

JOURNEYS

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OF SAINT SEBASTIAN I



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Only the faintest hint of grey light is coming in through the windows when I slip from under my covers and make my way silently between the rows of cots pushed neatly up against the walls of the long, spare room. I don't exactly sneak, but I prefer to rise before the other boys, if I can, so I can steal a few moments to wash while I'm still alone on the empty field. I never undress, so it's probably an unnecessary precaution, and I might as well admit it, I *do* like to be the first one out to the training area to get our station ready. This is the time of day I enjoy most: working off the chill of dawn by going through my meticulous, almost ritualistic preparation of our equipment — stocking the quivers, checking the arrows, and seeing to the great yew bow Tristan uses for morning practice.

But it's getting harder and harder to keep this time for myself. Some of the other boys have started getting up earlier, too, as though we're in competition amongst ourselves, or as though I'm motivated by some sort of misguided ambition to show them up and make them look lazy. They've got it all wrong, of course. I'm

conscientious, but really, ‘ambitious squire’ is an oxymoron. Either you find satisfaction in what you do, or you don’t, since there isn’t really anywhere to go from here. Not for me, anyway. But there’s no way to explain to them what this hour of solitude means to me, this hour safely absorbed in small tasks — simple ones, but ones in which I can take some measure of pride. On mornings like this, it all feels natural. I’m part of something bigger than myself, and I almost convince myself that I belong here.

This morning, I’m alone. No one else stirs as I make my way carefully across our dormitory. The stone floor feels like ice under my feet in the unheated room after the relative warmth beneath my blanket, but I wait until I reach the door to pull on my boots. As I step out into the corridor it’s a bit warmer, since the kitchens lie just beyond and the cooking fires will have been started by now. I stop here a moment as always, partly to warm myself before the inevitable plunge into the cold outdoors, but mostly to consider my route. The shortest way out to the training ground is to cut directly across the great hall, which opens before me to the left. On the opposite side of the hall, a door leads out to a covered portico which shades a walkway between the hall and an adjacent walled garden. From there a little gate gives easy access out to the place where a row of wooden sheds stands, each one assigned to a journeyman archer for the storage of his gear. Technically we’re not supposed to cut through the great hall, but all the boys do. At this hour there’s no one to see, except perhaps one of the kitchen staff or old Albrecht, but he always turns a blind eye to misdemeanors of this sort.

The other route, past the Journeymen’s rooms and the archives in a circuitous loop to the stables, is not only much longer, but there’s always the distinct possibility of an awkward encounter in the hallway if one of the Journeymen should happen to wake early, or worse, a master. This has never happened to me, but it’s happened to some of the others, and I don’t relish the thought of meeting, say, Master Guillaume wandering the halls in a state of undress on his way to the veterans’ lavatory, yawning and stretching, holding up his britches in one hand and scratching his hairy belly with the other. Or catching Taran unawares in a cramped

corridor, still sluggish from sleep but no doubt just as brutish and unforgiving as he is when he's wide awake.

At that thought, I hesitate, my foot hovering over the threshold of the hall, and I think, perhaps this is the morning I'll take the shortcut, too.

But I know I won't.

Still, I can't stop myself from taking a quick glance into the cavernous depths of the great hall, which the thin panes of colored glass placed high along on its walls do little to light even on the brightest day. Now with only the early morning gloom pressing in, it's as black as pitch in there and a good ten degrees colder even than it was back in our dormitory. The wan streaks of blue and greenish light reaching in through the windows only add to the unpleasant atmosphere, mingling with the darkness like swirls of murky water. Above, the high ceiling of blackened wood greedily swallows what little light struggles upward, trapping it within the maze of its intricately carved coffers. The odor of musty wood and candle wax gives the air a thick quality that's slightly nauseating, as though something palpable is forming within the shadows. It would only be a matter of seconds to cross the hall, and from where I'm standing I can clearly make out the outline of the door to the portico on its opposite side, but still I hesitate. I'm not afraid of the dark, and I know there's nothing really waiting there for me. Nothing alive, anyway.

It's not the darkness that stops me, it's the painting.

The massive canvas hangs at the far end of the room, covering the wall virtually from floor to rafters. Even in the full light of day, it's a commanding presence. Now in the stark emptiness of the hall it seems to have grown to fill the space completely. Its rich background hues of sumptuous blue-blacks and deep reds bleed into the surrounding darkness, so that the huge, lone human figure bristling with arrows at its center seems suspended in agony in the middle of the room, its vast expanse of naked, rent flesh as pale and as luminous as a moon in a midnight sky. For a moment I'm as mesmerized by that tortured figure again as I was the first time I saw it, not so many weeks ago. I remember every detail of that day, but my first sight of the painting stands out most vividly. Its image has become jumbled in my mind with other images, ones I don't

allow myself to see even in my mind's eye, and confused with memories of the terrible events that were quickly to follow. So much has changed since then that I can't trust the accuracy of my memories anymore, but I remember my reaction to the painting very clearly. I couldn't forget it if I tried, because I thought it was the most exquisitely beautiful thing I had ever seen. Now I can't bear to look at it.

The morbid painted figure staring past me, eyes glazed with pain, is more than a gruesome reminder. It's an accusation, a riddle I can't solve. I fight down a wave of revulsion and give myself a mental shake. I have to be sharp today; this is no time to get caught up in memories or lost in grim fancies, and Tristan's strange mood these past few days already has me on edge. Besides, perhaps it isn't the painting, after all, that keeps me now from crossing the room. Perhaps it's the plaque next to the arched doorway, which reads:

Great Hall, Archers' Guild of St. Sebastian.

Members only beyond this point. No women allowed.

I hesitate for a moment longer, then turn and proceed down the passageway along the Journeymen's quarters, as I always do. Today isn't going to be the day I try the shortcut after all. I'm lucky, though, and I make it out through the stables without meeting a single soul, except for a few stable boys still huddled asleep in one of the empty stalls. It's probably not really luck at this hour, but I feel as though I've run a gauntlet unscathed anyway. I cross out onto the corner of the field where barrels filled with water for washing are lined up under the stable's overhanging eaves. Although it's still early, I content myself with splashing some water on my face and washing my hands thoroughly. Today is the first day of the trials, and I'm understandably nervous. If everything goes as expected, we should breeze through these preliminaries, but I can't take any chances. I haven't come this far to fail now.

I run my wet hands through my hair and give my distorted reflection a quick check in the rippled glass of the empty archive window. Staring back at me is a young boy of indeterminate age. He could be anywhere from ten to thirteen, depending on what criteria you use to judge him: a little taller than you'd expect for a ten-year-old, but with a face and limbs that are still childishly soft and

rounded. The facial features are small and delicate, except for the nose. That's been spectacularly broken, leaving it crooked and misshapen. Short, lank hair frames the face, either hanging down in hanks of irregular length or sticking straight up at awkward angles, as though it's been hacked off by a drunken pair of dueling barbers. It's a singularly wretched cut, but it lends an air of vulnerability at odds with the brutality of scars, old and new, that snake across the nose to adorn the left brow. In all, I see just a rather average, ugly twelve-year-old boy, nothing extraordinary.

No, nothing extraordinary — except for the fact that up until ten weeks ago, I was a fifteen-year-old girl.