came across him just outside the grounds. He’d been after them too, came in first to give us time to act.’

‘And act we have.’ Jack turned to address Lion. ‘I’d stay where you are if I were you. Both your fellows are in a bit of pain. I’d say the one’s not like to last.’

‘Not my son?’ said Lion, his fingers twitching in rage.

‘I don’t know. Whoever he is, if he hadn’t fired first, he wouldn’t be in such a bad way now. Your men are unharmed, Mrs Blakewood. We made sure of that.’

Lion bellowed, letting out a roar that befitted his name. Throwing himself at Mercia, he grabbed her wrist in an effort to snatch the gun she was holding. The pain of his fist striking her arm was too great, and the gun was sent clattering to the ground. As Lion bent to retrieve it, she jumped out of his way just as he brandished the weapon first towards her, then at Jack, and finally at Simon who was looking out the window above. But Jack was a veteran of the fields of war, and before Lion could take proper aim, the soldier fired. Crying out, the gang leader grabbed at his side as he crumpled to lie screaming on the ground.

‘I’m sorry,’ said Jack. ‘But I could see his desperation. He would have fired.’

‘I know,’ said Mercia, recalling a time when she had been forced to fire at a desperate man herself. ‘I know. At least he still lives.’

‘Long enough to get him to jail, I hope.’

She nodded, looking away from the fallen man to sweep her gaze past Calthorpe as he approached, past Kwadwo, past the soldier now joined by his companion, past Tanner, past the back door where Bethany was looking out, past the window where Simon stood with Alena, and finally settling on the warm stone of the manor house, its inhabitants once again secure.

‘And now, Mr Tanner,’ she said, reaching inside her pocket, ‘I believe I have something here of yours.’

EPILOGUE: DECEMBER 1665

The plague passed, as plague always did. By year's end, the dreaded Bills of Mortality had swelled to show near seventy thousand Londoners had succumbed to its fatal touch, a fifth of the city's population. But the dead uncounted in the streets and on the wharves, the dead thrown unknown into the hideous pits, the dead ignored by the searchers paid to hide the true toll of mourning hid the grimmer tale, that nobody could ever know just how many souls were lost.

Thanks to the diligence and sacrifice of countless others, the rest of the country largely escaped such devastation, although there were pockets of plague all over, striking town and village alike, and the people of the land had been right to be scared. But slowly life began to return to its usual state, whatever that meant in a nation already scarred that century by tyranny and bloodshed, restrictions and civil war. These were the most trying of times, the most revelatory, and all who lived in them survived the best they knew how.

In December, at Halescott Manor, Mercia held a gathering, a party if you will, to celebrate, or perhaps commemorate this strange year in a century of strange years, and the invited included Nicholas, of course, as well as Kwadwo and his two soldier friends, Joshua Tanner and Mary the seamstress and everyone who lived near the estate, although for most of the evening, most of them kept themselves to themselves, the boundaries of class and decorum being like that. Daniel and Eliza knew no such bounds, and mixed freely with all, to the delight or annoyance of each particular guest.

In the midst of the party, Mercia sat with Nicholas by a warm fire, the weather outside cold and wet in stark contrast to that summer's heat. Once again she felt grateful to share this journey of life alongside him, this ill-suited companion – this

friend – who had shared so much more with her before. It was not the first time he had come to Halescott since the summer, but now he had come to take Eliza home, the threat of plague being mostly passed.

‘I shall miss her,’ said Mercia. ‘As will Daniel, though he will not admit it. She could stay if you wished it.’

‘I’m more grateful than I can say that she was here,’ said Nicholas, stoking the fire with a well-used poker. ‘But ‘tis time I took her home now.’

‘I suppose it is. Will she go back to Eve’s?’

‘For the time being, until I find a bigger place to live.’ He looked down. ‘But John dead, and two of the children. . . their house is not the same. Eve is getting by, she’s a strong one, must be to have survived the plague, but. . . ‘tis hard for her on her own. Eliza and I will help.’

‘If there is anything I can do, Nicholas, you must ask.’

He scratched at his tussled hair. ‘I will. One thing about the plague is there’s lots of work going round to get things back on their feet.’ He sighed. ‘A shame that that work needs doing, but – ‘tis work. Kwadwo needs some help with the safehouse too. I said I’d do what I could. Will Phibae stay here?’

‘For now. With Ayo gone, she was lost for a time. Not being able to be there for him, it struck her hard. But I think she is recovering, slowly.’ She shook her head. ‘Dear Lord, Nicholas, the number of families mourning dead. They say not one in London has escaped untouched.’

‘Tis hard. But London won’t be cowed, by plague or war or anything. We’ll go on, as will Phibae.’

‘I think you being here helps, in truth. She likes talking with you. She is another strong one, Nicholas. Another strong woman in a year where we have needed to be strong.’

The fire roared in the grate as if in agreement. ‘And what a year it was, no?’ he said. ‘At the start of it, we were in America.’

‘That seems a long time ago now.’

‘And then a long ocean crossing, Whitehall and searching for the traitor. Me on the ships in the battle, you saving the King’s life, fighting to get back your house.’

'Then the plague.' He looked at her. 'I was wondering. Have you had news from Nathan?'

She sucked in her lips. 'Indeed he wrote me a letter that I received last week.'

'And. . .?'

'And. . . I think I shall keep that to myself, for now. But it was very interesting. Intriguing, even. And that is all I shall say.'

He pulled a face. 'I won't pry. But he is well?'

'As well as he can be. Times are hard there, in America. It was his choice to stay behind.' She pulled her chair closer to the fire. 'I miss him, I will admit.'

Through the door, a group of people came into the room, led by Joshua Tanner and the two soldiers who seemed to have struck up a bond through the shared joys of warm punch. With them came others, a number of folk from the area, and all with an inquisitive look on their faces. She smiled as they approached.

'We were wondering, Mrs Blakewood,' said Tanner. 'With it being a cold night, and this a warm hearth with plentiful food and drink, that things were set right for a good tale.'

'Oh?' she said.

'So we were wondering, out of curiosity, and out of admiration, if you wouldn't mind telling us the tale of how you won back your house?'

She laughed. 'Tis a long story, Mr Tanner – sorry. Josh. It would take some time to tell it.'

'But we have time,' he said. 'We have company and merriment and the most gracious host in the land.'

'Aye,' said Jack the soldier. 'Tell us the tale. We want to hear it.'

And with that, the company pulled up chairs to surround her.

'It seems you have little choice,' said Nicholas. 'And it is a good story.'

Through the doorway came the rest of the guests, the differences between them forgotten, and someone brought a table to set beside them, fetching plates of food and the bowl of punch that seemed to refill itself of its own accord, and Bethany and Phibae brought Daniel and Eliza, who sat at Mercia's feet.

'Then if you are ready,' she said. 'How could I not begin?'

THE ADVENTURER'S TALE

'Two hundred, I counted, as the water dripped. Two hundred and one. Drip. Two hundred and two.

It had been an uncomfortable night, trapped in the close confines of my cramped Newgate cell. I had had no sleep, of course, not that I cared for sleep as I sat with eyes closed on the sparsely strewn straw, the ever-falling droplet invading my troubled mind. Still, it was better to be caught in a . . . counting loop – than dwell on why I was in that stifling hole.

Two hundred and nine. I wiped the sweat from my brow. Two hundred and ten.

Abruptly, the dripping ceased. . .'

THE END

Or maybe, the beginning?

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