

Chapter Ten

Unfettered by the chaos of the world, the cobblestone roads of Brae lay freshly laden with snow, creating a vacuum of silence throughout the already peaceful village. Light streams of breeze whirled through the vacant branches of the two oaks which lay firmly planted on either side of the door to the towering, finely crafted church. The building stood central in the village, directly opposing the southwestern entrance and placed immediately in front of the eastern gate. From its left and right each of the houses and shops flowed, forming a misshapen oval of sorts in the center of which lay the village green. The church protruded into this center, establishing with it even greater architectural prominence.

Strolling slowly from the church along the dead grass of the village lawn, Sir Whitford had bore witness to nearly every incarnation of the village since its creation. He knew its prosperity before the Plague, in the days where Lord Eckert had yet to be conceived by any but the mind of God and Sir Gareth presided over Brae without interference from the infant town of Faerlend. In times when the prosperous merchants of the south and west took rest in the inn on their way to the Scarborough Fair, trading their goods for the

fine craftsmanship of Brae's pewterware dishes and candlesticks, both of which originated within the stone walls of the bustling blacksmith's shop. Indeed, he had been among the craftsmen which made the prized wares, apprenticing under Gamel Hamlen for a score of his days.

Yet he had also held his aged former master in his arms when he breathed his last wheezing breath during the Great Pestilence, in the days where Gamel had resided in the house adjacent to the shop. He remembered the grief he experienced as he razed his master's home, attempting to halt the disease from spreading any further as he himself stood afflicted. The pain of his fading elder brother lying in his arms as a babe lies in the arms of its mother, tears streaming from his face as the pestilence slowly overtook his body.

His hands were worn, each line and groove a history as the rings of a tree. They held the dying as the village was nearly eradicated. They held the hand of the woman from whom he received treatment and healing. They held the hammer, nails, straw, and daub which rebuilt the town from its infected desolation. They reluctantly shook the unscathed, gentle hands of the newly instated Lord Eckert of Faerlend as he gained control of Brae from the deceased Sir Gareth.

His hands held the worn copy of the Psalms passed down to him from his father and mother as he strolled under the lantern-lit streets of the village. Though they had been through great trials and great prosperity, Sir Whitford remained deeply moved and grateful of his continued life, particularly on this night, as he thought many more deserving of life than he. To have known every inch of the village with precision and each of its residents with depth

gave him great peace and contentment with each reflection on his nightly strolls.

Yet as he neared the town well, its disfigured covering struck unfamiliarity in his mind. He studied the well with both an informed understanding of the village and the slow processing of an aged mind: the light snow seemed hardly an apt instigator to cause the flayed decay of the wooden posts supporting the cover nor the lined marks of destruction etched into the crumbling stone well wall. It seemed the mark of a beast with greater power than that which resided in Brae or anywhere near it, even outwards as far as Avon. The etchings were deep and filled with vigor, the destruction motivated.

A shout echoed in the vacant silence of the night near the eastern gate, calling as the orders of a guard. Sir Whitford turned and, indeed, there stood in the distance three of the village's finest protectors, one being a watchman and the other two being former soldiers. They brandished each a longsword, swords Sir Whitford knew to be among the sharpest in the village, and armor forged by the high armories of Milan, indicating to the studious eye of Sir Whitford that a mighty threat lay outside the walls of Brae.

They trod with an attention to stealth through the eastern gate, disappearing beyond his eyeline. The descending flakes and absorbing blanket across the earth created a paradoxically unsettling scene: the quietness amplified the tension within Sir Whitford's stomach and the natural beauty seemed inappropriate for the unnatural terror dwelling upon it. He looked up to the stars, the host staring back at him with the ominous knowledge of all which was to occur.

Then echoed a scream so unresonant that it stifled as quickly as it was released, though it could not be found lacking any degree of mortification as it expelled from the mouth of one of the village's fearless men. The heaving and struggle of the remaining soldiers passed as waves to the shore, thrust forth with intensity before dissolving into the air as if they had never existed at all.

And yet again, the night folded into stillness, relentlessly withholding any indication of its impending scourge. The aged heart of Sir Whitford beat as forcefully as the hammer with which he had once forged weaponry, more forcefully than it had beaten at any point prior during the nearly-concluding decade. He froze by the well, his mind unnaturally uncertain of the wisest course of action: what rational decision can be made against a force which bends not to the laws of the natural world?

Yet, as philosophers would allow the days to flow by endlessly to explore one more thought further, the mysterious force showed yet another mark of graceless resistance against the wishes of man, bringing an end to Sir Whitford's thoughts. Candlelight shone through the narrow crack of the shuttered window of the tailor's house, which lay closest to the eastern gate, and, within a portion of a moment, the scream of the tailor's wife emerged, a scream which chilled Sir Whitford's bones until it violently ceased prematurely.

This second strike seemed sufficient to resume the decisive mechanisms of Sir Whitford's mind as he began a steady stride towards the nearest hut which was inhabited by the village's butcher, a man of exceeding strength and breadth. Though he ordinarily would have required more than a minute to complete his journey, he arrived at the door in

less than half a minute's time, his heart nearly bursting from his chest. Yet, curiously, as he extended his arm to knock on the door, it opened as if it was intended by the distraught man which greeted him swiftly.

“Sir Whitford, your impeccable timing is greatly needed and appreciated.” Garth Emery spoke with a quaking timbre in his voice so unfamiliar that it caused a great internal startling for Sir Whitford.

“Have you then also caught wind of the force within our walls?” Sir Whitford inquired anxiously.

“I have had no encounter nor direct knowledge of such a force, yet I face a greater terror in which your force may have involvement: Simon has vanished without any indication.”

“May the Lord have mercy...” Sir Whitford muttered with empathy. “Have you known any disturbances within the night thus far?”

“None that I can name, though Juliana insists upon feeling an unsettling sensation within her stomach during the past hour.”

“Has this sensation revealed any truths?”

“To her great distress, it has not, though she remains frantically searchi-”

A cry emerged from the side room of the house, curdling the blood of both men with equal intensity. Garth darted into the chamber with as great a speed as he could muster before letting out a cry of fury. He paced swiftly throughout the house, checking every detail of the area for an intruder as Sir Whitford stood in the doorway with deep

concern and confusion. Finally, after many moments passed, he returned to the door, his eyes and cheeks stained with tears and his brow furrowed.

“She’s... mangled across the floor.” His eyes carried and radiated a greater spectrum of emotions than Sir Whitford had ever seen: rage, mourning, loathing, and, most unsettling of all, fear. He shot air from his nose as a bull, suppressing the ferocity within before speaking once more, “Your force has invaded this house, my house, and wrought terror on it this day and as the Lord bears my witness I will meet it with the full capacity of wrath which a man can possess.”

And then he was thrust into the interior of the house, violently, unnaturally, horrifically departed from the world of man. His limbs lay at Sir Whitford’s feet as he had attempted to grasp the doorframe and swiftly been dismembered. The floor seeped with the blood and organs of a family as gentle and pure as the snow falling beyond the walls of the vacant hut.

Yet the force dwelled not, leaving Sir Whitford among the living and haunting his mind with a question of why he breathed on and what fate would befall him if not a violent death?

He backed away from the door speechless, having no air within him with which to form even a cry. His feeble knees quickly gave way and he fell to the ground, weakly adjusting his position soon thereafter to survey what remained of the village. He gazed upon the houses lining the eastern wall: their lights shone one by one, illuminating enough of the interior to show the petrified expressions of their residents before screams fired into the air as the only

remaining facet of their existence, the flames extinguishing with their lives.

Yet as it reached the house of Sir Whitford and the blacksmith's shop adjacent to it, it halted, progressing no further to the houses continuing beyond it.

Sir Whitford's stomach turned with dread, feeling as if the stillness of the force indicated its intention to meet with him. He remained on the decaying green, his external being numbed by the snow and his mind numbed to the inevitability of his fate.

He looked once more to the stars and released a heavy sigh. "You have kept my life through great pestilence and age: may you do as you will with it further." With conviction stirring his mind, he lifted his fragile frame on his hands and knees and rose from the ground, making his way immediately towards his household.

The wooded walls of the Whitford house creaked as the cold air whirled through its fibers. It stood with two levels, as the gradual wealth accrued by its long line of tenants provided the house with sturdy wood for its walls, ample furnishings, and other structural and decorative luxuries enjoyed by few in the village. Yet the provisions of the household were not kept in vain by its owners, as the place was regarded well by the village as an open gathering place as well as a shelter for those who could not afford the inn or individual housing. One such resident was the boy Sayer, the latest in an abundant string of apprentices trained

by Sir Whitford and sent out beyond Brae for greater opportunities than its walls could provide.

As Sir Whitford arrived to the door of the grand house, it was Sayer who dwelled most prominently in his thoughts. Had the force been as violent or ferocious towards Sayer as it had been with the other villagers, he would have certainly been alerted by candlelight, screams, or the clattering of the blade which Sayer always kept by his side. With not even a hint of indication in any of these regards, Sir Whitford trembled with a hope he feared would be swiftly ripped from his heart.

The interior of the house lay virtually invisible, shrouded nearly completely in darkness save for the faint, refracted moonlight of the snow spilling in from the entrance. From the kitchen amply fitted with ranging cookware to the finely crafted oaken bench set next to the spiraling staircase leading above, the interior felt as an empty scene of elegance with magic never to be recaptured within it again. In the darkness, there was no wealth nor were there amenities: only emptiness, chilling and nauseating.

Sir Whitford looked upon each detail that could be seen with a savoring sense, attempting to find any semblance of peace he could in what seemed the eve of his death. He had utilized every amenity to serve the village to the best of his ability, and in such a sense he knew his mind would not be haunted with guilt. However, with each step taken up the winding stairs, he found the worldly facets of his being uneager to depart without experiencing the furthest extents of terrestrial grandeur, though he knew not in his mind what such grandeur would even be despite fearing the loss of it.

He reached the upper level with difficulty and found himself short of breath as he stared into the room: it served as the dual sleeping chamber for him and Sayer, their beds parallel to each other at the back of the room with a table between them, as well as the housing of any book he was able to acquire, all of which lined the walls on handcrafted shelves. Yet the boundless knowledge contained in their spines was rendered utterly trivial in the face of even the slightest possibility of harm brought to Sayer.

Sir Whitford trod through the room directly to Sayer's bed, kneeling at the side by the resting boy. He placed his ear to his chest and listened for any living essence within him.

His chest rang as silent as the landscape outside.

Sir Whitford wept, dedicating several subsequent uncalculated moments to his mourning and the boy's memory.

Once his eyes were unblurred by tears, he gazed upon the lifeless body of his apprentice who, contrary to the other lives he had seen ended during the night, seemed to retain some level of peace as he appeared deep in sleep. At this sight Sir Whitford miraculously mustered a faint smile, warmed by the memory of a boy which had been as near to a son as he had been given: no treasure within the walls of the house had been greater.

Yet the divine sense of fate energizing Sir Whitford pressed on beyond the conventional nature of one in grief and thus, planting a gentle kiss on his forehead, Sir Whitford raised the blankets above his face and left the bedside.

However, as he fortunately grasped the rail of the stairwell, a distorted cry from what only could have been the force

shook the walls of the home, nearly causing Sir Whitford to collapse. They emerged from the south, seeming to indicate the force's presence in the blacksmith's shop. Thus, with near paralyzing fear raging within him, Sir Whitford descended the stairs and left for the shop.

Had the shop been made out of walls of ice, it would have made little difference as the stone walls insulated the structure with the chill of the late autumn air. Though he seemed natural under the circumstances of such an environment, Sir Whitford's uncontrolled shivering was indeed derived more prominently from his dread than from his physical discomfort.

The grand forge occupied the central portion of the fairly open space, with a scattering of tables spaced incrementally along the walls and disorganized tools covering them. It seemed hardly the ideal scene for such a mysterious force to select as its hideaway, unless, of course, it sought the specific company of Sir Whitford. He approached the interior with expectation and yet found himself underwhelmed by the vacant space.

Sir Whitford waited, as if it had been he summoning Death to meet. With only a short period of anticipation, the force did honor his preparation with a startling appearance, stepping slowly from behind the forge as if appearing out of the air. The force had the appearance of a man nearly towering a cubit above Sir Whitford's modest height, with a face scarred as if his head had been placed in the forge

and removed with the flesh barely remaining. No hair could be found on his scalp, though it circled around his mouth and covered his chin. He wore a midnight doublet and trousers which matched it, with boots scuffed from many preceding altercations. A mist black as ash seemed to emanate from his faintly translucent body, dissipating in the air roughly two spans from the surface of his clothing. When he finally spoke, his voice rumbled roughly like a plow scraping gravel: "You have expected me with fear and, indeed, most men would find this appearance fearful." He paused, staring into Sir Whitford's eyes with the look of an adversary knowledgeable of his past. "Yet there is another appearance which I am doubtful you would meet with anything less than great timidity."

The man's features receded, leaving a plain shell of a human figure which was soon enveloped in a cloud of wispy, black smoke.

Then the cloud evaporated and a new man revealed:

Graham.

Sir Whitford gaped: he thought the old companion dead once word had passed many days prior from the Hare. Not so much as a rumor of his life had been uttered since the tragedy; his associates neared the end of their mourning. Yet Graham stood with enough reality before him that he collapsed once again.

However, it was his expression which seemed to make him more than a mere fabrication of mysterious darkness: he now met Sir Whitford's eyes with the tender look of a dear friend, intending not to endanger but embrace.

He seemed real, separate from the being preceding him.

The masks restrained the floods of his desperate emotions from allowing him escape into individuality. He fought with remarkable strength for one who had battled endlessly for many days, though such strength proved to be less than capable in accomplishing his desires as it merely matched the struggle instead of exceeding it. They spun around his mind erratically, firing such a jarring array of emotions and appearances that his own countenance seemed to be their equal.

Yet the presence of Sir Whitford set the dim flame of his heart ablaze and he found his face distinct among the masks once more: he remembered the countless days of counsel received from him, the teachings on coin and trade, the fellowship on lonely nights during which Kane and Kira spent in rejuvenating evenings of bonding. His face was unmistakable and inadvertently evoked memories of his own.

All of this the sprite observed and met with fury: such sentimentality halted the violent rhythm of indulgence which had formed an otherwise pleasant evening thus far. Its passion burned as a single flame igniting to swallow a forest and it overpowered the will of Graham for enough of a moment to reach for Sir Whitford's finest blade, which lay finely mounted and displayed centrally on the wall, and strike his nearest leg, mutilating it from its socket. Sir Whitford wailed with shock and pain, perplexed by the conflicting range of Graham's actions and expressions.

Yet the pain seemed unintentionally ample fuel to reverse the scales in Graham's favor, granting him enough control to drop the weapon and meet Sir Whitford with a caring touch. Though he made an initial attempt at retreat, Sir Whitford observed the change in the young man's spirit and allowed his touch to proceed.

The moment short-lived, Graham retracted into a kneeling position and grasped his forehead, screaming at the throbbing, depersonalizing pain within. He felt the control slipping – he had been unable to taste it since the fateful night of its emergence and he now was reminded of the luxury of controlling his own being which seemed unknown to all other men. He could never stand returning to such bondage: life as a slave was greater than death.

Graham lunged with the little control he still possessed for Sir Whitford's blade and angled it at his heart, until his body was jolted to the side and the blade fallen from his grasp. He lay paralyzed on the floor, slumped as though he had suddenly fallen to rest. However, hardly resting a moment, a translucent substance tore from the cavity of his chest and floated to the opposite end of the room, growing in size the longer it travelled until it formed its prior appearance as the towering man. Then, as if permitted by the being, Graham awoke and stared at the man, shaken with terror.

“We have shared each other's company for many days and yet you continue to meet my deliverance with ungrateful resistance. Pray tell, what remains in your heart that stirs such rebellion against the presence of one you willingly consented to host?”

Graham offered no response, speechless as he felt an emptiness within himself as if no spirit remained inside his body without the sprite.

“You fight unendingly to bear the face of your former self once more,” the man continued, “yet do you not recall what man you wish to resume being?”

As he finished speaking, the mist emitting from the man began to expand and fill the room, eventually rising in certain areas to form figures in some projection of a past scene. With the passing moments the figures grew in detail and Graham came to a realization of the unwelcome scene’s meaning.

It was the fateful night in which Kira and Alyn were slain. The night he slayed them.

“For the love of heaven above, continue no further!” Graham cried in remorse.

“Ah, so you do meet your past self with agony! Do tell, what value do you place in his appearance or character that supersedes your apprehension and places him more highly than what I have offered?”

The scene pressed onwards, his slaying of the marauders passing in time as it had on that very night.

“My heart was pure, I swear to my God above! He knows it was pure in seeking to protect them!”

“And yet you failed to succeed!” the man proclaimed as the arrow released from Graham’s bow into Kira and Alyn.

“Not even the man you so passionately seek to return to being is the one you wish to be in your own mind.”

Graham turned his face from the sight, weeping at the painful resurgence of the memory he devoted countless hours to suppressing.

“Graham, your character was no more different that night than the noble, tender-hearted man I counselled for many years,” Sir Whitford interrupted, refreshing the men of his presence. “None are beyond redemption.”

“But is redemption enough to cast away the haunting of the past and renew a tortured soul?” the man fought back in a duel of conjecture.

“You may achieve the peace you desire if you risk returning to the man you once were, with all his scars,” Sir Whitford parried, “but you will never have hope of attaining your desires if you continue to run from that which is the reality of who you are.”

“And would the man you seek to return to dismiss the slaughter attempted by the man he once called his closest companion? In all the innocence of your actions, did your dearest friend dedicate even a second to hearing the truth of your mistake before designating you as the next stain to grace his blade?”

Graham cleared his eyes and saw a reflection of the scene on the ridge, recalling the look in Kane’s eyes as he approached the elderly man with unwavering fury: his mind was set on the outcome of the encounter. If his face had been present throughout the encounter, would Kane have been any more merciful? The question pierced Graham’s mind and sent his torn heart into a chaotic anguish.

“Confound you!” Graham cried.

“Why are you confounded? Have I not laid bare in your presence every event as it has occurred? I have hidden no truth from your sight: the thoughts flowing through your feeble mind are none which I have initiated. Are they not your own revelations?”

“There is truth in them, Graham, but none from which you cannot recover!” Sir Whitford called with a fragile breath.

“The only truth is that those are men I do not recognize!” Graham yelled, being acquainted with the perspective as suddenly as Sir Whitford and the man were. “The man who slayed Kira and Alyn is not the man I am, nor is the man who sought unreasoning retribution against his innocent companion the man Kane once was. He has changed from the man who once deserved unending compassion and grace, as he has shown himself unwilling to extend the same offerings to even a man whom he called his brother. But I am not that brother either, and even if I were to come to a standstill and allow the reality you profess rejoin me, I could never become that man again in this life or any beyond it.”

He caught his breath, both the man and Sir Whitford staring speechlessly at his weak figure. Finally, he glanced at Sir Whitford before rising his gaze sympathetically towards the man. The mist faded in an instant from the room and as the features of the man retracted into the vacant figure of a being, he expressed a smile of pleasure.

The translucent substance floating once more, it rushed as a gale into the open space of Graham’s chest from which it had emerged. Mist swallowed Graham’s body as he turned one final time to face Sir Whitford before his face transformed once again into that of the man’s.

Sir Witford struck a paradoxical state of paralysis and quaking as the figure rose, brandishing his finest blade once more.

He saw his own reflection in its flawless steel, petrified, before it plunged into his heart and sent him into the death which he had been allowed to evade for so many years.

And in the silence of the snow-laden night, his cry faded as swiftly as it had been expelled.

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