

A Wood in England, 1645

The smell of gunpowder and death was rank on the air. Black wings flapped in the trees, greedy for carrion. The soldier's breath matched the feathered beat as he ran, feet stumbling over roots and dead wood.

The battle hadn't been what he'd expected. More of a skirmish really, it'd sickened him to the pit of his stomach. With him such a blackguard too, that fear had shamed him. What would the lads say? And Bess? What of the parish constable that'd dragged him here under arms – a conscript fresh for the kill?

Home.

His pace quickened.

He'd never been this far into the woods before. He'd never have admitted it to the lads but he was scared. Scared of the closed in feeling, the way the trees crashed together over his head in the wind, like great masts at sea. He'd rather be there than in this place with its growths that sprung from rotting dead things, the smell of decay, the mustiness of the earth all about. It reminded him of the graves freshly dug, just at the edge of the battle field, the flash of a red sash here and there, poking through the hastily shovelled dirt.

Smoke rose in a single plume, just ahead. He wasn't alone.

He wished he still had his pike but of course, it would have been too big and unwieldy. He could never have run away carrying that thing.

“I've got what you want.”

He stopped running, holding his breath, as he watched from the cover of a holly. A magpie watched him in turn, head cocked to one side. One for sorrow.

There was a man, much older than himself, hair white against skin the colour of wet peat, cooking something over a fire. Behind the man stood a gypsy wagon, clothes drying

over its open door.

“How do you know what I want?” The soldier emerged from his hiding place, eyes scouring the tree line.

The old man shrugged. “You were running away.”

Reaching for a branch, the soldier armed himself. Just in case.

The old man continued to stir his pot. “There's many reasons a man runs but it all comes down to one thing.”

“And what's that?” The soldier snorted. The old man was clearly mad. He'd heard of men like him before. The hermit. The mad man roaming the forest, talking to the trees.

The old man looked up. His eyes were shrewd, far cleverer than the soldier would have guessed.

“Death.”

The soldier laughed. “You think I'm running from death?” He glanced over his shoulder. Was that a footstep? The magpie broke its cover of the holly, a streak of black and white against the grey of the woods. The soldier shook his head. He was getting paranoid. The others would be too busy fighting to worry about him. He wouldn't have been the first to run and he certainly wouldn't be the last. This war was madness and he wouldn't be a part of it. He'd be back by Bess's side by morning. Everything would be as it always had been. Their little cottage, the dogs at their feet. Maybe he'd start work on a little patch of land, give her the security she'd always wanted.

“Hungry?” The old man spooned up a dish of whatever had been cooking over the fire and offered it to him. The soldier's stomach growled in reply and he grabbed the dish, muttering his thanks.

“Do you trust all the strangers you run into in the woods?” The soldier scoffed over his dish.

“You're the one doing the running.” The old man grinned. “How do you know I'm not the strange one?”

The thought about this as he warmed himself by the fire. The sun was setting now and the sound of musket fire could no longer be heard. “So what is it that you've got?” He rubbed his hands together, feeling the heat from the flames. “That thing that you said I wanted?”

The old man was silent for a moment, watching the soldier as if weighing him up.

“Your freedom.”

He spoke so quietly that the soldier thought he'd misheard what he'd said at first. He blinked. “My freedom? Are you mad old man?” He thought of Bess, of the little patch of ground, of what he would grow come Spring. “How?”

The old man set down his dish upon the earth. The soldier tried to ignore the funghi, the rotting wood, the dank smell of death ripe upon the soil.

“The way we always do in the woods. A little blood that's all.”

The soldier was suddenly aware of the trees, of their roots snaking just beneath his feet, of their canopies folded above. He struggled to breathe. The old man reached out. He was holding something. “Take it.”

As the soldier reached out, he found himself thinking how mad this was, how everything was turned upside down in war. He felt something prick his fingers and he looked down, frowning. A single holly leaf sat in his palm, it's veins thick with his own blood. The old man smiled and the soldier felt very tired. He needed to sleep.

The sun rose and the soldier stretched, aware that his limbs ached much more than before. The old man was nowhere to be seen. He called a few times, searched the wagon but there was no sign. He walked a few feet into the trees, needing to relieve himself and found a gnarled birch to lean against as he did so. As he pee'd he noticed his hands were dirty so he

bent down at the side of a little stream to wash. From the shivering brook, a pair of shrewd eyes set within a face the colour of peat stared back. His eyes now. The price of his freedom.